



The situation of persons with disabilities in the context of the war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine



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Introduction

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is taking a devastating and disproportionate toll on persons with disabilities. This report documents many of these violations of human rights and humanitarian law occurring in Ukraine, and is based on interviews with persons with disabilities and representatives of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). The human rights violations the testimony describes are all too common in conflict-settings across the world and highlight the need for strengthened protection of persons with disabilities at all phases of armed conflict, in accordance with Article 11 of the CRPD and UN Security Council resolution 2475.

The United Nations, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and others have published detailed reports on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine during the conflict as well as since the 2014 occupation.¹ This report focuses on the voices of persons with disabilities themselves, through extensive personal testimony from persons with disabilities and some of their representative organizations with the aim of encouraging more disability- inclusive rights protection and humanitarian response. The critical role of organizations of persons with disabilities in the context of armed conflict is highlighted throughout. This report could be used to support international mechanisms covering violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law, such as the Human Right Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine.²

In a statement during his visit to Ukraine in December 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk noted the particular risks to persons with disabilities, saying, "I have ... heard about the particular plight of persons with disabilities and older people who are unable to reach safe shelter when the air raid sirens go off."

¹ See multiple reports by Fight for Right's Disability Research Center, <https://ffr.org.ua/en/projects/disability-research-center/> including on Evacuations of Persons with Disabilities: https://ffr.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/funds_new_ffr_en.pdf and on Women with Disabilities in Ukraine: https://ffr.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/wheels_final_web-2-1.pdf; reports by the National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities of Ukraine <https://naiu.org.ua/>, including a report together with HelpAge International on preparedness for winter for persons with disabilities and older people: https://naiu.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NAIU_SurveyForWinterSeasonEN_v04.pdf; and on Cash Feasibility: <https://naiu.org.ua/cash-feasibility-assessment-conducted-on-adult-internally-displaced-people-idps-with-disabilities-in-ukraine-in-may-june-2022-cash-feasibility-assessment-conducted-on-adult-internally-displaced-people/>; League of the Strong, including on accessibility of modular housing in Ukraine: <https://ls.org.ua/monitoryng-dostupnosti-modulnyh-mistechok-dlya-lyudej-z-invalidnistyu/>; OHCHR, "Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine," 1 February- 31 July, 2022, <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/ReportUkraine-1Feb-31Jul2022-en.pdf>; OHCHR HRMMU Update on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 2 December 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ua/2022-12-02/HRMMU_Update_2022-12-02_EN.pdf; Report of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism's mission of experts entitled 'Report on Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity Committed in Ukraine (1 April – 25 June 2022)', <https://www.osce.org/odihr/522616>

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iic/hr-ukraine/index>

He also specified that humanitarian actors have to prioritize persons with disabilities and older people: “Humanitarian aid plays a vital role in providing support to the most vulnerable, including older people and persons with disabilities. Providing an adequate social security net to the most vulnerable need to be prioritized,” and it must include “ensuring equal access without discrimination to essential services for those most in need – including persons with disabilities and older people, with women the most deeply affected.”³ Through the testimony of the 69 individuals interviewed, this report gives detail and further meaning to the words of the High Commissioner.

Due to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine the human rights situation in Ukraine for persons with disabilities is dire. Many have been killed or injured as a result of Russian mortar and aerial and other attacks. Their homes have been severely damaged or destroyed, leaving many to remain in unsafe and uninhabitable conditions. Many are living without adequate shelter, food, and medical care in areas that have been heavily damaged by hostilities, especially on the front lines of fighting, or that are under occupation by Russian forces. Persons with disabilities face disproportionate risks in situations which are dangerous for all civilians, including because they face significant barriers to accessing bomb shelters, information, evacuations, support services, and humanitarian aid, including due to a lack of personal assistance and lack of sign language interpreters. Many persons with disabilities who are at serious risk of harm in Ukraine are older people.

As a result of Russian attacks on critical infrastructure many Ukrainian cities have been without electricity, water, internet, means of communication, and/or without heat. Some occupied areas have been without electricity for months. All people face hardships in such conditions, and persons with disabilities are very often additionally impacted. As documented in this report, people who are deaf rely on their smart phones for information, air raid warning signals, and communication with others and are in danger when internet connection is lost or they cannot charge their phones. Some persons with disabilities can be trapped at home, such as those who use electricity to charge an electric wheelchair or scooter or those who depend on an elevator to exit or enter their building.

There have been other disproportionate barriers, risks and human rights protection gaps faced by persons with disabilities. Many have reported lack of accessible information about the war, evacuations, and access to humanitarian aid. Bomb shelters are overwhelmingly not accessible for persons with disabilities. Many have been unable to flee danger due to lack of accessible evacuation procedures. For those who do manage to flee, temporary shelters within Ukraine for internally displaced people are often not accessible. With significant inflation—the National Bank of Ukraine reported the rate of inflation to be over 24% in September 2022—persons with disabilities who rely on pensions are forced to make impossible choices about whether to buy medicines, food, or hygiene items.

³ “UN High Commissioner Volker Türk concludes his official visit to Ukraine,” December 7, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/12/un-high-commissioner-human-rights-volker-turk-concludes-his-official-visit>

This report highlights that Ukrainian organizations of persons with disabilities of all sizes and other civil society organizations, including networks of volunteers, have been at the forefront of supporting persons with disabilities during the war with evacuations, access to information, accessible accommodation, including sign language interpretation, support services, medicines, food, humanitarian aid supplies, legal aid, and much more. Organizations of persons with disabilities have extensive existing networks of persons with disabilities in their communities and have reacted quickly to requests for assistance and information. Many persons with disabilities undertake this critical, life-saving work often at great physical risk and personal sacrifice. Often, they are working in the hardest to reach areas that the government and international humanitarian actors are not covering. Yet, many report that there has been insufficient consultation on the part of authorities and others to inform policies and activities. Some have also faced difficulties securing sufficient funding to meet the high demand for their services and support.

Ukraine has a long-standing problem of systematic institutionalization of persons with disabilities, overwhelmingly people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, violating their rights to legal capacity, to live independently, and other rights.⁴ The government evacuated some institutions soon after the February 2022 Russian attack, placing them in institutions in other parts of Ukraine or in other countries. For those institutions that were not evacuated, many people remain in conditions not respectful of their dignity or rights. Some persons with disabilities, including many older persons with disabilities, who did not live in institutions before, and evacuated from eastern Ukraine are now in institutions and nursing homes due to the lack of available accessible accommodation and community-based support services. Evacuations of people living in towns and villages in recently liberated and front-line areas continues, yet there are fewer and fewer housing options available. There are legitimate fears that moving people into institutions now will expand the number of people there over the long term and would reflect a serious backsliding in disability rights protections.

⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, "Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report," September 9, 2022, <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/content/crpd-committee-adopts-report-recommendations-regarding-rights-persons-disabilities-impacted>; "Persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities remain the most vulnerable and neglected group among persons with disabilities in Ukraine. This is due to their systematic institutionalisation, stigmatization, and lack of guarantees of protection in specialised institutions, where cases of torture and ill-treatment continue to be documented." United Nations Ukraine, "UN Policy Paper on Disability," December 13, 2021, <https://ukraine.un.org/en/165090-un-policy-paper-disability>.

Methodology

Research for this report was conducted between September and December 2022. The research consisted of interviews with 69 people, including persons with disabilities, representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities, civil society organizations supporting the rights of persons with disabilities, and others. All interviews were conducted remotely by video and telephone. Interviews were conducted either in Russian, in English, or in Ukrainian Sign Language with interpretation into Russian.

Interviewees were explained the purpose of the interview, how the information would be used and distributed, and informed of their right not to participate in the interview and of the option to remain anonymous. This research also examined existing reporting by Ukrainian organizations and international organizations of persons with disabilities, human rights organizations, and international monitoring mechanisms documenting human rights and humanitarian law violations in Ukraine.

Background

According to January 2021 data from the Ukrainian government's State Statistical Service, the most recent data available, there were over 2.7 million registered persons with disabilities in Ukraine, or just under 7% of the population.⁵ There are approximately 163,000 children with disabilities.⁶ The actual number of persons with disabilities may be higher, as not all people register as having a disability; according to the WHO, persons with disabilities make up approximately 16% of the world's population.⁷ In countries affected by protracted conflict, this number of persons with disabilities can be significantly higher.⁸ According to the National Association of Persons with disabilities in Ukraine, there is no clear data regarding persons with disabilities in Ukraine during the war.⁹ With regard to the occupied territories in Ukraine, the UN's Humanitarian Needs Overview published in 2021 estimated that out of the 3.4 million people in need in Eastern Ukraine, at least 13 percent were persons with disabilities.¹⁰

⁵ State Statistics Service of Ukraine, "Social Protection of the Population of Ukraine," 2021, https://ukrstat.gov.ua/druk/publicat/kat_u/2021/zb/07/zb_szn_2020_e.pdf. Persons with disabilities in Ukraine are assigned to first, second or third group of disability, which determine the size of pension, access to other benefits, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2961-15#Text>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ World Health Organization (WHO), "Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities," December 2, 2022, <https://www.who.int/activities/global-report-on-health-equity-for-persons-with-disabilities>.

⁸ Diakonia International Human Rights Law Centre, "Armed Conflict and Persons with Disabilities," December 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/fact-sheet-conflict-and-persons-disabilities-3-december-2021>.

⁹ Intervention by National Assembly of Persons with disabilities of Ukraine, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, August 2022 session.

¹⁰ OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Ukraine," February 15, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-needs-overview-2021-february-2021-enuk>.

Persons with disabilities in Ukraine have been victims of violations of international human rights law, including, inter alia, the right to life; the prohibition on the infliction of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment; the rights to liberty and security of person; freedom of movement; medical care and essential medicines; to live independently and be included in the community; to equality before the law, and to an adequate standard of living including adequate food, water, clothing, and housing.

Article 11 of the CRPD creates obligations relating to the protection of persons with disabilities during situations of emergency, including armed conflict. It requires that states parties “shall take, in accordance with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict.”¹¹ The CRPD does not have an article allowing for derogations, which means that the rights of persons with disabilities continue to apply during armed conflict.¹²

UN Security Council resolution 2475 (2019) calls upon all parties to armed conflict to allow and facilitate safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access to all people in need of assistance. It further urged them to prevent violence and abuses against civilians in situations of armed conflict, including those involving killing and maiming, abduction and torture, as well as rape and other forms of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations. The resolution urges Member States to take steps to eliminate discrimination and marginalization on the basis of disability in situations of armed conflict, and emphasizes the need for States to end impunity for criminal acts against civilians, including those with disabilities, and to ensure they have access to justice and effective remedies, and as appropriate, reparation. Encouraging Member States to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy equal access to basic services, including education, health care, transportation and information and communications technology (ICT) and systems, the Council further urged States to enable the meaningful participation and representation of persons with disabilities, including their representative organizations, in humanitarian action and in conflict prevention, resolution, reconciliation, reconstruction and peacebuilding.

The 2019 IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action set out essential actions that humanitarian actors must take in order to effectively identify and respond to the needs and rights of persons with disabilities who are most at risk of being left behind in humanitarian settings. They place persons with disabilities at the center of humanitarian action, both as actors and as members of an affected population.

¹¹ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art. 11.

¹² Report A/76/146 to the General Assembly by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Gerard Quinn, on the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of armed conflict, 2021, para. 10.

They require that “in all circumstances, humanitarian actors, together with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), must identify and address factors that make it difficult for persons with disabilities to access assistance and protection (see the section barriers), as well as factors that promote their inclusion and protection.” The guidelines offer specific sectoral guidance and recommendations, including regarding protection, health, food, water and sanitation, and data collection as well as guidance on partnerships and empowerment of OPDs.¹³ This report demonstrates that much more can be done on the part of all humanitarian actors, including international agencies, donors, and the Ukrainian government, to implement these guidelines and ensure the rights of persons with disabilities in Ukraine.

The Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as other experts, have noted that little if any attention has been given to the implementation of IHL rules related to the conduct of hostilities as they apply to persons with disabilities. The disability dimension of conflict are not taken into account in military doctrine, training, planning, or in the conduct of operations.¹⁴ The Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities has pointed out that the IHL provision that ensures the “protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population” should also be understood through importance for persons with disabilities, who often depend on goods, services and medication that others may be able to survive without.¹⁵ Ukrainians with disabilities, including those interviewed for this report, were significantly impacted by the lack of access to medical care and medication as a result of the war.

Parties to a conflict are obligated to give ‘effective advance warning of attacks which may affect the civilian population, unless circumstances do not permit, yet overwhelmingly there is little or no consideration whether warnings are accessible to persons with disabilities. Parties to a conflict are also obliged to take feasible precautions to minimize the risk to civilians and civilian objects from the effects of an attack.¹⁶ This can include emergency information, evacuation procedures, and emergency shelter. In order for persons with disabilities to benefit from this protection, these measures must be accessible, including for people with different types of disabilities. Both IHL and the CRPD require differential treatment, including reasonable accommodation, to ensure that the applicable IHL protections are applied in a non-discriminatory manner and are accessible to all persons with disabilities.

¹³ “IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action,” November 2019, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-guidelines-on-inclusion-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-humanitarian-action-2019>

¹⁴ See Helen Durham and Gerard Quinn, “Lifting the Cloak of Invisibility: Civilians with Disabilities in Armed Conflict, ICRC Humanitarian Blog, April 21, 2022, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2022/04/21/civilians-disabilities-armed-conflict/>. Alice Priddy, “Disability and Armed Conflict,” Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, April 2019, <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/Academy%20Briefing%2014-interactif.pdf> ; More generally see <https://international-review.icrc.org/reviews/irrc-no-922-persons-with-disabilities-in-armed-conflict>

¹⁵ “Rights of Persons with Disabilities: the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of armed conflict,” UNGA A/76/146, July 19, 2021, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/196/98/PDF/N2119698.pdf?OpenElement>

¹⁶ Priddy, “Disability and Armed Conflict.”

