# Belgium

## COVID-19 cases

Belgium registered a total of 9,885 deaths from COVID-19[[1]](#footnote-1) in a country of 11.5 million people. Some deaths were attributed to COVID-19 without testing or autopsies. Data on deaths or cases disaggregated by disability are not available despite demands of the organisations of people with disabilities to the Belgian state[[2]](#footnote-2). However, the Belgian European Forum collected partial data from regional agencies. As of 11 May 2020, Walloon Region registered 42 deaths of persons with disabilities. Flemish Region counted 31 deaths and German-speaking community registered 1 death. As of 09 June 2020, 4,896 of residents of care homes died of or are suspected of dying of COVID-19 which represents 50% of the overall deaths linked to the pandemic in Belgium[[3]](#footnote-3).

## Emergency, lockdown, and confinement

Belgium declared a state of emergency from 12 March to 19 April 2020. Barrier and distancing measures adopted impacted disability-related rights and access to services. The National Superior Council of Disabled Persons delivered a series of opinions raising concerns about issues faced by persons with disabilities including access to information[[4]](#footnote-4), suspension of assistance in public transport (SNCB)[[5]](#footnote-5) and suspension of visits for people living in residential environment. Along with the Belgian Disability Forum, the National Superior Council expressed concerns regarding education of children with disabilities since families lacked access to adapted equipment or knowledge to provide care and support from home[[6]](#footnote-6).

## Involvement of organisations of persons with disabilities

There was limited involvement of Disability Advisory Councils – “*Conseil d’avis”*, established in Belgian regions. In Brussels-Capital Region, Brussels Advisory Council was consulted once a month and in Flemish Region, NOOZO - the Advisory Council of people with disabilities was included in the Task Force “Kwetsbare Gezinnen” from May 2020 onwards. At federal level from 10 April 2020, two members of the National Advisory Council took part in the “Task Force Vulnerable Groups” but several proposals they suggested were not acted on. The National Advisory Council urged the authorities to further consider advice from people with disabilities in the management of the COVID-19 crisis[[7]](#footnote-7). The Disability Advisory Councils raised a series of issues in the framework of Task Forces including life with dignity, hospitals and home care, accessible information, access to health care, “handistreaming*”* (mainstreaming disability inclusion) and triage.

## Communications and announcement

At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, announcement and publications dealing with COVID-19 were not provided in sign language, easy-to-read formats or accessibly online. The National Superior Council, the Belgian Disability Forum and UNIA - the Belgian Equality Body, urged the government to make information accessible to all citizens, including persons with disabilities.[[8]](#footnote-8) Following these calls for action, improvement were noticed in official communications which included sign language.

## Institutions and closed settings

Visits were prohibited in residential care institutions until 15 April. When the Federal government announced lifting this ban regions such as Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels implemented their own rules on visits in institutions[[9]](#footnote-9). Regarding children with disabilities, parents had to make the difficult choice between bringing their children home or leaving them in institutions without seeing them for long periods[[10]](#footnote-10).

## Health care

The National High Council, supported by the Belgian Disability Forum, released a notice following the publication of Ethical recommendations for hospitals elaborated by the Belgian intensive medicine society. The notice stressed among other issues the lack of clarity about the situation of persons with disabilities[[11]](#footnote-11) and the respect of their agency. Additionally, The National High Council raised several concerns including the lack of clarity about whether disability is a criterion for access to intensive care units and the potential lack of referral to hospital for persons with disability living in institutions[[12]](#footnote-12). In this regard, an article from the New York Times revealed that residents of nursing homes were denied access to medical care during the pandemic since hospitals refused to collected them while beds were available[[13]](#footnote-13).

