

**Input by Deputy Minister, Ministry of Employment and Social Protection
Mrs. Sophia Kalantzakos at the OECD High-Level Forum on Sickness,
Disability and Work.**

In the EU the percentage of disabled is around 15%. In Greece, the percentage is at 9.3% of the population. Though many things have changed over the years, new policies and laws combating discrimination have been implemented and adopted, much still needs to be done in fighting stereotypes and misconceptions. Cultivating the idea that it is possible and preferable to take measures to include those with health problems into the labor market will take more work. The disabled have taken a strong stance on this issue and are fighting for inclusion. The state has taken steps to remedy a previously very difficult situation but mentalities need to be altered in the private sector of the economy where quotas for placement and incentives to hire do not suffice to eradicate the problem.

Like other countries, Greece too is rethinking its policies regarding sickness, disability and work to make things better and more efficient and equitable. From the outset let me point out that benefits provided by the state are such that they don't really discourage people from seeking work. They are not a sufficient substitute for an income. The largest benefits go to those who have very serious disabilities. In fact, the persistent demand of those facing exclusion from the labor force for the reasons we are discussing today has led us to invest more heavily and in a more focused manner on policies getting them back into work or just into work for the first time.

The global economic crisis poses a threat to the progress being made in this respect. The private sector, which is feeling the brunt of the economic downturn, is letting go of workers and new hirings have dwindled. Unemployment figures are on the rise

and governments have the added challenge of implementing programs that will help workers retool, give business incentives to stop laying off workers, incentives to hire new workers and incentives for the workforce to start-up a new business.

In this economic climate, it will take a redoubling of our efforts to help those with disabilities to successfully enter a very tight and competitive job market.

I would like to briefly describe the policies which are in place and discuss what's working best and what still needs improvement.

Act 2643/1998 "employment of persons of special categories" which provides for the compulsory placement of persons with disabilities to bodies of the private sector, of public enterprises and organization, and public services, public bodies, corporate and local self government agencies, is still an important instrument for promoting persons with disabilities to the labor market using the quota method. The law has been effective and the job openings especially in the public sector are much sought after. The main element is that once hired through this law the individual cannot be fired and if the private company closes down, the person is then found a new position in another company of the private sector. The realities of this law is that the process of selection is very time consuming and the private sector is not as cooperative as it should be in providing openings. We have gone through a first process of evaluation of the implementation of the law and have decided that in the end an overhaul of the act would probably be best. The basic philosophy of providing added protection and quotas for the employment of the disabled will still be the core of the new act and in fact we are working closely with representative organizations of the disabled to take into account their perspectives and needs in drafting the new law. We have found that the act has been successful in assisting people to enter the

workforce since it went into effect in 2000. Prior to this act there was a similar law under which 13.000 individuals with disability have been successfully placed in the public and private sectors.

80 million euros from the European social fund budget 2007-13 will be dedicated to local integrated initiatives to fight social exclusion among which the disabled are a prominent category. The social partners will play a pivotal role in designing these initiatives. We had pledged another 80 million euros for programs that promote placement in the labor market of vulnerable social groups and these involve pre-training support, training and obligatory placement in work of a percentage of the trained population. We have also committed 5 million euros for the hiring of the disabled by NGOs.

In recent years we have also adopted the use of a more "mainstream" employment policy, including activation measures to support persons to enter or re-enter the workforce including those with partial work capacity to take up work. It's important to identify what each individual can do before we proceed with the process of integrating him or her in the labor market.

The Ministry of Employment and Social Protection has established subsidy programs of employment of disabled persons which are funded either by solely national funds or are co-financed by the European Social Fund and are implemented by the Manpower Employment Organization. This programs include the creation of new job posts, full time four year program which subsidies the post for 36 months and the employer must employ the person for another 12 months without subsidy. A part-time four year program along the same lines. A full time program under a fixed term contract for the subsidy of enterprises operating on a seasonal basis. A subsidy program for someone wanting to start a new business. Another program subsidizing

the ergonomic arrangement of the workplace. Training programs are available and OAED encourage and promotes the integration of disabled person in educational programs of apprenticeship and continuing training implemented for the entire labor force. 10% of trainees who enroll each year in the schools of the Manpower Employment Organization are designated for the disabled.

The Manpower Employment Organization has specially trained consultants ready to assist the disabled in the one stop shops throughout Greece.

Through the use of EQUAL, in the last programming period, several innovative projects were carried out aimed at integrating the disabled into the labor market.

When it comes to the benefits from the insurance agencies, our biggest and most pressing need is the computerization of the entire system. Research has found that the system for issuing disabled pensions is fraught with problems and that a significant number of the recipients of such pensions should not have been getting them in the first place. The Ministry of Employment and Social Protection which oversees most of the Pension Funds in Greece is pushing for the computerization of their systems which will bring transparency to the system.

Extended sick leave is a prelude to a disability pension and a permanent exit from the job market, depleting it of the talents and contributions of a workforce that could have remained active and productive albeit in a more limited manner.

In closing, we are in agreement that we are on the right track and moving in the right direction. Implementing changes is not as easy as identifying the problem. But it is of great importance to take all the necessary steps to provide for opportunity to work for all our citizens.