IHL also governs the actions of occupying powers, which is relevant for areas of Ukraine which Russia has occupied, including prior to the February 2022 invasion, such as Crimea. These include, inter alia, the obligation to ensure humane treatment of the local population and to meet their needs, ensuring the existence and functioning of medical services, allowing relief operations to take place as well as allowing impartial humanitarian organizations to carry out their activities.¹⁷ The available information suggests that Russia has not met these obligations, including from the perspective of the specific impacts that the lack of electricity, heat, medical care, medicines and other essential items have on persons with disabilities.

It is essential to acknowledge the devastation, death, injury, and loss wrought by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The CRPD Committee has twice called on the Russian Federation to “immediately end the hostilities and observe and respect the principles of international human rights and humanitarian law.”¹⁸ During the 27th session of the Committee in August 2022, CRPD Committee Vice Chair Jonas Ruskus said that for the full realization of the human rights of persons with disabilities in Ukraine, Russia must cease military activity in the country.¹⁹

Following on from that meeting the CRPD Committee made recommendations with regard to Article 11, including IHL obligations, in its September 2022 report on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine. It called on the Russian Federation “to immediately cease attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure including hospitals, clinics, rehabilitation centres, maternities, ambulances and healthcare workers” and “[e]nsure that all persons with disabilities living in territories under its occupation have access to safe voluntary evacuation to the area of their choice; are protected from violence, abuse and ill-treatment; and have full access to basic services including water and sanitation, social support, education, healthcare, transport and information. It also called for “timely, unrestricted and safe access to persons with disabilities,” for humanitarian and human rights organizations to areas under Russian control. It also called on both Ukraine and Russia to “refrain from taking up military positions in residential areas or near civilian objects, and from involving persons with disabilities in military operations.”²⁰

¹⁷ ICRC, “Contemporary Challenges to IHL- Occupation: Overview,” <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/war-and-law/contemporary-challenges-for-ihl/occupation/overview-occupation.htm>.

¹⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022, <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/content/crpd-committee-adopts-report-recommendations-regarding-rights-persons-disabilities-impacted>; and “Ukraine” 2.7 million persons with disabilities at risk, UN committee warns,” April 14, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/04/ukraine-27-million-people-disabilities-risk-un-committee-warns>.

¹⁹ UN OHCHR, “Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Holds Meeting with States Parties on the Situation of Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine and in Countries where they Fled Following the Russian Aggression,” August 17, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/committee-rights-persons-disabilities-holds-meeting-states-parties-situation>

²⁰ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022, <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/content/crpd-committee-adopts-report-recommendations-regarding-rights-persons-disabilities-impacted>.

There are a range of international and domestic efforts underway to monitor the implementation of IHL in Ukraine, including by Ukrainian civil society organizations, a UN Human Rights Council Independent International Commission of Inquiry, UN and OSCE mechanisms as well as monitoring by international human rights groups.²¹ All of these mechanisms should ensure that their monitoring and documentation is inclusive and pays particular attention to the situation of persons with disabilities. Regrettably the first report from the HRC Commission of Inquiry²² regrettably did not adequately address the situation of persons with disabilities. Monitors and investigators should seek and incorporate the expertise of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in their work.

²¹ For example: The Center for Civil Liberties, <https://ccl.org.ua/en/>, The 5am Coalition, https://www.5am.in.ua/en?fbclid=IwAR37cbpWVYeSnX4NiNukYcwmA_s6VygnEgxU7hi9a7aPJzYDqLc91r8i5J0, Truth Hounds, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/start-2/>, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iicir-ukraine/index>, the OSCE Moscow Mechanism, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/522616>, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/ukraine/our-presence>, among others.

²² https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf published 16 March 2023, see also associated material <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iicir-ukraine/index>

| Key issues

Consultation with and Participation of Persons with disabilities

The CRPD Committee has recommended that “all concerned States parties and humanitarian actors ensure active participation of and coordination and meaningful consultation with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, including organizations of women and children with disabilities.”²³ This recognizes that organizations of persons with disabilities have been crucial in supporting persons with disabilities during the war with evacuations, access to information, accommodation, services, medicines, food, humanitarian aid supplies and much more. They have deep and unique professional knowledge of the specific requirements and needs of persons with disabilities, including persons with different types of disabilities, in Ukraine during the war. Many have remained in high-risk areas and dire conditions, separated from family and taking on great personal risk, in order to support members of their community.

Many OPDs are taking on immense roles and responsibilities completely new to them: collecting data and information on the locations and conditions of persons with disabilities; organizing shipments and distribution of food and other items, including to remote and dangerous locations; fielding requests for assistance; organizing evacuations. Unfortunately, many OPDs felt that there had been insufficient consultation and engagement on the part of government agencies with persons with disabilities to inform policies and actions to guarantee the rights of persons with disabilities, despite the serious risks they face. It is crucial that government and humanitarian actors at all levels seek out and incorporate the views and expertise of persons with disabilities, as required under the CRPD.

The sentiments reflected here are some examples of the lack of consultation. Oleg Lepetiuk, of the Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, said, “For the last 6 months in the city of Kharkiv, there has been not a single meeting between the authorities and persons with disabilities.”²⁴

²³ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022.

²⁴ Interview with Oleg Lepetiuk, Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, Kharkiv, November 9, 2022.

Igor Revenko, chair of the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf in Mykolaiv region, explained:

*The Mykolaiv government has done no outreach to us. None. We have to go, ask, explain what people's problems are, what needs to be done. At the beginning of the war, I went to them to ask for help. They asked for a list. I gave them a list of 90 deaf people. After a week they said I could come get the humanitarian aid. But it was just a small kit of 4 items, supposedly a month's supply. It felt like they were just checking the box. We decided to work with volunteer groups instead.*²⁵

"No one has invited us to any consultations, and if they have it's just been a tick-box exercise. Everything has changed. Before, we were part of all different types of consultations," said a wheelchair user and activist in the Chernivtsi region.²⁶ Nelia Lepetiuk, of the organization Women, Youth, Family, in Zhitomir, said, "I think persons with disabilities should be part of the commission that determines the distribution of humanitarian support."²⁷

In Dnipro, Olga Volkova, of the organization Ocean of Kindness, said, "Before the war, we were consulted. At the suggestion of the public council of the city, a special commission of the city was created with all departments. Unfortunately, the war broke out, we met twice in total and now it just isn't that organized."²⁸

In early 2022, the Ukrainian government stopped providing financial support to the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf, which, among many other activities, delivers the essential public service of providing accredited sign language interpreters to any person who requests their services.²⁹ The organization was forced to cut salaries for staff, many of whom continue working out of a strong commitment to supporting each other. The organization's sign language interpreters continue working, often paying their own travel expenses to reach people who request services.³⁰

On participation and representation in international mechanisms, activists in Ukraine have raised concerns at the absence of persons with disabilities in the leadership of the Age and Disability Technical Working Group³¹ of the UNHCR-led Protection Cluster, which was established in 2015 in relation to the humanitarian response in eastern Ukraine. They have also noted a lack of accessible information and lack for sign language interpretation for meetings, which negatively impacts OPD engagement.

²⁵ Interview with Igor Revenko, Ukrainian Society of the Deaf, Mykolaiv, December 9, 2022.

²⁶ Interview with "Helena" [requested anonymity], Chernivtsi region, November 1, 2022.

²⁷ Interview with Nelia Kovaluk, Women. Youth. Family., Zhitomir, October 24, 2022.

²⁸ Interviews with Olga Volkova, Ocean of Kindness, Dnipro, November 1 and 3, 2022.

²⁹ Email correspondence with Irina Chepchina, Director, Ukrainian Society of the Deaf, December 8, 2022.

³⁰ Interview with Irina Troyan, Ukrainian Society of the Deaf, Dnipro, December 8, 2022.

³¹ "Age and Disability Technical Working Group," <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/ukraine/age-and-disability-technical-working-group>

Indiscriminate Attacks, Executions, Sexual and gender-based violence

The CRPD Committee said in September 2022, that it is “deeply concerned about the disproportionate risk of death or injury to which persons with disabilities are exposed, as a result of indiscriminate attacks against civilian population,” also noting concerns regarding non-inclusive and inaccessible emergency preparedness.³²

Indiscriminate attacks can be particularly dangerous for persons with disabilities. For example, Natalia who is deaf and lives in Mykolaiv, described an attack on May 27 who is only aware of air raid warnings when she can see them on her smartphone. “There was an attack at about 4:00am in the morning. I was asleep. I woke up, looked at the internet. People sent me messages: “Are you alive?” A rocket hit the neighboring 9-story apartment building. Half of it was in complete ruins. I didn’t know about anywarning.”³³

Russian forces have perpetrated other forms of violence, including against persons with disabilities, including extrajudicial executions, torture and ill-treatment, and arbitrary detentions. For example, Russian armed forces killed a man with a disability in his late 60s, a local forensic expert, May 7, as they attempted to requisition his car, according to the HRMMU.³⁴ Russian forces arbitrarily detained 360 residents, including persons with disabilities for 28 days in an overcrowded basement of a school that they were using as their base. People had to sit for days without an opportunity to lie down. There were no toilet facilities, water or ventilation. Ten older people died.³⁵

Ukrainian and international human rights investigators have documented sexual and gender-based violence in Ukraine.³⁶ The UN Commission of Inquiry documented a case in which an 83-year-old woman was raped by a Russian armed forces serviceman in her house, where her physically disabled husband was also present.³⁷ In the context of the war, many victims face particular obstacles in reporting such violations, accessing appropriate health care and psychological support services.

³² UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022.

³³ Interview with Natalia Drogalchuk, Mykolaiv, December 7, 2022.

³⁴ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Update on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, August 1- October 31, 2022,” https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ua/2022-12-02/HRMMU_Update_2022-12-02_EN.pdf

³⁵ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Ukraine: Update to the Human Rights Council Special Session,” May 12, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2022/05/ukraine-update-human-rights-council-special-session>; and Human Rights Watch, “Ukraine: Torture Executions During Russian Occupation,” May 18, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/18/ukraine-executions-torture-during-russian-occupation>.

³⁶ “Commission has found an array of war crimes, violations of human rights and humanitarian law have been committed in Ukraine,” October 18, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/un-commission-has-found-array-war-crimes-violations-human-rights-and>

³⁷ “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine,” October 18, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/18/ukraine-executions-torture-during-russian-occupation>.

For persons with disabilities, Women Enabled International has documented how barriers to reporting and assistance are often much greater. This can be due to discrimination and stigma; loss of support networks; inaccessible avenues for reporting crimes to law enforcement; and inaccessible healthcare and other services because of inaccessible transportation and communication, including the lack of sign language interpreters.³⁸

There are grave dangers as a result of Russian forces' use of landmines as well as large amounts of unexploded ordnance in parts of Ukraine for all civilians, with particular risks for persons with disabilities.³⁹ For example, Raisa Kravchenko described how soon after the war started, she evacuated with her son, Oleksei, 38, who has an intellectual disability to a smaller village in Kyiv region. Oleksei lost his system of support. His blood pressure went up due to anxiety and he had more challenging behaviors. He would leave home and walk in areas outside the village that had not been de-mined and could not read the warning signs. Soldiers from checkpoints brought him back home and said, "It's not safe. He could be killed."⁴⁰

Case study: Svitlana and Nikolai in Mariupol

Svitlana lived with her 73-old-father, Nikolai, on the fourth floor of an apartment building in Mariupol, a city that came under heavy shelling by the Russian military on February 24 and came under Russian occupation on March 7. Shelling during the first week of the war destroyed the apartment building opposite Svitlana's and blew out all of the windows except in one small room. They lost gas, water, electricity, and communication with the outside world. The temperature was -10 C. Svitlana and Nikolai were unable to leave their apartment due to the active fighting in the streets. Nikolai stayed in bed for long periods and did not have access to medications he used to manage his blood pressure and other health conditions. He began to rely increasingly on Svitlana to support him in getting up and moving around the apartment.⁴¹

³⁸ Women Enabled International, "Fact Sheet: Rights of Women and Girls with Disabilities in Conflict and Humanitarian Emergencies," <https://womenenabled.org/reports/wei-fact-sheet-conflict-humanitarian-emergencies/>.

³⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross, "Under snow and ice, landmines and unexploded ordnance pose deadly danger to civilians," <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/russia-ukraine-under-snow-landmines-unexploded-ordnance-deadly-danger-to-civilians>

⁴⁰ Interview with Raisa Kravchenko, Coalition of People with Intellectual Disabilities (VGO Coalition), Kyiv region, October 7, 2022.

⁴¹ Interview with Svitlana, United Kingdom, October 15, 2022. Some analyses have found that more than half of the buildings in Mariupol have been damaged or destroyed: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-26/damage-data-reveals-extent-of-vicious-russian-tactics/101070918>

On March 16, Russian soldiers entered their building and forced everyone remaining in the building to the basement. Svitlana convinced the soldiers to allow Nikolai to remain in their apartment, given the difficulties he experienced navigating the stairs and the poor living conditions in the basement. They allowed Svitlana to take Nikolai one meal a day. He remained in bed, wearing all of his clothes and shoes and covered in blankets in an effort to stay warm.

Nikolai's health deteriorated, and he experiencing increasing difficulty moving independently. There was no functioning hospital that Nikolai could access, as Russian military attacks had destroyed hospitals and clinics along with large numbers of other buildings across the city. The soldiers eventually let the residents leave, apparently after they ran out of food to share with them. Svitlana and Nikolai traveled to Donetsk, which is under Russian occupation, and then later fled Ukraine, as described below.⁴²

Isolation and Shortages of Essentials in High-Risk Areas

People living in cities, towns, and villages across Ukraine that have been heavily damaged by military activity; are close to the front lines of active hostilities; are or have been under Russian occupation, or that are remote, continue to face severe hardship. These areas often lack electricity, water, heat, and communications, including for months. There have also been serious shortages of food, medicines, medical care, and other essentials particularly in occupied areas.⁴³ Many people are entirely dependent on volunteers to bring them essentials, when supplies are available and it is safe for volunteers to travel. These conditions have presented serious risks to individuals' rights to life, to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment; to an adequate standard of living including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to essential primary health care, including essential medicine.

