



Alþýðusamband Íslands

ASI Policy on healthcare services and the welfare system

ASI's 43rd Congress demands a society of welfare for all. A society where workers and the public at large enjoy a reliable and good healthcare, as well as a stable welfare system irrespective of their financial position, residence and age.

Government allocations to the health sector in Iceland have lagged far behind population growth and the growing need for services in many areas. The basic services of the health system have for a number of years been underfunded and undermanned while at the same time private-sector-based healthcare has grown fast and more funds go to profit seeking companies. The line between public and private healthcare services is also often unclear, with the same healthcare practitioners working in both. The result of this development is evident:

- Many people have to wait too long for necessary healthcare.
- Service levels are reduced in many rural areas and patients have to travel long distances at a considerable cost and loss of wages.
- Patient cost for healthcare service and medication can be a heavy financial burden and even insurmountable, and the authorities do not share the cost of important elements of the healthcare services.
- There is a lack of psychological services, especially within primary health care as well in other mental healthcare and the cost thereof is insurmountable.
- There are more and more instances of individuals with serious diseases not receiving necessary medication.
- The result is that many Icelanders are reluctant to seek the healthcare they need.

Healthcare and welfare services need to focus more on young people, for example in more efficient preventive measures and forms of treatment and make psychological services more accessible in primary healthcare and in schools. Families with children need more support and protection due to high cost in the healthcare system and the treatment of chronically ill children.

An increasing number of people are leaving the labour market due to ailments that are frequently related to increased stress and job burnout. This calls for strengthening work rehabilitation and that the Vocational Rehabilitation Fund Virk be given a broader mandate to preventative measures and other means before it is too late.

The population is getting older and the number of senior citizens will grow fast in coming years. The circumstances for senior citizens are unacceptable and will deteriorate even further if extensive measures are not applied. This leaves relatives under great stress and calls for diverse measures in terms of action and solutions, such as better residential care and services. The problem is aggravated when it comes to residential and nursing homes where there are long waiting lists for local living accommodation and other services. In addition to this, institutions serving the elderly are faced with

financial difficulties, municipal residential services are starved for funds, leaving their staff with inadequate working conditions, insufficient manpower and poor wages.

Throughout their working lives people have been acquiring precious pension rights, meant to allow the populous generations retiring in the next few years to be mostly self-reliant with their pension. But there is still a large group of people that does not have adequate pension rights once they reach retirement age. That is where the social security system should come in, securing everyone a decent living in their senior years.

Low income pensioners should have a decent standard of living, and linking wages to social security benefits must be considerably stepped down in order to allow people to enjoy their pension in full and to encourage those who are willing and able to participate in the labour market. The pension system also lacks flexibility to accommodate those who do hard physical labour to work less or retire earlier. There is also inherent gender inequality in the system as women generally have lower wages and a shorter working life.

The disability pension system needs to be thoroughly reviewed. Emphasis should be placed on ability in stead of disability, focusing on work related rehabilitation and activity on the basis of those who have a limited ability to work, among other things in cooperation with the industries, their increased responsibility and in harmony with the industries. At the same time the social security payment system needs revising in order to encourage active employment, it needs simplification and abolishment of benefit reduction whereby every krona earned means one krona less in benefits .

The fundamentals of the welfare society, such as access to good and free healthcare and reliable housing are especially important for the elderly and the disabled.

Changes in the labour market and how work is organised can have a profound negative effect on labour market rights that are based on cumulation and tied to a fixed employment relationship with one employer, such as sickness leave, pension rights and vacation rights. It is also clear that growing technological development and automation, with jobs changing or disappearing and new ones being created, call for increased opportunities for continuous education and assistance for individuals looking for new employment.

ASI Policy

- Everyone should have equal access to excellent healthcare irrespective of residence, age and financial position.
 - The fundamentals of the public healthcare system need to be strengthened and we must ensure that everyone has access to reliable local primary healthcare and necessary medication.
 - Profit seeking private-sector-based healthcare and welfare services must be avoided and a clear boundary must be set between publicly and privately operated healthcare services.
 - The entire population must have access to specialised healthcare with greatly increased contributions from social security for travelling, subsistence expense and lost days of work.
 - Patient cost participation for any kind of healthcare and medication must be reduced, in order to secure that no one need deny themselves necessary support.
 - Waiting lists for services need shortening and large efforts must be made to remove waiting lists in the healthcare system.
 - A sustained effort is called for in providing more information on available resources in healthcare and welfare for users and relations , for example with an information centre for patients.

- Preventive measures must be strengthened, as well as support for individuals that need work rehabilitation.
- A programme of policy and action must be formed for the elderly, providing services and suitable living accommodation, increasing the number of nursing rooms, and providing much more municipal residential care among other things.
- The elderly and disabled must be secured a decent living and their opportunities for active participation in society must be increased.
 - Linking social benefits to wages in the social security system must be reduced and the practise to cut benefits for each krona earned must be abolished.
 - More opportunities are needed for people with reduced occupational ability to participate in the labour market.
 - More possibilities should be provided for the elderly who are willing and able to participate in the labour market as well as a more flexible retirement schedule.
- ASI rejects the present ideas on work ability assessment and will work on those issues with the Organisation of Disabled in Iceland.
- Changes in how work is organised as well as less stable form of hire, call for efforts to secure any compounded and built-up employee rights, such as sick leave, vacation and pension rights.
- Professional guidance in relation to job stress shall be ensured.
- The nationwide crisis of addiction and narcotic diseases must be addressed.

ASI Tasks

- Work with member unions on pressing the authorities to formulate a targeted healthcare policy for developing the healthcare system, with the aim of providing everyone with vigorous healthcare irrespective of residence and financial standing with the following actions:
 - Strengthen the basic functions of the public healthcare system and ensure that all inhabitants has access to strong local healthcare.
 - Ensure that all Icelanders have access to specialised healthcare services.
 - Reduce patient payments for any kind of healthcare and medication.
 - Emphasise specifically increased access and lowering of the cost of psychological and mental healthcare services, by strengthening that service within the primary healthcare.
 - Provide more and better information and social consultation to users and patients.
- Promote cooperation of the authorities, the Administration of Occupational Safety and Health, Directorate of Labour, Vocational Rehabilitation Fund and other social partners in order to greatly increase occupational safety and preventive measures in workplaces, prevent people leaving the labour market, support work rehabilitation and re-entry to work following an illness or accident.
- Demand action for the elderly, providing them with suitable services and living accommodation.
- Promote extensive collaboration of the social partners, senior citizen interest groups and the disabled, and call for the authorities to bring about changes to social security laws in order to secure a decent living for the elderly and disabled and increase opportunities for active social participation:
 - It is demanded that the curtailment within the social security system be lowered to 30% and cutting benefits krona against krona earned be abolished in full immediately.
 - Emphasise furthering participation by those with reduced occupational ability and that the elderly have adequate flexibility for their retirement.

- Push for revision of the structure and accumulation of rights in the labour market in light of changes in the organisation of work. Place an increasing emphasis on accumulated rights being transferred with wage earners from one employer to another.