## Social Protection

On 29 May 2020, the Belgian Federal Government introduced a one-off premium grant of €250 to certain groups including people with disabilities. However, the National High Council for Persons with Disabilities considered that the grant was not sufficient to cover the increase of cost of living for persons with disabilities due to the pandemic. The High Council urged the government for “immediate and effective support for persons with disabilities”[[14]](#footnote-14). The Belgian Federal government adopted additional measures to support persons with disabilities including an additional €50 on top of their benefit for a 6 months period starting from July 2020 and the increase of the sickness benefit for the period between 1st March to 31st August 2020[[15]](#footnote-15).

1. Sciensano – Belgian public research institution, COVID – 19 Bilan épidémiologique, 12 August 2020, available in French at: <https://covid-19.sciensano.be/sites/default/files/Covid19/COVID-19_Daily%20report_20200812%20-%20FR_0.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The National Superior Council of Disabled Persons addressed a letter to the Minister of Public Health, the President of the Comité de direction of the Federal Public Service – Public Health and Sciensano requesting data on cases and deaths from COVID-19 of persons with disabilities. The letter is dated on 27 April 2020 and a copy was shared with EDF. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sciensano, COVID-19 daily report, 09 June 2020. Available in French at : <https://covid-19.sciensano.be/sites/default/files/Covid19/COVID-19_Daily%20report_20200809%20-%20FR.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. National High Council of Disabled Persons and the Belgian Disability Forum, Are persons with disabilities forgotten throughout COVID-19, 13 March 2020. Available in French at <http://ph.belgium.be/fr/nouvelles-amp-presse/13-03-2020-les-personnes-handicap%C3%A9es-les-oubli%C3%A9s-du-covid-19.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. National High Council of Disabled Persons and the Belgian Disability Forum, COVID-19: SNCB no longer assists persons with disabilities, 20 March 2020. Available in French at: <http://ph.belgium.be/fr/nouvelles-amp-presse/20-03-2020-covid-19-la-sncb-n-assiste-plus-les-personnes-handicap%C3%A9es.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Opinion n° 2020/09 of the National High Council of Disabled Persons on the measures taken following the crisis caused by COVID-19, 30 March 2020, 30 March 2020. Available in French at: <http://ph.belgium.be/fr/avis/avis-2020-09.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Opinion n° 2020/10 of the National High Council on the consideration of advice from people with disabilities in the context of the management of the health crisis COVID-19, 17 April 2020. Available in French at: <http://ph.belgium.be/fr/avis/avis-2020-10.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. National High Council of Disabled Persons and the Belgian Disability Forum, Are persons with disabilities forgotten throughout COVID-19, 13 March 2020. Available in French at: <http://ph.belgium.be/fr/nouvelles-amp-presse/13-03-2020-les-personnes-handicap%C3%A9es-les-oubli%C3%A9s-du-covid-19.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. FRA Bulletin II, Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – Fundamental rights implications: with a focus on contact-tracing apps, Report on Belgium, p.13. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/be_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic-_may_2020.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. FRA Bulletin I, Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – Fundamental rights implication, 1 Feb. – 20 March, p.27. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-coronavirus-pandemic-eu-bulletin_en.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Opinion n ° 2020/08 of the National Superior Council of People with Disabilities relating to the idea of ​​regulating the influx of patients affected by COVID-19 to intensive care, 27 March 2020. Available in French at: <http://ph.belgium.be/fr/avis/avis-2020-08.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. FRA Bulletin II, Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – Report on Belgium, p.14. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/be_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic-_may_2020.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The New York Times, When Covid-19 Hit, Many Elderly were left behind to die, 8 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/08/world/europe/coronavirus-nursing-homes-elderly.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. FRA Bulletin III, Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – Fundamental rights implications: with a focus on older people, p.17. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-coronavirus-pandemic-eu-bulletin-june_en.pdf>) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Eurofound (2020), Additional financial support for people in precarious situations, case BE-2020-23/974 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin, <http://eurofound.link/covid19eupolicywatch> . <https://handicap.belgium.be/fr/news/060720-prime-corona.htm>l [↑](#footnote-ref-15)