Often, the vast majority of people who remain in these high-risk locations are those with disabilities, including many older people, according to people interviewed for this report. Those with the resources, including money, transportation, and connections in other locations have fled. In addition, many evacuation initiatives are often not accessible for persons with disabilities, as described in more detail below.

⁴² Interview with Svitlana, United Kingdom, October 15, 2022.

⁴³ Interviews for this report, and Left Bank Analytics, "Critical Areas Situation Report," 3 November 2022, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/202211103_critical_areas_situation_report_3_november_en_v02.pdf

As one activist who is blind and lives in Kharkiv described it:

*Those who remain are those who maybe would have liked to leave, but were not able to. There was no place to go: older people, people who are physically weak, persons with disabilities. There were some who did not want to abandon their homes. Their relatives, those who helped them, have left. There are many risks for those who remain.*⁴⁴

Ludmila, 69, lives in a village in Sumy region, 140km from the regional capital, which came under occupation during the first days of Russia's invasion. She described the hardship of isolation, lack of essentials and communication: "Food, medicines, as soon as the war started, everything disappeared almost immediately. During occupation, there was not enough food or medicine. We did not have any contact with the regional center. It was really hard, especially people with high blood pressure, plus there was Covid."⁴⁵ Ludmila, who is a volunteer with an organization for older people, supported other people in her community, including those with dementia and their relatives as much as she could until the area was liberated and food and medicines began to return to store shelves.⁴⁶

The UN reported in October that millions of Ukrainians are beyond the reach of humanitarians, including in newly liberated areas.⁴⁷ The lack of adequate personal assistance for persons with disabilities who require support with tasks of daily living, travel, communication, or other activities is a grave concern. Some experience the sudden absence of their existing support persons while others find themselves in situations where they now require additional or new types of personal assistance due to the conditions created by the war. Some people are all alone without support; others have a relative to support them; others are supported by neighbors and networks of volunteers.

According to Maria, an activist in Kharkiv:

*We traveled to districts of Kharkiv region where there were only older women. They did not go to the metro [bomb shelter] or anywhere. Some had not had anything to eat or to drink for days. There was one older woman with a disability whom we helped evacuate. Most of her family had left for Germany and her relative whom she lived with did not support her. She could not get out of bed independently. When we tried to move her, we found she was lying on a mattress soaked with urine.*⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Interview with Oleg Lepetiuk, Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, Kharkiv, November 9, 2022.

⁴⁵ Interview with Ludmila Kozachenkova, Age Concern Ukraine [Turbota pro Litnih v Ukraini], Glukhov, November 4, 2022.

⁴⁶ Interview with Ludmila Kozachenkova, Age Concern Ukraine, Glukhov, November 4, 2022.

⁴⁷ "Humanitarian Coordinator Denise Brown," VOA, October 20, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-interview-u-n-humanitarian-coordinator-denise-brown/6798655.html>

⁴⁸ Interview with Maria Chupina, Kharkiv, November 1, 2022.

Inaccessible or unavailable bomb shelters

Inaccessible and unavailable bomb shelters were consistently reported by interviewees for this report. Sergei Lebed, a 36-year-old wheelchair user, lives in a town in the Zhitomir region with his wife, who uses a scooter when out of the house. When the war first started, they would go the basement of their neighbor's house for emergency shelter. He described it: "When we went down into the basement it was hard to go down there in a wheelchair. There were a lot of people, maybe 15-20. They helped us get down." He explained their other options: "The local kindergarten has a well-constructed shelter, but it's far away. You'd have to run for a kilometer just to get there." The lack of accessible options means: "Now we just hide in a corner of the house," he said.⁴⁹

Viktorija, 36, is a wheelchair user who lives with her husband, two dogs, and a cat in Mykolaiv, a city near the Black Sea in Southern Ukraine. Mykolaiv has been on the front lines of active fighting since February, with shelling nearly every day.⁵⁰ The couple live in a house that does not have a basement, and when there is shelling, they gather in the entryway. "Every time, I think, is this my last breath or not. We never know, is this the moment our luck runs out." Viktorija said.⁵¹

For people who are blind or low-vision, shelters are also not always viable options for safety. Maria Gogilchin, who is blind and leads the disability organization, "White Cane," lives in a building in Ivano-Frankivsk where other blind residents live. She said, "We do not even have a bomb shelter. We've gone down to the building's basement, but it's damp, cold, and it is not equipped as a shelter. The ceilings are low and communications do not work there. We have had to sit there for hours at a time. It was terrifying. For people who are sighted, they can run, themselves, to the shelter in the school 300 meters away. For us, it's simply impossible. It's really difficult without some support."⁵² She described another terrifying incident: "Once we had an air raid siren while I was on the bus. The driver said, 'Everyone out!' Everyone got out and ran. And me? I didn't know where to run."⁵³

Raisa Kravchenko, of the Coalition of People with Intellectual Disabilities, also stated that many of the people with intellectual disabilities her organization works with find basement and other group shelters not always accessible. Individuals report experiencing increased anxiety and have adverse emotional or behavioral reactions to crowds and unfamiliar locations, particularly in already upsetting circumstances.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Interview with Sergei Lebedev, October 27, 2022.

⁵⁰ "Ukraine war: No sleep in Ukraine's relentlessly bombed city," BBC, August 4, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62407872>

⁵¹ Interview with Viktorija, Mykolaiv, October 19, 2022.

⁵² Interview with Maria Gogilchin, White Cane (Ivano-Frankivsk), France, October 28, 2022.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Interview with Raisa Kravchenko, Coalition of People with Intellectual Disabilities (VGO Coalition), Kyiv region, October 7, 2022.

Parents of children with disabilities described how inaccessibility of shelters led them to remain in their apartments or homes, exposed to risk. For example, Natalia Ostrogljad, who runs an organization for children with autism and their families in Zaporizhia, described going to the basement of their apartment building with her daughter Viktoria, 11, has autism. “The official bomb shelter is a 10-minute walk away, at the cultural center. It has water, ventilation. But it’s too far. During the first days of the war, we went to the basement of our apartment building. It was dark, moldy. There were 40 people in there. Vika covered her ears and kept trying to get out. I could see she was trying to manage her emotions, but it was difficult. “When will this end?” she kept asking. Later, she kept repeating, “I won’t go back there!” Now, we just sit in our hallway. I give her pillows and something to draw with.”⁵⁵

Physical barriers, lack of sign language interpretation, lack of personal assistance

There are physical and communication barriers, including the lack of sign language interpretation, that prevent people from accessing humanitarian goods and services on an equal basis with others. The lack of personal assistance also creates obstacles for those who require that kind of support.

Igor Revenko of the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf in Mykolaiv explained what it was like for deaf residents of Kherson to access aid, when he visited the city in December: “I saw huge lines of people waiting for aid. There are no sign language interpreters. For a person who is deaf, they can’t ask people who is at the end of the line, what documents are required. People are pushing, it’s impossible to understand what’s happening. So they leave without getting anything.”⁵⁶

Nadezhda, 65, a wheelchair user who left Kramatorsk in mid-March for western Ukraine, described the difficulty of accessing distribution points, “Someone who can run around can get aid five times, but those who are alone, have disabilities, without any support it can be hard for them to even get it once.”⁵⁷ Yuri Yarmenduk, a disability activist in Zhitomir region, said that in their town the municipal government has given out some humanitarian support but that people must go there to get it. A lot of persons with disabilities are asking, “How do they [the authorities] think I can get to it?”⁵⁸ Oleg Lepetiuk, in Kharkiv, said, “The government did organize humanitarian aid, but there were long queues. For person with a disability, it was nearly impossible to receive. Whoever gets there earliest and waits the longest, they’ll get the aid.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Interview with Natalia Ostrogljad, Autism- Conscious Parenting, Zaporizhia, October 27, 2022.

⁵⁶ Interview with Igor Revenko, Ukrainian Society of the Deaf, Mykolaiv, December 9, 2022.

⁵⁷ Interview with Nadezhda Polomarchuk, Donetsk Regional Organization of Persons with disabilities (Kramatorsk), Ivano-Frankivsk, November 2, 2022.

⁵⁸ Interview with Yuri Yaremchuk, Zhitomir region, October 24, 2022.

⁵⁹ Interview with Oleg Lepetiuk, Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, Kharkiv, November 9, 2022.

Viktor Korotovskii, an actor and cameraman who also works as a volunteer ensuring humanitarian aid reaches deaf people in Kharkiv and the surrounding area, explained that he and others in the deaf community made great efforts soon after the war started to connect with deaf people to be sure they received information and humanitarian support, given particular barriers they might face. He explained: “At the beginning it was very hard. We’re trying to figure out: Who is where? It was especially hard to find those who did not have smart phones, mostly older people. We go to them directly to deliver food. Some are deaf, and have other disabilities, maybe they use a wheelchair. They’re not going to be able to go out somewhere and get aid. The world of deaf people is very close-knit. No one is left alone.”⁶⁰

Those who live outside of city centers or who are not connected to local organizations can be particularly at risk of not receiving available aid. According to one woman, “Helena,” a wheelchair user, who is also involved in humanitarian support, in Chernivtsi region:

The problem with the assistance from international organizations was that it has not included all people. People who are older, people who cannot get to the distribution points, people who do not have smart phones and cannot register themselves, those who do not have bank cards [for cash assistance]. They simply do not receive assistance. Assistance is not inclusive of everyone.

It was not thought through: if people have to come from remote villages for food aid, how will they travel? They might have to pay for the transportation. I do know people who registered, but did not get assistance.

*When they first started to register people, there were outrageous lines. People, in some cases, waited in line overnight. Many people just can’t wait like that.*⁶¹

There is a significant lack of personal assistance for persons with disabilities. Ukraine does not have a publicly-funded system of professional assistance, and for persons with disabilities who relied on family members or informal support persons, those individuals may have chosen or been force to flee, or joined the Ukrainian military. According to Nadezhda Polomarchuk, the head of a disability organization from Kramatorsk, “We can’t even understand how many people [with disabilities] are alone. There are no support people. This whole country is on the move. Whole regions. What kind of support people can there be?”⁶²

⁶⁰ Interview with Viktor Korotovskii, Kharkiv, December 7, 2022.

⁶¹ Interview with “Helena” [requested anonymity], Chernivtsi region, November 1, 2022.

⁶² Interview with Nadezhda Polomarchuk, Donetsk Regional Organization of Persons with disabilities (Kramatorsk), Ivano-Frankivsk, November 2, 2022.

Volunteers have stepped in to provide assistance, but this is typically by necessity limited to delivering food, medicines, and essentials, and thus people are left without adequate support for their other needs. A 69-year-old volunteer in a village in the Sumy region explained, “For people who can’t get out of bed on their own, who do not have relatives around, we, volunteers, will go with their documents to get their humanitarian aid and bring it to them.”⁶³ In Kharkiv, one activist reported, “Some of the humanitarian aid distribution points were shelled, so it was only possible to organize humanitarian support through visits to people. Volunteers took everything on themselves. The only ones who help are the military and ambulance medics.”⁶⁴

Natalia, in Mykolaiv, who lives with her older mother and son with a disability, said that they have received food by going to their local government social services agency, which provides food to people who are 75 and older, persons with disabilities, and single mothers. The family also receives support through the older persons’ organization, Age Concern Ukraine, including food, hygiene items, adult diapers. Age Concern Ukraine also provides a support group for individuals who supporting older relatives with dementia and other disabilities, which Natalia attends.⁶⁵

Lack of Accessible and Comprehensive Information

People whom we interviewed said that organizations, volunteers and word of mouth communication were the main source of information regarding evacuations and social services, rather than the government and said that there was not consistently accessible information available to persons with disabilities.

In its September 2022 report on Ukraine, the CRPD Committee expressed concern “about the lack of accessibility of information and alert mechanisms in evacuation procedures, particularly for persons with psychosocial and/or intellectual disabilities residing in institutions; persons with hearing and visual impairments; persons with limited mobility, including those who can only travel laying down; men with disabilities and male caregivers for close relatives with disabilities who wish to leave Ukraine and seek international protection in another country.” It urged all concerned States parties to ensure that all emergency-related information is made available in formats accessible to all persons with disabilities regardless of type of impairment.⁶⁶

⁶³ Interview with Ludmila Kozachenkova, Glukhov, November 4, 2022.

⁶⁴ Interview with Maria Chupina, Kharkiv, November 1, 2022.

⁶⁵ Interview with Natalia, Mykolaiv, October 27, 2022.

⁶⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022.

Oleg Lepetiuk of the Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, said that when the war started, “No one answered the phones at the government social services. Persons with disabilities did not know how to get information. All the workers were working remotely. There really wasn’t any information, particularly before May.”⁶⁷ Even when more information became available on the internet, it is frequently not accessible. “There are a lot of resources online, a lot of sites, now. But persons with disabilities can get lost in all the different information on different sites. And what about people who do not have smart phones- how do they access it?”⁶⁸

Interviews with Ukrainians who are deaf revealed many of the particular obstacles they faced in accessing information about the war and humanitarian aid, as well as air raid alerts. They said they overwhelmingly rely on their smart phones to receive air raid alerts, which come through online apps. They also read the news and receive information through social media or group chats. However, for those without phones, they must rely on others who are around them for all information, including when there are air raids.⁶⁹

“For people who are deaf, especially those who are older, without phones, it is very difficult. Information only reaches them through relatives or friends,” explained Viktor Korotovskii, an actor and cameraman who also works as a volunteer ensuring humanitarian aid reaches deaf people in Kharkiv and surrounding areas.⁷⁰

Electricity blackouts due to Russian attacks on energy infrastructure can mean their electronic devices run out of charge. With electrical outages, there are also communication blackouts which leaves people who are deaf are completely cut off from information and communication about what is happening around them.⁷¹

There is often no access to internet in bomb shelters, which can make people reluctant to use them. “There was so much bombing, shelling in Mykolaiv in the first days of the war,” explained Natalia in Mykolaiv. “I was in shock. What should I do? I was reading my messages, looking at Telegram and the internet. Total panic. Should we go to the bomb shelter? But in the bomb shelter the internet doesn’t work, and I can’t hear what others are explaining.”⁷²

⁶⁷ Interview with Oleg Lepetiuk, Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, Kharkiv, November 9, 2022.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Interviews with Viktor Korotovskii, Kharkiv, December 7, 2022.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Interviews with Interviews with Viktor Korotovskii, Kharkiv, December 7, 2022; Natalia Drogalchuk, Mykolaiv, December 7, 2022, and Irina Troyan, Dnipro, December 8, 2022.

