

EPHA Statement on the removal of operating grants from the EU4Health 2025 Work Programme

The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) deeply regrets the European Commission's decision to eliminate operating grants for civil society from the EU4Health 2025 Work Programme. This marks a serious and dangerous precedent not only for health NGOs, but for people and democracy in Europe.

The Commission's final confirmation, issued only at the end of July, leaves 30 health NGOs - representing thousands of patients, healthcare professionals and communities - without the core operational support they were led to expect. Despite having signed multi-annual Framework Partnership Agreements with the Commission, these organisations have now entered the second half of the year with no communication and no funding for structural activities.

For EPHA, this meant a 40% reduction in staff. The absence of operating grants has also meant halted projects, cancelled convenings, and, most importantly, broken continuity of support to people and public health.

Operating grants accounted for just over 1% of the EU4Health budget in 2024. Cutting them is a false economy - a direct blow to civil society's ability to act independently of commercial interests; to counterbalance lobbying by well-resourced industry actors; and to serve as a watchdog for transparency, accountability, and health equity.

This is more than a funding issue. If operational support for health NGOs continues to vanish, the damage to public health will reverberate for years to come, weakening our collective ability to promote equity, support patients and professionals, and hold decision-makers to account.

The Commission's silence, despite repeated appeals from Member States, MEPs, and NGOs - including direct letters to President von der Leyen and Commissioner Várhelyi - speaks volumes.

This absence of operating grants is not just bureaucratic inertia, it reflects a wider pattern of democratic backsliding, where watchdogs are defunded and critical voices silenced. Across Europe, civil society is being deliberately stripped of funding, space, and recognition. If this trend continues, it will not be only civil society at risk, but democracy itself.

In this context, EPHA reaffirms its resolve. The mounting pressures only strengthen our commitment to act, support, and stand up for health, equity, and democracy. People's right to health needs defending, and public interest voices must not, and cannot, disappear.

EPHA calls on the European Commission to reconsider its position, restore structural support to civil society, and align its budgetary decisions with the values of the European Health Union and the rule of law. Without a strong, independent civil society, there can be no credible public health - and no real democracy.