

Working  
together



## ENSURING THE PROTECTION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES FLEEING FROM UKRAINE

### Key challenges for persons with disabilities fleeing Ukraine

The following observations have been collected by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and EDF, the European Disability Forum and its members/partners working in Ukraine and in neighbouring and nearby countries.

While comprehensive statistics are not available, persons with disabilities constitute at least 15% of any displaced population<sup>1</sup>. According to available sources, there were 2.7 million persons with disabilities in Ukraine before the war.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> IASC Guidelines, Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, 2019. [Link](#)

<sup>2</sup> European Disability Forum – Protection and safety of persons with disabilities in Ukraine – European Disability Forum (edf-feph.org). [Link](#)

Persons with disabilities are experiencing barriers in accessing safety from ongoing hostilities, in travelling long distances to flee hostilities, in accessing adequate bomb shelters and in crossing borders. Persons who have fled Ukraine have highlighted a lack of safe evacuation pathways and safe transportation, and inaccessible emergency shelters, as well as risks of being left behind or separated from family members. People with hearing impairments are in particular danger as they cannot hear the sound of air raid sirens.

In Ukraine, there were a high number of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, living in residential facilities before the war. Some of these people have been evacuated to neighbouring countries through private and government initiatives, where they face new and similar challenges. Many children and adults with disabilities continue

to live in residential facilities – so called “institutions” - and are facing the risk of being abandoned or of serious neglect.

The situation is becoming even more serious as winter sets in. Persons with disabilities and especially children with disabilities who have remained in Ukraine and those who have arrived in some neighbouring countries risk serious consequences due to insufficient protection against the cold. We anticipate that many children with high-support needs may not survive this winter without immediate intervention and assistance.

Many emergency shelters or institutions hosting evacuated children or adults with disabilities are ill prepared for the winter. The situation is getting more complicated every day due to regular targeted attacks on the critical energy infrastructure of Ukraine. According to Ukrainian officials, about 40 percent of Ukraine’s critical energy infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed. Some people with disabilities are at heightened risk, due to an inability to use bomb shelters due to non-working lifts.

Moreover, upon arrival in neighbouring countries, lack of interpretation capacity (including Ukrainian sign language) and inadequate accessibility of basic services, information, accommodation and reception facilities present major challenges. Some persons may be (re)institutionalised or face barriers or discrimination in accessing appropriate housing, education, employment, social protection, legal aid

and recognition of disability status. Healthcare, including access to medicine and assistive devices, has also been reported as a concern. While steps have been taken to engage with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, for example the [Polish Deaf Association who provide online sign interpretation](#), as well as opportunities in Poland to apply for the [EU Disability Card](#), more needs to be done to ensure meaningful involvement in decision making. Women and girls with disabilities are also likely to face increased risks of violence, abuse and human trafficking.



*Moldova. Wheelchair-bound woman received by UNHCR at border crossing, May 2022, © UNHCR/Andrew McConnell*





Bulgaria. Ukrainian refugees in the process of centrally organized relocation from hotels to government facilities May 2022 © UNHCR/Dobrin Kashavelov

## UNHCR's approach to disability inclusion

Disability inclusion is an institutional commitment and an operational priority for UNHCR, as set out in the [2018 Age, Gender and Diversity Policy](#), the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), and in UNHCR's commitment to the [UN Disability Inclusion Strategy](#). UNHCR applies a rights-based and community-based approach, with a focus on disability inclusion, the identification and mitigation of barriers, and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities.

In the context of the Ukraine emergency, UNHCR has advocated with host countries to ensure accessible reception facilities, services and information for all persons of concern, with particular attention to persons with disabilities and others with specific protection needs. UNHCR's offices in neighbouring countries are

mapping existing support services, monitoring potential barriers to accessing such services, and engaging with national authorities and organizations working with persons with disabilities, including as part of the Protection Working Groups.

As part of the roll out of the [Blue Dot Information and Support Hubs](#), UNHCR and UNICEF developed an accessibility checklist to help ensure that the Blue Dot locations are suitable for persons with disabilities. The checklist aims to ensure that, together with a number of partners, psychosocial support, information and referral services for persons with disabilities exist at all Blue Dots.

UNHCR has also supported vulnerability screening to identify persons with disabilities for air transfers from Moldova to the European Union (EU) member states under the EU Solidarity Platform.

# Five priorities to strengthen support to persons with disabilities fleeing from Ukraine

**1 Identification and inclusion in national services:** UNHCR advocates for the use of the [Washington Group](#) questions to facilitate the early identification of persons with disabilities. These should be used at border crossing points after having been granted access to territory, and at other key transit points and in reception and accommodation centres, so as to ensure timely referral and inclusion into national services. We advocate for and support the rapid scale up and adaptation of national services in countries of asylum, including through interpreters and cultural mediators.

**2 Accessible accommodation:** UNHCR calls on all hosting states to ensure accessible and adapted accommodation for persons with disabilities. UNHCR also calls for the use of accessibility audits in reception and accommodation centres to ensure that these are suitable to all persons of concern. Institutional care should be avoided.

**3 Identifying and mitigating barriers to services:** UNHCR encourages government authorities and other service providers to ensure adequate and accessible services for persons with disabilities. This includes accessible health care, access to medicine and assistive devices, education and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). Regular reviews should be carried out in order to identify potential barriers to such access in collaboration with organisations working for persons with disabilities and with refugees with disabilities themselves. Providing transportation to and from key service points can be essential.

**4 Accessible information and communication:** Information provision and communication needs to be adapted to different communication needs and preferences. This should be done through a wide range of channels, including audio-visual and easy to read material, sign language, captioning etc. This is critical to ensure that information reaches everyone, including on how to register for temporary protection or asylum, where to go for help, rights and obligations, and how to raise complaints or concerns.

**5 Engagement with organizations of persons with disabilities and working for persons with disabilities:** UNHCR seeks and encourages enhanced engagement with organizations of persons with disabilities, including in capacity building, technical guidance and peer support, as well as for information about rights and services. UNHCR acknowledges the critical role that persons with disabilities and their representative organizations have in decision-making that affects their lives. Persons with disabilities should be meaningfully involved in decision-making also in situations of conflict and forced displacement.

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