⁷² Interview with Natalia Drogalchuk, Mykolaiv, December 7, 2022.

National and local official announcements and news broadcasts on television do not have subtitles or sign language interpretation. Ukrainian sign language interpreters with the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf often prepare sign language interpretation of official speeches, which then the organization overlays onto the original video and circulates so that people who are deaf have equal access to this important information. There has been no initiative on the part of the government to hire sign language interpreters to make their video speeches accessible.⁷³

Raisa Kravchenko of the VGO Coalition also noted that many of the families within her organization's network of people with intellectual disabilities do not have smart phones in order to learn about or apply for assistance. According to Viktor, an activist providing humanitarian support and evacuations in Mykolaiv, near the front lines of the armed conflict, "The city isn't distributing much information. People do not know who to contact. We're giving information on social networks, through the news, and when we deliver supplies to people, we put our telephone number on the delivery bag so others will share it."⁷⁴ Olga Volkova, 65, who has a physical disability, directs the organization Ocean of Kindness in Dnipro in eastern Ukraine. She said civil society is the main conduit of information for persons with disabilities in remote or high-risk areas: "Volunteers supporting persons with disabilities or older people, they know us, will call us, explain the situation, and we'll tell them to take the person to the hospital, or help them get to us."⁷⁵

Forced Displacement and Evacuations

Since February 2022, over 7.8 million Ukrainians have fled the country.⁷⁶ Eighty-six percent are women.⁷⁷ According to UNHCR, there are also over 2.8 million Ukrainians in Russia;⁷⁸ Ukrainian and international human rights organizations have documented forced transfers to Russia. UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe reported in October that among 34,000 people refugees interviewed in 7 countries, 24% of respondents reported having "at least one family member with specific needs," and disability was the most frequently reported (12%) "need."⁷⁹

⁷³ Interviews with Viktor Korotskii, Kharkiv, December 7, 2022, and Svitlana Baklytska, Ukrainian Society of the Deaf, Poltava, December 7, 2022.

⁷⁴ Interview with Viktor, Mykolaiv, October 24, 2022.

⁷⁵ Interview with Olga Volkova, Ocean of Kindness, Dnipro, November 1 and 3, 2022.

⁷⁶ Data as of November 12, 2022. UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal Ukraine Refugee Situation," November 12, 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

⁷⁷ "UNHCR Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring," October 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

⁷⁸ UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal Ukraine Refugee Situation," November 12, 2022.

⁷⁹ Data from 7 countries. Data as of September 30, 2022. UNHCR, Regional Bureau for Europe, "Displacement Patterns, Protection Risks, and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine," October 26, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/poland/displacement-patterns-protection-risks-and-needs-refugees-ukraine-regional-protection-analysis-1>

There are also 6.5 million people displaced within Ukraine, as of October 27, 2022, according to the International Organization for Migration, an increase since September.⁸⁰ The European Disability Forum (EDF) reported that as of June 2022, 143,600 persons with disabilities were registered as displaced.⁸¹

Many people who were not able to organize their own departure have required evacuation. People interviewed for this report said that overwhelmingly evacuations were organized by organizations of persons with disabilities, NGOs, volunteers, and individuals themselves. Often, organizations undertook evacuations for the first time, as is the case with Fight for Right, an organization of persons with disabilities which has supported over 1,000 evacuations of persons with disabilities, and other services to several thousand more.⁸² In some cases, organizations, such as the Donetsk regional organization of persons with disabilities, drew on previous experience evacuating people from eastern Ukraine when Russia's aggression started in 2014.⁸³

People who had the financial means, a place to go, and the opportunity to leave dangerous areas, mostly did so quickly, with those remaining being people with fewer financial means, those without relatives or others to travel to, those with disabilities, including many older people, as well as those who wanted to stay at their homes and property and hoped the war would end soon. According to one interviewee, 69, with a daughter with a disability, who lives in a village in Sumy region that came under occupation during the first days of the war, "If you had transport, you left; that was mostly the people in the city [not us, in villages]."⁸⁴

In some cases, the Ukrainian government provides evacuations, although most activists reported that the government's efforts had been insufficient because they were slow, people did not know about them, they could not reach them, or were inaccessible. During the government-ordered mandatory evacuations in the Donetsk region in August there was a stronger system functioning to evacuate people, including with disabilities, according to Vostok SOS, which organizes evacuations in eastern Ukraine, and stronger cooperation with the government in evacuations from liberated areas in the Donetsk region as well.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ IOM, "Ukraine Internal Displacement Report General Population Survey Round 10," October 27, 2022, <https://displacement.iom.int/reports/ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-10-17-27-october-2022>

⁸¹ "Ukrainians with Disabilities remain Trapped in Conflict Zones UN Committee Says," Reuters, September 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainians-with-disabilities-remain-trapped-conflict-zones-un-committee-says-2022-09-09/>

⁸² Interview with Yuliia Savchuk, Fight for Right, November 10, 2022.

⁸³ Interview with Nadezhda Polomarchuk, Donetsk Regional Organization of Persons with disabilities (Kramatorsk), Ivano-Frankyivsk, November 2, 2022.

⁸⁴ Interview with Lyudmila Kozachenkova, Glukhov, November 4, 2022.

⁸⁵ Interview with Yaroslav Kornienko, Vostok SOS, November 14, 2022.

Following advocacy on the part of organizations of persons with disabilities, as of July 2022, the government had organized accessible train carriages to transport passengers with disabilities.⁸⁶

The carriages include staff, including medical personnel and travel from Donetsk region to Lviv in Western Ukraine, with stops at other cities.⁸⁷ Some organizations of persons with disabilities and international organizations provide medical evacuations. There has also been some cooperation between some organizations and the government with evacuations as the months of the war have gone on.

The CRPD Committee has called on the Ukrainian government “to ensure adequate support for persons with disabilities is available and accessible to all persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others. Evacuation protocols should include prioritization of persons with disabilities during emergency evacuations; and safeguards regarding assistive devices and equipment, to ensure that persons with disabilities are able to take their assistive devices with them during evacuation or, if not possible, to have them replaced.”⁸⁸

Inaccessibility of evacuations

Evacuations for persons with disabilities have frequently not been accessible, including due to the lack of personal assistants or support persons for those who require support, as well as due to the limited availability of accessible transportation.

Many who were evacuating in earlier periods during the war, or from areas where there is no functioning train system, did not benefit from this type of service. For example, Maria Chupina, who lives in Kharkiv and has children with disabilities, including Denis, 13, who has spina bifida and microcephaly.

Chupina said that in early March, the local authorities offered to evacuate her family by bus, but that it was not accessible. She explained:

*Denis would not have survived a trip that way. There wasn't any kind of medical evacuation at all. There were no specialized vehicles to evacuate him. They offered a train, but even if you made it into a coupe, there would be [a lot of people]. He uses a catheter, which needs to be kept sterile. They evacuated him last.*⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Interview with Yulia Savchuk, Fight for Right, November 10, 2022. National Assembly of Persons with disabilities of Ukraine, On the findings from a survey of men and women with disabilities and legal representatives to monitor the implementation of legislation on assistance to internally displaced women and men with disabilities,” June 2022.

⁸⁷ Interview with Yaroslav Korninenko, Vostok SOS, November 14, 2022.

⁸⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022,

⁸⁹ Interview with Maria Chupina, Kharkiv, November 1, 2022.

The lack of support persons has also meant evacuations have been inaccessible and has created serious barriers for persons with disabilities to enjoy their rights. Referring to people who are blind, Oleg Lepetiuk said, “People who are blind became very dependent on others. For evacuations, there were no support persons provided. There were only volunteers at train stations, who did huge amounts of good work.”⁹⁰

In response to the war, the Ukrainian government has prohibited men who can be conscripted from leaving the country. For many persons with disabilities, this has meant particular barriers during displacement or even the lack of a possibility to evacuate. “Since men of conscription age cannot leave Ukraine, we are not able to organize adequate support for people,” said one activist involved in evacuations of persons with disabilities from areas near the front lines in eastern Ukraine.⁹¹

Maria Gogilchin, of the White Cane organization of people with low vision, reported that persons with disabilities who are evacuated without a support person face particular obstacles coping in unfamiliar surroundings. She gave the example of a man with cerebral palsy who is blind and had been evacuated to France for medical treatment without a personal assistant, although he requires one. She noted that men with disabilities very often require or prefer a man as a personal assistant, in order to adequately support their needs. She also told IDA, “When our organization conducted a survey of people who are blind and low vision, and asked why people do not evacuate, a lot of them said, because they do not have someone to go with them; they would have to go without assistance.”⁹²

Lack of adequate information about relocation

While there certainly have been people in Ukraine, including those with disabilities, who have chosen not to evacuate even from dangerous areas, there has been little attention given to the experience of persons with disabilities who make the difficult decision not to evacuate because there is insufficient information about the conditions and support available once people are in a new location. “Even when evacuations are possible, people in any case say that they’re not going because they do not know where they’re going. No one explains anything to them,” said Oleg Lepetiuk, a blind activist in Kharkiv.

For example, Tatiana and Konstantin, a couple in their 60s were among the few remaining residents in an apartment building in a heavily bombed area of Kharkiv. As a result of a stroke, Konstantin was not able to move without significant support and spent most of his days in bed. Their apartment had been damaged by shelling. They went for a long period without the medication that Konstantin needed.

⁹⁰ Interview with Oleg Lepetiuk, Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, Kharkiv, November 9, 2022.

⁹¹ Interview with activist involved in evacuations, Dnipro, November 11, 2022.

⁹² Interview with Maria Gogilchin, White Cane (Ivano-Frankivsk), France, October 28, 2022.

Although volunteers offered to evacuate them, they declined, as they had justifiable fears that temporary shelters would not be accessible for Konstantin due to his disabilities, including because he required privacy when bathing. Neighbors who had previously fled returned to the building to support the couple.⁹³

Maria Chupina, the mother of 7, including 3 children with disabilities, said she was afraid to evacuate without knowing exactly where she would be going, since her son, who is 13 and has microcephaly and other disabilities, requires regular medical care and 24/7 support from her or others. She explained:

*We couldn't end up in a village, because our youngest needs medical care. International evacuation also was not an option. If something happens here, at least I know I can call right away to the hospital. I'm worried about the qualifications of doctors somewhere else. If we ended up somewhere in a big city, then ok, but if we got placed in some small town, ... then it's really unclear what kind of medical care we would get.*⁹⁴

The family eventually evacuated from Kharkiv to Lviv for several months. Later, they secured a vehicle from an international donor and helped to transport children from villages in Kharkiv region to the hospital.⁹⁵

Victoria, a wheelchair user who lives in Mykolaiv, said she is reluctant to leave her home, which is accessible for her. "Where will I go?" she said. "It's comfortable for me here. I know I can live here. I do not want to give up everything we have here, our home, our land."⁹⁶

Similarly, Olga Volkova of Ocean of Kindness in Dnipro noted that people did not evacuate quickly, often due to uncertainty: "Many do not evacuate until the last minute. They do not have anywhere to go. If they know that someone will be waiting for them, there will be decent conditions, a place to live, then they of course will go. But without this, they do not leave, and then it's very difficult to help them evacuate later," because their disabilities have been exacerbated by the conditions and experience of the war.⁹⁷

Sergei, a wheelchair user, said that early in the war an organization supporting persons with disabilities had offered for them to evacuate to the Netherlands, but he and his wife did not choose to go because they could not envision what life would be like for them there.⁹⁸

⁹³ Interview with Felicity Gray and Kristina Preiksaityte, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Odesa, October 7, 2022.

⁹⁴ Interview with Maria Chupina, Kharkiv, November 1, 2022.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ IDA telephone interview with Viktoria, Mykolaiv, October 19, 2022.

⁹⁷ Interview with Olga Volkova, Ocean of Kindness, Dnipro, November 1 and 3, 2022.

⁹⁸ Interview with Sergei Lebed, Zhitomir region, October 27, 2022.

Access to assistive products and technologies

In armed conflict, persons with disabilities are at risk of having their assistive products, including wheelchairs, walkers, electric scooters, canes, hearing aids, prostheses, and other devices lost, left behind, or damaged. As a result of injuries related to the war, some people may find themselves in need of an assistive product for the first time. While access to assistive products was not a focus of this research, some activists noted the particular difficulty of accessing hearing aids, which appear to be in greater demand due to hearing loss associated with explosions.

As Yuliia Savchuk, of the organization of persons with disabilities, Fight For Right, said, “Technical equipment is also life-saving.” She added:

Often people need the proper documents regarding the nature of their disability to get assistive devices offered by the authorities. But even if they have the right paperwork, some devices just are not available. We have a lot of requests for hearing aids. Part of it seems related to the war. I met one mother with two sons with hearing disabilities. They shared one set of hearing aids.

Fight for Right has been able to support this family and others in accessing hearing aids. They also organized a shipment of 1,000 assistive products to Ukraine, including wheelchairs, walkers and canes.⁹⁹ Nonviolent Peaceforce reported that they had spent months trying to secure hearing aids for 20 people in need of them in Odesa and that neither government nor international humanitarian organizations committed to supplying them, with one international organization saying that the request was too small to justify an order.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Interview with Yulia Savchuk, Fight for Right, November 10, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Felicity Gray and Kristina Preiksaityte, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Odesa, October 7, 2022.

Adequate standard of living, the right to health, and humanitarian assistance

Living in damaged homes

Many people in Ukraine live in damaged homes, including people interviewed for this report. For many people, they remain in these conditions because they do not have the means to evacuate or relocate or they are supporting others who cannot. A deaf activist in Mykolaiv said that a dormitory for deaf people and other residents in the city had many of its windows blown out as a result of shelling about 100 meters from the building, yet they continued to live there with plastic covering the windows. They were without heat until December 1.¹⁰¹ Activists described visiting a neighborhood not far from downtown Kharkiv in May 2022 that had suffered extensive damage from Russian military attacks. They met older people and persons with disabilities remaining in buildings that had been shelled multiple times resulting in significant damage to walls and windows, including in the apartments where people continued to live. People were exposed to the elements and also asbestos, a building material that poses serious health risks when exposed to the air and not contained properly.¹⁰²

Lack of access to water

As a result of Russian military targeting of civilian infrastructure, certain locations in Ukraine have lacked potable running water for extended periods of time, in particular the city of Mykolaiv. In other locations water has been shut off for shorter periods. Mykolaiv has not had potable running water since April 19, when Russian military actions destroyed the main water supply lines to the city.¹⁰³ According to Victoria, the water coming to households has been salty, discolored, and has a bad odor, and residents only use it for washing clothes. She and her husband buy bottled water from their limited income for drinking, cooking, and bathing. The queues to access water that is brought in by truck or available at pumps are often long and she fears for her safety, as Russian forces have attacked people queueing for essentials and as a person with a disability, she cannot easily flee an attack.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Interview with Igor Revenko, Ukrainian Society of the Deaf, Mykolaiv, December 7, 2022.

¹⁰² Interview with Felicity Gray and Kristina Preiksaityte, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Odesa, October 7, 2022.

¹⁰³ "A Ukrainian city struggles after Russian forces blew up its water supply," NPR, October 8, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/08/1127303154/ukraine-mykolaiv-water-supply>.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Viktoria, Mykolaiv, October 19, 2022.

Natalia, who is deaf and also lives in Mykolaiv, said that often the information about the water distribution points, which often only operated for a short time on any given day, was via word of mouth, passed by neighbors and that by the time she learned where one was, it was closed for the day and she would have to look for another distribution point.¹⁰⁵

According to Maria, who is blind, from Ivano-Frankivsk, “The water is sometimes shut off, either with advance notice, or without. We have learned to store water in our apartment. When there’s a need to carry it home, people must bring it themselves from the taps. There isn’t any service that will help get it to us.”¹⁰⁶

Lack of access to healthcare and medications

Russian attacks on civilian areas have resulted in significant damage and destruction of clinics, pharmacies, and hospitals. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports 668 attacks on healthcare in Ukraine as of November 11, 2022, the overwhelming majority impacting facilities, caused by “violence with heavy weapons.”¹⁰⁷ The absence of available and accessible healthcare services can be particularly harmful to persons with disabilities who may rely on regular services and access to regular medications, as well as those whose disabilities are exacerbated by the war-time conditions and experience of the war.

In a December 2 statement, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry noted the disproportionate impact of destruction of medical facilities and on infrastructure attacks on persons with disabilities and people with chronic health conditions: “Destruction and devastation of medical institutions by attacks prevents people to access health protection. Additionally, attacks on transport and energy infrastructure limit mobility of patients and indirectly reduces enjoyment of the right to health. Patients with chronic conditions and those who have need for urgent medical treatment are particularly affected by this situation.”¹⁰⁸

After Svitlana evacuated from Mariupol to Donetsk, with her 73-year-old father, Nikolai, whose mobility and health had deteriorated under Russian occupation, as described above, Nikolai was able to receive emergency treatment at a hospital near where they stayed. However, even after initial tests indicated that he might have cancer, he could not access specialized doctors for further assessment. Nor could Nikolai get a new catheter or medicines he needed. “We could not go to the oncology center because it was across town, and there was too much shelling. It was too dangerous.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Natalia Drogalchuk, Mykolaiv, December 7, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Maria Gogilchin, White Cane (Ivano-Frankivsk), France, October 28, 2022.

¹⁰⁷ WHO, “Surveillance System for Attacks on Healthcare,” November 14, 2022, <https://extranet.who.int/ssa/LeftMenu/PublicReportList.aspx?start=2022-01-01&end=2022-11-15&countryList=229&typeList=0>

¹⁰⁸ “Statement at the end of the UN’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine’s visit to Kyiv- 2 December 2022,” December 2, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/12/statement-end-independent-international-commission-inquiry-ukraines-visit>

We could not even reach a pharmacy. My dad had stopped walking and he was in pain, but there was nothing to do.”¹⁰⁹

On a visit to Kherson, not long after Ukrainians had retaken the city, Igor Revenko of the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf said that most stores were not working and that people reported that during the occupation by Russian forces they had no access to medicines whatsoever. All of the pharmacies were closed.¹¹⁰

Elena, whose 16-year-old son, Maxim, has autism and a medical condition said that her son used to receive regular physiotherapy and massage which he depended on to manage aspects of his disability. They live in eastern Ukraine, in the Zaporizhia region. “The hospitals work but only for very basic services. They cancelled all the rehabilitation,” Elena said.¹¹¹ Galina, 60, who has diabetes and severe glaucoma lived with her husband in Toretsk in Donetsk region, on the front lines of the war. “Our hospitals, pharmacies, all closed. With all the fighting, I got so nervous. My blood pressure went up. My diabetes got worse. I couldn’t manage it. I had to travel 70 km to another city for surgery to remove four of my toes. We had to wait there for 3 days for my turn.”¹¹²

Natalia, 62, lives in Mykolaiv with her mother, who is 92 and has dementia and her son, who is 39 and has psychosocial disabilities. She said that before the war, her son would seek services as needed from a psychiatric hospital. Due to the risk of military attacks, they are afraid to go to the hospital. She also said that services have been severely restricted since the war started. This limitation is particularly acute in the context of the ongoing war, “My son is taking this all really hard. He is afraid of the aircraft. He’s afraid of the missile strikes. We try to talk to him, have calming conversations.”¹¹³ Even in areas where active hostilities have ceased, access remains limited, “There is medical assistance now, but many doctors also fled the fighting. Access to medical care is not the same as it was, before the war,” said Oleg, in Kharkiv.¹¹⁴

Many of those interviews described how disruption in medications for persons with disabilities who take medication regularly posed serious risks for them.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Svitlana, United Kingdom, October 15, 2022.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Igor Renenko, Ukrainian Society of the Deaf, Mykolaiv, December 9, 2022.

¹¹¹ Interview with Elena, Volniansk, October 25, 2022.

¹¹² Interview with Galina, Berdych, October 26, 2022.

¹¹³ Interview with Natalia, Mykolaiv, October 27, 2022.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Oleg Lepetiuk, Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, Kharkiv, November 9, 2022.

Olga, whose 17-year-old daughter Veleria has multiple disabilities, said that they ultimately decided to flee their village in the Kherson region after medicines became unavailable during Russian occupation:

*When the Russians arrived in the village, they took out all the medicines in the pharmacy. They did not allow any in. My daughter uses a catheter and takes antibiotics and pain medication regularly. Some neighbors got together what they could, but Veleria was suffering. I had to get her somewhere where there were medicines.*¹¹⁵

Raisa Kravchenko of the VGO coalition said, “Some people can have panic attacks or experience behaviors and moods that medications help them manage. These are medicines that general practitioner doctors can’t prescribe. Only psychiatrists can. It’s more difficult to reach them and medicines are not always available. Sometimes people get an offer to go to the psychiatric hospital as the only way to get their medications.”¹¹⁶ Victoria, a wheelchair user with cerebral palsy who lives in Mykolaiv, said that because of disruptions to the supplies of medicines, she has been forced to switch to unfamiliar medicines.¹¹⁷ Local organizations of persons with disabilities have gone to great efforts to organize medications, including specialized medications for persons with disabilities, coordinating with local authorities, international organizations, or purchasing medications directly.

Other organizations have also documented cases of hardship and even death due to lack of healthcare services. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)’s monitoring mechanism, reported that a 54-year-old woman with epilepsy died in March 2022 in Kyiv region, as the hospital where she usually received medical care was unable to provide services due to active hostilities. There were many similar cases reported across Ukraine.¹¹⁸

Disproportionate Impact of Heat and Electricity Cutoffs

Russian forces have attacked critical civilian infrastructure in Ukraine throughout the war, with increasing intensity in recent months as Ukrainian troops have regained territory that had been under Russian occupation. According to the UN, in October 2022, alone, there were five waves of attacks on critical infrastructure across Ukraine. According to the Ukrainian government, Russian missiles and drone attacks have now destroyed up to 40% of Ukraine’s energy system.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Interview with Olga V., Zamosc, Poland, November 13, 2022.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Raisa Kravchenko, Coalition of People with Intellectual Disabilities (VGO Coalition), Kyiv region, October 7, 2022.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Viktoria, Mykolaiv, October 19, 2022.

¹¹⁸ OHCHR, “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine,” 1 February- 31 July, 2022, <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/ReportUkraine-1Feb-31Jul2022-en.pdf>.

¹¹⁹ “Ukraine Response: UNHCR Operational Response Delivery Updates,” 2 November 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/96581>

For many people across Ukraine, when there is no electricity, they are also deprived of water, hot water, and/or heating, which are often dependent on electricity, depending on the home or building's systems. The lack of a clean and regular water supply in Mykolaiv has also impacted the heating system.

The lack of electricity creates hardship for many people, but often disproportionately impacts persons with disabilities and puts their health, well-being, life in danger.

Nelia Kovaluk is a 52-year-old wheelchair user in Zhitomir, in western Ukraine, where Russian strikes damaged the electrical station in October. She is a disability rights activist and lives with her mother, 78, and sister, 58, both of whom also have disabilities. Nelia explained how the absence of electricity impacts her:

*I have a small lift that enables me to go in and out of the house. When there's no electricity I am trapped in my apartment. I can't get to the shelter. I also have greater heat needs than other people because of my limited movement. I put on lots of clothes or lay under a lot of blankets. When there is no water, I have to use adult diapers. They are expensive.*¹²⁰

Yuri, a wheelchair user, lived in an apartment building in Kharkiv. He had remained in his apartment throughout shelling and aerial attacks, as the building's basement shelter was inaccessible for him. The area had lost electricity due to bombardments and the elevator did not function.¹²¹

Sergei, a wheelchair user in the Zhitomir region in northern Ukraine, said his wife uses an electric scooter to travel outside of the house. These scooters depend on electricity to stay charged. Their heating system is dependent on electricity, so they had to put in a wood stove and buy wood for it, an added expense. "Things are available in the stores, but everything is more expensive. Prices rose 2 to 3 times where we are."¹²²

Deaf Ukrainians reported that they overwhelmingly rely on their smart phones to receive alerts of air raid sirens, which come through apps or alerts on Telegram and Viber. They also read the news and receive information through social media or group chats. "I do not hear sirens. The phone shows me when there is an air raid alert," explained Irina Troyan, chair of the Ukrainian Society for the Deaf in Dnipro.¹²³

Electricity blackouts due to Russian attacks on energy infrastructure can mean their electronic devices run out of charge. With electrical outages, there are also communication blackouts which leaves people who are deaf are completely cut off from information and communication about what is happening around them. People who may be connected to sign language interpreters for live interpretation while at the hospital or accessing humanitarian aid can be left without crucial support.

¹²⁰ Interview with Nelia Kovaluk, "Women Youth and Family," Zhitomir, October 24, 2022.

¹²¹ Interview with Felicity Gray and Kristina Preiksaityte, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Odesa, October 7, 2022.

¹²² Interview with Sergei Lebed, Zhitomir region, October 27, 2022.

¹²³ Interview with Irina Troyan, Ukrainian Society of the Deaf, Dnipro, December 8, 2022.

For people who are blind, Oleg Lepetiuk, noted that most use electricity for cooking, as it is safer for them, so they cannot rely on gas in the absence of electricity. He also said that while many people living in individual houses have bought firewood, solar panels, generators, or gas stoves, in preparation for potential electrical outages, persons with disabilities who rely on a pension are not able to make these kinds of purchases.¹²⁴

Galina, 60, is an internally displaced person who has diabetes and low vision lived in a village near Toretsk in the Donetsk region before she and her husband fled to Berdychiv in northern Ukraine. She began crying as she described living on the front lines of the war for 3 months: “There was no electricity, no water. There was shooting without any warning sirens. Then other times there were sirens. I can’t see anything. I became very anxious. I was so worried. I can’t go anywhere on my own. Our hospitals, pharmacies all closed. We did not go anywhere except to fetch water.”¹²⁵

OHCHR documented the deaths of at least 12 older persons due to the dire humanitarian situation in areas affected by hostilities. This included one man whose oxygen device stopped functioning because of a power cut, in Bucha, when it was under control of Russian armed forces in March.¹²⁶

Access to Essential Goods and Humanitarian Assistance across Ukraine

Access to essential goods and services including food, medicine, hygiene items, and services, for people who were internally displaced as well as those who remained at home in parts of Ukraine less impacted by direct hostilities has been varied across the country and over time. Support has been provided by organizations of persons with disabilities, non-governmental organizations, volunteer networks, government, and international humanitarian organizations, including in partnership together. It is not within the scope of this report to analyze the scale and reach of humanitarian aid to persons with disabilities in Ukraine, but instead presents some of the barriers, including those which persist even as humanitarian support has increased over time. The CRPD Committee notes that the principle of non-discrimination must be respected “in all situations of risk and humanitarian emergency, particularly regarding equal access to basic necessities, such as water, sanitation, healthcare, food and shelter.”¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Interview with Oleg Lepetiuk, Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, Kharkiv, November 9, 2022.

¹²⁵ Interview with Galina, Berdychiv, October 25, 2022.

¹²⁶ OHCHR, “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine,” 1 February- 31 July, 2022, <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/ReportUkraine-1Feb-31Jul2022-en.pdf>

¹²⁷ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022.

Most interviewees for this report described barriers for persons with disabilities to receive assistance on an equal basis with others, particularly those in remote or frontline areas who do not have required support to reach distribution sites. Some described receiving support from local government or organizations, in many cases food or hygiene kits provided by international humanitarian actors. In some instances, people reporting receiving this support only once or twice in the 8 months of the war. Others said that the only way to receive aid was through personal connections, particularly those who are not displaced and thus not receiving particular attention as an at risk-group. Some interviewees, including several in the Kharkiv and Dnipro regions who were active in providing aid, services, and evacuations, had yet to encounter the support of international humanitarian organizations.

In some cases, interviewees reported that the assistance provided was not appropriate, or timely. For example, Svetlana Demko of the Open Hearts Association in Vinnytsia said, “The humanitarian food kits do not seem to take into consideration our food culture. For example, we do not use that much rice. Many persons with disabilities can only eat rice in limited quantities because of how it affects their digestion. So, the support ends up going to the other members of the family and not the person for whom it was intended.” Demko also said that back in the summer of 2022, her organization, together with other public organizations of Ukraine, asked International Humanitarian Organizations to help prepare for the winter, with specific equipment and materials, including generators, warm clothes, blankets, gas stoves, wood-burning stoves for heating, fuel canisters, lanterns and the like. Unfortunately, few organizations addressed the requested assistance and now these items are in limited supply and cannot be bought in Ukraine.¹²⁸

Rising costs and access to income

In general, many persons with disabilities have greater expenses than others, including to purchase and maintain assistive devices, hygiene items such as diapers, pads, or catheters, particular foods and medicines, as well as medical care.¹²⁹ Many persons with disabilities in Ukraine are experiencing additional costs as a result of the war. Internally displaced people may need to rent accommodation, replace clothes and other essentials that they were not able to bring with them, or face other new and unexpected expenses. Both IDPs and people who remain in their homes are faced with significantly higher prices of essential goods.

¹²⁸ Interviews with Svetlana Demko, Open Hearts Association (Vinnytsia), Poland, November 2 and 4, 2022.

¹²⁹ For example, a feasibility study on cash transfers for IDPs in Ukraine in May 2022 found that 33% spend money on assistive devices and 10% spend money on personal assistance or home-based care. National Assembly of Persons with disabilities of Ukraine, CBM, and European Disability Forum, “Disability Inclusive Cash Feasibility Assessment,” June 2022,

The National Bank of Ukraine reported the rate of inflation to be over 24 percent in September 2022, and predicted it could rise to 30 percent in 2023.¹³⁰

Disability pensions of those interviewed ranged from 2,100 hryvna (US\$57) to 4,027 hryvna (\$US110), depending on the type of disability and level of support needs. According to Ukrainian government data in 2021, over 2.2 million registered persons with disabilities in Ukraine received a state disability pension.¹³¹ The government has continued to pay disability pensions throughout the war, accessible by ATM or banks, although there were some disruptions in access for many due to damage to banks and ATMs, displacement, loss of bank cards, and the like.

At the start of the war, the government authorized temporary monthly payments to those who register as internally displaced persons of 2,000 hryvna (\$54) per month per person, and 3,000 hryvna (\$81) for children and persons with disabilities.¹³² Several UN agencies and international organizations also provide cash assistance to displaced persons.¹³³ In a June 2022 UNHCR assessment of its cash benefit distribution, persons with disabilities reported that they faced obstacles withdrawing or spending cash assistance, while others did not report difficulties.¹³⁴

Activists have raised concerns that international cash assistance programs do not take into account the increased need for support among many persons with disabilities. They have also identified the lack of access to information for persons with disabilities, especially those in rural areas or people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities, who have no access to information about types of international cash assistance, including due to the lack of Internet, computers, and smartphones.¹³⁵ One interviewee, who is deaf, said that she had applied for humanitarian cash assistance of 2,200 hryvna per month for three months, but had waited several weeks without a response to her application.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ "Ukraine's central bank says inflation reaches 24.4% y/y in September," Reuters, October 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/ukraines-central-bank-says-inflation-reaches-244-yy-sept-2022-10-06/>

¹³¹ State Statistics Service of Ukraine, "Social Protection of the Population of Ukraine," 2021, https://ukrstat.gov.ua/druk/publicat/kat_u/2021/zb/07/zb_szn_2020_e.pdf.

¹³² As of 1 May, the same assistance was available only to IDPs whose house was destroyed, or who fled territory currently in active fighting or under control by Russian armed forces. OHCHR, "Situation of Human Rights in Ukraine in the Context of the Armed Attack by the Russian Federation, 24 February- 15 May 2022," 29 June 2022,

¹³³ "UNHCR Cash Assistance Fact Sheet October 2022," November 7, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/unhcr-ukraine-cash-assistance-factsheet-october-2022>; "World Food Programme Limited Emergency Operation Ukraine External Situation Report," November 6, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/wfp-limited-emergency-operation-ukraine-external-situation-report-30-6-november-2022>, IOM, "Ukraine Response Operational Update," September 20-26, 2022, https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/situation_reports/file/IOM%20Ukraine%20Operational%20SitRep%2024%5B50%5D.pdf

¹³⁴ "UNHCR: Multi-purpose cash assistance: 2022 Post Distribution Monitoring Report," November 6, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/multi-purpose-cash-assistance-2022-post-distribution-monitoring-report>.

¹³⁵ National Assembly of Persons with disabilities of Ukraine, Age and Disability Technical Working Group, August 2022, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1h1_M3owKz-ZhjgbKX-EuYffe388E0ivW/edit#.

¹³⁶ Interview with Natalia, Mykolaiv, December 7, 2022.

People who are not displaced, in areas of active hostilities or in other parts of Ukraine, continue to rely almost exclusively on their pre-existing pensions or salaries, if they are still employed. Many people lost their jobs as a result of the war, either because they were displaced or because of the war's impact on the economy and businesses. Persons with disabilities reported that their government pensions did not meet their needs even before the war, and that with rising inflation they were frequently forced to make difficult tradeoffs about which essentials to buy and the quality of what they purchase. A September 2022 survey of nearly 3,000 persons with disabilities and older people living in their own homes found that 64% felt their pensions and social benefits were not enough to meet their basic needs, with 61% concerned with price increases; 85% did not have employment or other sources of income.¹³⁷

Interviewees for this report confirmed this. Maria Gogilchin, a disability rights activist who is blind and lived in Ivano-Frankivsk before a medical evacuation abroad for eye surgery, said, "The [disability] pension is really small to cover electricity, heating, medicine, food, clothing. It's just not enough. I constantly have headaches and I have high blood pressure and each month I'd spend 600 hryvna (\$16) just on those. We [persons with disabilities] do not even have money to buy quality food that we need."¹³⁸

"Persons with disabilities needed more support before the war. The 2,200 hryvna (\$60) pension was just not enough to get food, medicine, everything else. We got some food packets from the UN and distributed them. We try to understand who is the most in need, explained Yuri Yaremchuk, an activist and wheelchair user in Berdychiv."¹³⁹

Sergei, a wheelchair user living in the Zhitomir region, reported that "The local administration gave us humanitarian support two or three times: a package of adult diapers and sanitizing wipes. We knew someone who worked there, who told us they had these items, so we went there and got them. But now we buy them. I also need a catheter, and they have become very expensive. Almost all of our money goes to buy food. We try not to buy anything else. There's not enough. Prices have gone up, but my pension, 2,300 hryvna (\$62), remains the same."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ "Survey to Determine the Preparedness for the Winter Season for Persons with disabilities and Older People," November 2022, Ukraine Protection Cluster Age and Disability Technical Working Group, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/ukraine/age-and-disability-technical-working-group>

¹³⁸ Interview with Maria Gogilchin, White Cane (Ivano-Frankivsk), France, October 28, 2022.

¹³⁹ Interview with Yuri Yaremchuk, Stimul, Berdychiv, October 24, 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Sergei Lebed, Zhitomir region, October 27, 2022.

Mental health and psychosocial impacts

For many people, the death, loss, uncertainty, displacement, and destruction caused by the war has brought significant psychosocial impacts, including intense fear, constant stress, persistent worry, sleeplessness, hopelessness, and panic attacks.¹⁴¹ The UN Protection system's Health Cluster in Ukraine has identified trauma and MHPSS among the primary threats to people's well-being in Ukraine. Despite the provision of mental health and psychosocial support by international and local organizations in different areas, support services are out of reach for many people, as previously existing services and personnel no longer function.

Oleg, who is blind and lives in Kharkiv, which has been under consistent shelling throughout the war, described how he felt, "There were strikes even at 10am in the morning, when people were going to work. It was impossible to predict. Psychologically it was really hard. You constantly felt in danger."¹⁴² Victoria, a wheelchair user who lives in Mykolaiv said that the relentless shelling and the loud noise as well as the deaths of many people in the city have left her incredibly anxious and it has exacerbated uncontrolled movements related to her disability, disrupting her sleep and daily life. She said she cries frequently. Because she had sought services prior to the war and could not access them, she did not try to seek out help in the context of the war.¹⁴³

Elena, whose son Maxim, 16, has autism, said that schools have been closed as have Maxim's social support groups and sport activities for security reasons, disrupting his routine, causing him distress. "In one day, his schedule was ruined. It was a catastrophe for him. He can get very agitated and hurt himself unintentionally. He could not sleep-only 2 hours. He was very nervous. I had to get some serious sleeping medication for him. It was the only thing to do."¹⁴⁴ Tatiana made the decision to leave her home in the front-line town of Orikhiv, in the Zaporizhia region when her son, Timur, who has autism, started to show signs of psychological distress. "He started to get anxious, so I decided we had to leave. There would be an air raid siren and we would go to the basement. He actually liked it- he made friends with the kids there. But then I noticed how he would react to noises. The door would close and he would jump. I was afraid it would get worse. He misses home, he misses his school. He always asks for it."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ MSF, Mental health needs grow in Ukraine after 100 days of war, June 3, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/mental-health-needs-grow-ukraine-after-100-days-war-enuk>

¹⁴² Interview with Oleg Lepetiuk, Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, Kharkiv, November 9, 2022.

¹⁴³ Interview with Viktoria, Mykolaiv, October 19, 2022.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Elena, Volnyansk, October 25, 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Tatiana, Zaporizhia, October 28, 2022.

Legal assistance

Organizations and activists reported that many persons with disabilities have lost their identity documents, did not have the opportunity to take them with them when they fled or evacuated, or never had documents that are now required for registration with the state as internally displaced people and to access other benefits.¹⁴⁶ Some people who never obtained official disability status or have newly acquired disabilities as a result of the war have sought to obtain it, yet the procedure can be time consuming causing delays in their access to benefits. Increased digitalization of essential documentation and of registration of services can benefit some, but is not accessible for all persons with disabilities.¹⁴⁷

Many persons with disabilities have requested assistance from OPDs and NGOs to secure identity documents and other documentation that enable them to receive pensions and other services, as well as bank cards that allow them to access bank accounts and pensions. For example, White Cane, an OPD in Ivano-Frankivsk for people who are blind reported, “Many internally displaced people came to us with questions regarding getting their identity documents, alimony, social pensions.”¹⁴⁸ Similarly, according to Olga Volkova of Ocean of Kindness in Dnipro, “People are constantly arriving without any identity documents, particularly from occupied areas. We’re constantly helping people get new IDs. It costs money. We also pay for the photo [for the ID].”¹⁴⁹ Nonviolent Peaceforce staff has supported numerous persons with disabilities to secure their necessary legal documents, including by accompanying them on journeys from their homes to Odesa, if they could not receive documents locally.¹⁵⁰

Availability, accessibility and affordability of accommodation for displaced people and refugees

Accessible accommodation, and availability of accommodation, for people who are displaced within Ukraine and for many of those who have fled to other countries remains a serious concern.¹⁵¹ Most housing centers were set up to address the most urgent and temporary needs of persons fleeing the hostilities and are not meant for long term stays with accommodation provided in schools, kindergartens, cultural centers, religious organizations, dormitories, as well as institutions for persons with disabilities and for older people.

¹⁴⁶ Yuliia Savchenko, Fight for Right, November 10, 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Ukraine Age and Disability Technical Working Group meeting minutes, September 2022, <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1v54YhdDmHJ9gDx4JrfamOgb824AmtSKg>.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Maria Gogilchin, White Cane (Ivano-Frankivsk), France, October 28, 2022.

¹⁴⁹ Interviews with Olga Volkova, Ocean of Kindness, November 1 and 3, 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Felicity Gray and Kristina Preiksaityte, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Odesa, October 7, 2022.

¹⁵¹ See also Amnesty International, “I used to have a home: Older people’s experience of war, displacement, and access to housing in Ukraine,” December 6, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/ukraine-older-people-face-heightened-risks-unable-to-access-housing-in-displacement-following-russian-invasion-new-report/#:~:text=Older%20people%20in%20Ukraine%20have,in%20a%20new%20report%20today>.

But these types of accommodations are often not accessible or suitable for persons with disabilities including those with support needs.

Organizations involved in evacuations reported that finding long term accommodation for people who do not have friends or relatives to go to is the most difficult aspect of their work. Organizations often are supporting people to find accommodation on a case-by-case basis. “If people have been living in under occupation for half a year, they do not have any money, they are under a lot of stress, they do not have any place to go, do not have relatives in Ukraine... they just are not in a position to quickly find an apartment somewhere, especially if they do not have money. Evacuation requires a dignified approach. We can’t just drop people off in a dorm somewhere without appropriate support,” said Yaroslav Kornienko.¹⁵² “In one case we found a place for a [displaced] family to live. It was with our acquaintances, one of whom also has a disability and so their home was accessible. We even adapted one room to make it more accessible,” said another activist.¹⁵³

Persons with disabilities interviewed for this report also described the inaccessibility of shelters. For example, a blind man, 80, from the Donetsk region near the front lines, was evacuated to a nursing home in Khmelnytska region, together with two other older people. However, the location was not accessible for a person who was blind, and the personnel did not know how to interact with him. He eventually returned to his home close to the front lines in the Donetsk region, despite the risk.¹⁵⁴ In another case, a blind couple, husband and wife, were placed in a room in a displaced persons shelter together with two other unknown men, which was uncomfortable for them. According to one wheelchair user, “When I went to these shelters, in gymnasias, in schools, and I saw how people lived, whole families grouped together, it was just horrible what we found ourselves in.”

The organization League of the Strong examined modular settlements being constructed for displaced people or those who had lost housing in 8 regions of Ukraine and found that they were overwhelmingly not accessible for persons with disabilities. As of October 24, 2022, 16 towns had been built and 8 were under construction, for a total of about 12 thousand people. There are plans for construction of 30 more settlements for 20,000 people. Of the existing settlements, 9 were financed by government of Poland and 3 by Germany.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Interview with Yaroslav Kornienko, Vostok SOS, November 14, 2022.

¹⁵³ Interview with “Helena” [requested anonymity], Chernivtsi region, November 1, 2022.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Oleg Lepetiuk, Kharkiv Association of Blind Lawyers, Kharkiv, November 9, 2022.

¹⁵⁵ League of the Strong, “Modular Settlements. Analysis as of October 24,” October 24, 2022, Presentation at Protection Cluster Age and Disability Technical Working Group, <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/12VdDW-RfAmBPQw4ZaoME822dkAXpCAX6/edit#slide=id.p14>

Some organizations of persons with disabilities and NGOs are arranging accessible temporary shelters and housing, but these are insufficient to meet the overall need, and cannot be a replacement for government and international organizations' initiatives. As a few examples, the Open Hearts Association is providing temporary shelter for people in Vinnytsia. The Latvian organization of persons with disabilities, Sustento, supported the establishment of an accessible shelter in Riga with 150 beds and supplied it with necessary items. The National Assembly for Persons with Disabilities of Ukraine has organized shelters in several locations through their members. The organization Ocean of Kindness, in Dnipro, offers temporary shelter to persons with disabilities and older people, particularly those with high support needs, evacuating from areas of active hostilities or near the front lines in Ukraine's eastern regions.¹⁵⁶

Interviews revealed that many internally displaced persons with disabilities find it difficult to pay for accommodation from the financial support they receive. Because many temporary shelters that are offered are not accessible, they are compelled to find private accommodation. "We have 6 people living in 2 rooms. The cost of our apartment is 15,000 hryvna, plus 3,000 for utilities. Sometimes we feel like we're ready to go back to the basement shelter and live there, because on my pension, even with the additional 3,000 for IDPs [with disabilities], it's not possible to pay for this."¹⁵⁷

Displaced people and refugees with disabilities in institutions

There is widespread institutionalization of children, adults, and older persons with disabilities, in particular those with intellectual and/or psychosocial disabilities, in residential care institutions in Ukraine, a legacy of a Soviet system of segregation of persons with disabilities. Official data states that there are 284 residential institutions in Ukraine;¹⁵⁸ some are enormous, holding up to 700 people.¹⁵⁹ According to the UN Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, 42,000 persons with disabilities are in institutions.¹⁶⁰ According to activists, the number may be higher, when considering private facilities as well.¹⁶¹ UNICEF has reported that before the war Ukraine had the highest number of children in institutional care in Europe.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Olga Volkova, Ocean of Kindness, Dnipro, November 1 and 3, 2022.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Nadezhda Polomarchuk, Donetsk Regional Organization of Persons with disabilities (Kramatorsk), Ivano-Frankivsk, November 2, 2022.

¹⁵⁸ As presented by League of the Strong, "Ukraine Evacuation from Institutions," August 2022, <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1b50-Nzwl7rRsO-XYZyE6C-LH0eL5oJ/edit#slide=id.p5>

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Galina Poliakova, Age Concern Ukraine, Kyiv, October 14, 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Olena Ashchenko, UN Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, CRPD session August 2022.

¹⁶¹ Interview with Galina Poliakova, Age Concern Ukraine, Kyiv, October 14, 2022.

¹⁶² UNICEF, "Ukraine War Response: Children with Disabilities," June 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/ukraine-war-response-children-disabilities>.

OPDs, journalists and others have documented human rights abuses in institutions in Ukraine, including during the war.¹⁶³

Institutions have not been evacuated except in early days of the war and many do not have accessible bomb shelters.¹⁶⁴ Institutionalization of persons with disabilities violates their rights to liberty, legal capacity, and equality before the law, as well as their right to live in the community on an equal basis with others, among other rights guaranteed under the CRPD.

The CRPD Guidelines on deinstitutionalization, including in emergencies, adopted at the 27th session of the CRPD Committee (September 2022) is particularly relevant here. At the same session, in its September 2022 report on Ukraine, the CRPD Committee has expressed numerous concerns regarding persons with disabilities in institutions in Ukraine, including that its previous recommendations regarding deinstitutionalization had not been fully implemented. It noted with concern the “widespread institutionalization of persons with disabilities, in particular those living with intellectual and/or psychosocial disabilities, in residential care institutions,” “re-institutionalization of children with disabilities in institutional settings in Ukraine and in refugee hosting countries,” and both parties’ to the conflict failure to prioritize evacuation of the institutions located in conflict areas.” It called for expedited deinstitutionalization “of all persons with disabilities who remain in residential care institutions for persons with disabilities in the territory of Ukraine,” and independent monitoring of this process, with the close involvement of organizations of persons with disabilities.¹⁶⁵ The Committee also expressed concerns about “the persistent lack of community-based services and social housing for persons with disabilities living in Ukraine, particularly for persons with intellectual and/or psychosocial disabilities, and autistic persons, which has been exacerbated as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation. This negatively impacts their right to live independently and be included in the community.”¹⁶⁶

As of August, 3,867 people had been evacuated from 20 institutions, according to the government, transferred within Ukraine and to other countries.¹⁶⁷ UNICEF reported in May that over 5,300 children were evacuated from institutions.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ For example, see Fight for Right, “Places of Deprivation of Liberty in Ukraine During the War,” 2022, https://ffr.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Main_Free_eng.pdf; DRI, “Left Behind in the War: Dangers Facing Children with Disabilities In Ukraine’s Orphanages,” May 5, 2022, <https://www.driadvocacy.org/media-gallery/our-reports-publications/>; BBC, “Ukraine Orphanages: Children Tied up and Men in Cots,” July 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/disability-62226636>;

¹⁶⁴ Olena Ashchenko, UN Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, CRPD session August 2022.

¹⁶⁵ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022,

¹⁶⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022,

¹⁶⁷ As presented by League of the Strong, “Ukraine Evacuation from Institutions,” August 2022, <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1b50-Nzwl7rRsO-XYZyE6C-LH0eL5oJ/edit#slide=id.p5>

¹⁶⁸ UNICEF, “Children with Disabilities in Ukraine Before and During the War,” May 2022.

These figures are likely to be higher as some evacuations, particularly in the early weeks of the war, were organized independent of the authorities. A number of institutions for persons with disabilities have been damaged or destroyed by hostilities, including broken windows, walls, and roofs. In some cases, people remain in damaged institutions and locations that lacked access to sufficient food, medication, and hygiene products for the residents and staff.¹⁶⁹ OHCHR reported on the lack of access to healthcare that led to the tragic death of 12 residents in a long-term care facility for persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities and older persons in Borodianka.¹⁷⁰

This research found that persons with disabilities have been evacuated from institutions in Ukraine to institutions in Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, Italy, and Poland. There is no evidence that people were consulted regarding their evacuation or destinations. Additionally, some persons with disabilities who were evacuated, particularly from eastern Ukraine, were placed in institutions in the Chernivtsi and Vinnytsia regions of Ukraine. This included persons with disabilities who were previously in institutions, as well as persons with disabilities who were living independently. Many persons with disabilities who previously lived in the community, particularly those with higher support needs, have been given institutions or hospitals as the only option for accommodation because of a lack of adequate support services for them to live independently. Social services remain concentrated within institutions, rather than in communities where they should exist in order to support people to live independently.

Galina Poliakova, of Age Concern Ukraine, which supports older people including those with disabilities, reported many institutions who have received evacuees with disabilities have become overcrowded and have insufficient staff, food, hygiene products, bedding, and other items, resulting in some cases in neglect and inadequate, harmful, and undignified conditions. Other organizations have reported similar concerns. These shortages are a concern in areas of active hostilities and under occupation as well.¹⁷¹

On March 16, the government issued a decree on a simplified procedure for the placement of persons with disabilities and older people in institutions, including at the request of a guardian or legal representative for those who have been deprived of their legal capacity.¹⁷² According to Raisa Kravchenko of the VGO Coalition, as of October, 4,000 people had been placed in institutions under this procedure.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Galina Poliakova, Age Concern Ukraine, Kyiv, October 14, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ OHCHR, "Situation of Human Rights in Ukraine in the Context of the Armed Attack by the Russian Federation, 24 February- 15 May 2022," 29 June 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ua/2022-06-29/2022-06-UkraineArmedAttack-EN.pdf>

¹⁷¹ Interview with Galina Poliakova, Age Concern Ukraine, Kyiv, October 14, 2022.

¹⁷² Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, "Older people and persons with disabilities will receive care services during martial law under a simplified procedure," March 16, 2022, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/lyudi-pohilogo-viku-ta-lyudi-z-invalidnistyu-otrimayut-poslugi-z-doglyadu-pid-chas-voyennogo-stanu-za-sproshchenoyu-proceduroyu>.

¹⁷³ Interview with Raisa Kravchenko, Coalition of People with Intellectual Disabilities (VGO Coalition), Kyiv region, October 7, 2022.

These findings are not exhaustive and this report did not set out to document institutionalization in Ukraine or other countries in detail. DPOs and other organizations have reported on the placement of evacuated persons with disabilities in institutions in other parts of Ukraine and in other countries as well as abuses in institutions prior to the war and during the war.¹⁷⁴

Placement in institutions in Ukraine

Raisa Kravchenko of the VGO Coalition described the case of a man, 52, with Down Syndrome who had evacuated from Mariupol after his parents had died. A family in the Kyiv region offered to host him and support him. The man did not have any identity documents or other documents, and when he visited the social services office in his new location, they offered him to move into a residential institution, rather than provide immediate support to him and the family supporting him. According to Kravchenko, the law requires that the welfare services provide immediate assistance whether they have an identity document or not. The man remained in the community, with the help of the Association.¹⁷⁵

One activist described how in a central region of Ukraine displaced persons with disabilities from institutions in the east were placed in a nursing home, a social psychological center, a children's institution, and several psychiatric institutions. Svetlana Demko, of the Open Hearts Association, said that persons with disabilities from institutions in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Poltava, and Kharkiv regions were transferred to institutions in the Vinnytsia region. As soon as the war started, we knew that people from institutions would be brought from the east to our region," said Demko.¹⁷⁶

"People with psychosocial disabilities, older people with dementia or Alzheimer's syndrome, they need particular individual support. There are no people to assist them, even in nursing homes. For some people, they can live on their own, they just need outpatient support, but they end up in institutions. Only where they are concentrated together, they will get services," said one activist in Dnipro.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ League of the Strong, "Ukraine: Evacuation from Institutions," August 15, 2022, <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1b50-Nzwl7rIRsO-XYZyfE6C-LH0eL5oJ/edit#slide=id.p5>; Fight for Right, "Places of Deprivation of Liberty in Ukraine During the War," 2022, https://ffr.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Main_Free_eng.pdf; Disability Rights International, "Left Behind in the War: Dangers Facing Children with Disabilities in Ukraine's Orphanages," May 5, 2022, <https://www.driadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/DRI-Ukraine-Left-Behind.pdf>; Amnesty International, "I used to have a home: Older people's experience of war, displacement, and access to housing in Ukraine," December 6, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/ukraine-older-people-face-heightened-risks-unable-to-access-housing-in-displacement-following-russian-invasion-new-report/#:~:text=Older%20people%20in%20Ukraine%20have,in%20a%20new%20report%20today.> ; <https://www.bbc.com/news/disability-62513459>

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Raisa Kravchenko, Coalition of People with Intellectual Disabilities (VGO Coalition), Kyiv region, October 7, 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Interviews with Svetlana Demko, Open Hearts Association (Vinnytsia), Poland, November 2 and 4, 2022.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with activist [name withheld], Dnipro, November 11, 2022.

As mentioned above, a blind man, 80, from the Donetsk region near the front lines, was evacuated to a nursing home in Khmel'nitska region, together with two other older people. Some organizations involved in evacuations stated that when they evacuated people the only accommodation offered by the government for persons with disabilities was in medical facilities or in institutions for persons with disabilities .

Placement in institutions in other countries

The Ministry of Social Affairs of Ukraine transferred a group of 143 people with psychosocial disabilities from an institution in Ukraine to residential institutions in Latvia. According to Kristaps Keišs, the director of the State Social Care Center “Zemgale,” which is hosting 51 of the refugees, the group of 143 men arrived by bus with just one employee from the Ukrainian institution. Before the group arrived, the staff in Latvia did not know anything about those being transferred, such as their ages, what types of disabilities they had, or what their support and health needs were. The institutions in which they are living hold between 80 and 290 people. Keišs noted that that he and his staff had supported dozens of Latvians previously living in their institution to move into the community, with support, and would similarly support Ukrainians among the group to live independently including with different forms of support, such as for household tasks, communication, or with financial decision-making. However, Keišs was not certain what the Latvian and Ukrainian governments would decide about the men’s future.¹⁷⁸

Dovile Juodkaite of the Lithuanian Disability Forum said that while overall the Ministry of Social Affairs has taken a positive approach to support refugees, including those with disabilities, from Ukraine, children from some institutions in Ukraine were transferred directly to institutions in Lithuania, including a group of blind children. She also said that many adults who need accessible accommodation and support services may end up in group homes or residential institutions for persons with disabilities.¹⁷⁹

The CRPD Committee called on refugee hosting countries to “invest in a wide range of services, including in-home services, personal assistance, early intervention and rehabilitation,” to ensure the right of persons with disabilities to live in the community.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Kristaps Keišs, State social care center “Zemgale,” Iecava, October 25, 2022

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Dovile Juodkaite, Lithuania Disability Forum, Vilnius, September 13, 2022.

¹⁸⁰ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation-to be included in 27th Session Report,” September 9, 2022.

Fleeing Ukraine – Barriers and impact

A number of interviewees described obstacles they encountered as they left Ukraine for other countries in search of safety. Svetlana Demko, whose adult son uses a wheelchair, described how he and another young man using a wheelchair were denied exit from Ukraine during the first week of March, based on the general prohibition on men ages 18 to 60 leaving Ukraine. After Demko contacted the Vinnytsia regional administration, the issue was eventually raised with national authorities and the men were able to depart. The following week, the Ukrainian parliament adopted legislative amendments allowing men with certain types of disabilities to leave the country.¹⁸¹

Others interviewed described inaccessible conditions at the Ukrainian border, including no accessible toilets and no place for people to change adult diapers. “My adult son [who uses a wheelchair] spent 10 hours in his diaper because there was not anywhere to change it. After all, all people have dignity, we do not have the right to humiliate them. People feel it. It hurts,” said one activist who evacuated her son and a group of other persons with disabilities.”

Two people reported humiliating treatment on the part of border guards. “The border guards don’t know how to speak with persons with disabilities . And so one border guard said to a man in a wheelchair, “Get up! You can stand up! I have to check [whether you have a disability],” reported one activist.¹⁸² “We were coming from Western Ukraine. The border guards, they do not know how to act around persons with disabilities. They said, ‘Why are you leaving, there isn’t even bombing where you live.’ We had to explain, we are not as mobile, if something does happen, we can’t run away quickly, we will be crushed.”¹⁸³

Svitlana fled Ukraine in September with her 73-year-old father, Nikolai, after his mobility and health declined while confined by Russian forces in a heavily damaged apartment in Mariupol and he needed medical treatment. The Russian occupying authorities in Donetsk only allowed them to travel in one direction, to the Russian border. Svitlana hired a series of cars to travel for three days starting in Donetsk and eventually reaching the Russian-Estonian border. An organization in Latvia had agreed to support them. However, when Svitlana and Nikolai arrived initially at the Russian-Latvia border, there were over 100 cars in the queue and they would have to wait for up to 6 days to cross. There was no priority given to persons with disabilities or others for whom waiting would have been impossible. They drove onward to the Russian-Estonian border where Svitlana begged people in cars waiting to cross to let them pass. She described, “We were in filtration for 6 hours.

¹⁸¹ Interview with Svetlana Demko, Open Hearts Association (Vinnytsia), Poland, November 2 and 4, 2022.

¹⁸² Interview with activist [name withheld], Kharkiv, November 2022.

¹⁸³ Interview with activist [name withheld], Vinnytsia, November 4, 2022.

They asked me questions: where are you going? Who did you vote for? My dad sat in the car alone the entire time,” Svitlana said. At the Estonian border authorities offered them the opportunity to apply for asylum and receive a pension, medical care, and social services. Svitlana and Nikolai traveled onward to Latvia, where the organization of persons with disabilities, Sustento, supported them.¹⁸⁴

Situation in refugee hosting countries

It was not within the scope of this report to document the situation for persons with disabilities in each of the countries where persons with disabilities have sought asylum or temporary protection. Persons with disabilities, disabled persons organizations and civil society organizations interviewed in Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Poland shared a mixed picture regarding the rights of Ukrainian disabilities who have left Ukraine. Many shared their concerns that persons with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities were not prioritized and seemed not to be well understood in the response. Refugee reception and shelters were not always accessible and there was a lack of personal assistance.¹⁸⁵

In all countries, when persons with disabilities arrived, government agencies and international organizations were frequently referring people to organizations of persons with disabilities or in some cases, volunteers, for different types of support, including immediate support with transportation, accommodation, immediate medical attention, and essentials. Some people reached organizations through hotlines. Many organizations have continued to provide crucial support people with accommodation, assistive devices, legal aid, access to medical care, enrollment in schools, sign language interpretation services, and the like.

The EU Temporary Protection Directive was activated in response to the large influx of Ukrainian refugees into EU countries and guarantees the same standards and rights to people fleeing Ukraine in all EU member states, including to accommodation, medical care, work, and education.¹⁸⁶ For persons with disabilities, they are required to apply for disability status in their new locations, which can often take 1 to 2 months, and organizations reported supporting people during this period.¹⁸⁷ In Moldova, for those who register as refugees they access to services on an equal basis with Moldovan citizens, although many people choose not to register, as they are traveling onward to other countries or may be planning to return to Ukraine.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Svitlana, United Kingdom, October 15, 2022.

¹⁸⁵ Interviewees for this report in Moldova, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

¹⁸⁶ European Commission, “Temporary Protection,” https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Gunta Anca, Sustento, Riga, October 10, 2022. Interview with Lina Sasnauskiene and Klementina Gruzdiene, Children of the Rain, Vilnius and Alytus, November 9, 2022.

¹⁸⁸ In-person interview with Dr. Ludmila Malocci, Keystone Moldova, New York, NY, November 7, 2022.

Some organizations reported that people who are living in smaller villages face barriers receiving the services they need because services are absent and they may not know where services are available or have the possibility to travel to other locations to access them. For example, according to activists from the organization, Children of the Rain in Lithuania, the migration center found accommodation for some people in villages in the countryside. The authorities appeared not to consider that in order for them to access adequate services regularly, it would be best for these people to live larger cities of Vilnius or Kaunas.¹⁸⁹ In Moldova, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians are living in communities, often with host families, rather than in temporary shelters. Ludmila Malocci of Keystone Moldova said she was concerned about persons with disabilities having sufficient food and clothing, particularly in light of inflation and additional needs that people may have during the winter. She also noted that people were not always able to access medications due to the cost and that neither the government nor international organizations had sufficiently prioritized access to medication.¹⁹⁰

Those interviewed for this report said that data and information on Ukrainians with disabilities in other countries remains insufficient and that governments and international organizations could be doing much more, both upon arrival as well as in the context of ongoing programming. According to Dovile Juodkiate, president of the Lithuanian Disability Forum, “Lithuania lacks accurate data on persons with disabilities or families with children with disabilities from Ukraine. When people arrived and registered with the authorities, information was not collected. We asked for there to be a self-reported disability marker when people registered with the Lithuanian authorities, but we don’t know if they have implemented this.”¹⁹¹ In Latvia, the authorities have reported on the total number of people from Ukraine, but have not publicly shared any information regarding the number of persons with disabilities, and local organizations are not aware of any data on persons with disabilities.¹⁹² Keystone Moldova reported that they had been advocating with UNHCR to ensure that all of its protection monitoring surveys have questions on disability integrated into them and that its contracts with organizations include organizations of persons with disabilities and disability rights organizations.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Lina Sasnauskiene and Klementina Gruzdiene, Children of the Rain, Vilnius and Alytus, November 9, 2022.

¹⁹⁰ In-person interview with Dr. Ludmila Malocci, Keystone Moldova, New York, NY, November 7, 2022.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Dovile Juodkaite, Lithuanian Disability Forum, Vilnius, September 13, 2022.

¹⁹² “Next year, Latvia could spend 200 million euros to support Ukrainian refugees,” LALV, October 23, 2022, <https://www.la.lv/nakamgad-ukrainas-beglu-atbalstam-latvija-varetu-teret-200-miljonus-eiro>

¹⁹³ In-person interview with Dr. Ludmila Malocci, Keystone Moldova, New York, NY, November 7, 2022.



Conclusion and Way Forward

The findings of this report, based on the first-hand testimony of persons with disabilities in Ukraine, confirms a range of serious concerns with regard to many human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law experienced by persons with disabilities in Ukraine since Russia's February 2022 invasion, an act of aggression against Ukraine. This includes abuse and arbitrary detention of persons with disabilities by Russian forces and severe damage or destruction of their homes forcing them to leave or to live in dangerous conditions. Many persons with disabilities reported the lack of accessible evacuations and access to humanitarian aid. Some described how there was no appropriate transportation for those who needed to be evacuated lying down, particularly early in the war. Others explained that the lack of personal assistance meant that they could not evacuate or faced severe difficulties once they did.

The distribution of humanitarian aid in centralized locations, with long wait times, and without provision of sign language interpreters means that persons with disabilities could not consistently access it on an equal basis with others. People with different types of disabilities also described explained the barriers they face in accessing and using bomb shelters, including lack of physical accessibility. Information is not consistently provided in accessible formats and those who do not have smart phones have the most difficulties getting timely, accurate, accessible information, according to multiple persons with disabilities interviewed for this report.

The hardships resulting from Russian attacks on infrastructure, such as the loss of heat, electricity, and telecommunications, have a disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities. For example, without electricity for lifts, wheelchair users reported being trapped in their homes. Interviewees who are deaf said that they rely on their phones for air raid warning notifications and do not receive them if they lose telecommunications connectivity or cannot keep their devices charged.

According to people interviewed for this report, the vast majority of people who remain in high-risk locations in areas of occupation or on the front lines of the conflict, are those with disabilities, including many older people. They described serious shortages of medicines, medical care, and in some cases, food and water. For those in other parts of Ukraine, even where food and other essentials are available, they said that prices have risen considerably, and their small disability pensions are not sufficient to live on, including because of the additional purchases they are required to make related to their disabilities, such as catheters, diapers, and assistive products.

There is widespread institutionalization of children, adults, and older persons with disabilities, in particular those with intellectual and/or psychosocial disabilities, in residential care institutions in Ukraine. Ukrainian authorities evacuated some people from institutions in areas of active hostilities, but overwhelmingly those people have been placed in other institutions in Ukraine or in other countries. Some persons with disabilities who lived independently prior to the war have been placed in institutions. There is insufficient accessible housing and community-based support services to ensure people can live independently in the community.

Persons with disabilities and OPDs described numerous initiatives all over the country, including in high-risk areas to support each other, including at great personal risk. At the same time, they expressed concerns that the government, including regional and local governments, as well as humanitarian organizations, have not consulted with them and included them in the humanitarian planning, response, and monitoring.

In recent years, the international standards on enhanced protection of persons with disabilities during armed conflict as well as disability-inclusive humanitarian action has grown significantly. Full implementation of these rules and standards by all stakeholders is required to ensure protection and safety of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and their access to humanitarian aid and basic services on equal basis with others.

Governments involved as well as humanitarian actors including UN agencies and NGOs providing humanitarian assistance should consider the following:

- Fully implement UNSC resolution 2475.
- Implement the IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with disabilities in Humanitarian Action, including by incorporating the guidelines in policies and planning and training staff.
- Implement the recommendations of the CRPD Committee’s “Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation,” included in the CRPD 27th Session Report.
- Ensure that the Humanitarian Needs Overview for Ukraine and Humanitarian Response Plans for Ukraine include detailed information and analysis on the situation of persons with disabilities.
- Ensure regular and meaningful consultation with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, and ensure their views are taken into account in planning, implementation, and monitoring of policies, services, and programs.
- Provide direct funding to organizations of persons with disabilities and when that is not feasible require implementing partners to include organizations of persons with disabilities as sub-grantees. Publicly report on initiatives to improve inclusion of organizations of persons with disabilities in localization efforts.
- Ensure that emergency warnings, including air raid sirens, and information about evacuations and available aid and services are accessible and available in different formats.
- Ensure accessibility of bomb/safety shelters for people with different impairments, including in all new construction.

- Ensure that evacuations are accessible, including by reaching persons with disabilities in hard to reach and high-risk areas to offer accessible evacuations.
- Adopt specific measures to ensure the safety, security, and adequate standard of living for persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others, including during planned and unplanned blackouts and disruptions in utilities.
- Ensure accessible accommodation for displaced persons and that housing constructed for IDPs is accessible and that persons with disabilities can benefit from such housing, including as a priority group.
- Implement the 2022 CRPD Guidelines on Deinstitutionalization, including in Emergencies.
- Refrain from placement of persons with disabilities in institutions and instead identify or develop community-based independent living options and ensure the deinstitutionalization of persons with disabilities.
- If deinstitutionalization is ongoing and institutions still exist, organize the evacuation of institutions from front line and recently liberated areas to ensure the lives and safety of residents.
- Ensure that all programs and services, including, for example, for survivors of gender-based violence and mental health and psychosocial services (MHPSS) are inclusive of and accessible for all persons with disabilities and meet their particular needs.
- Refrain from designing services based on assumptions that persons with disabilities are always cared for or supported by their family members or wish to be supported by them, ensuring the right to live independently in the community
- Ensure collection of data that is disaggregated by age, disability, and sex, and make disaggregated data publicly available, with due consideration to privacy concerns.
- Support the government of Ukraine in its implementation of the recommendations of the CRPD Committee's "Chapter on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine and in countries where they have fled after 24 February 2022, as a result of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation," included in the CRPD 27th Session Report.
- Support the government of Ukraine in its implementation of the 2022 CRPD Guidelines on Deinstitutionalization, including in Emergencies.
- UN-mandated commissions of inquiry and other monitoring mechanisms should ensure that their documentation is disability inclusive and that they undertake a disability analysis of armed conflict.

