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**Closing conference for the European Year of People with Disabilities 2003**

**Rome 7th December 2003**

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**Commissioner responsible for Employment and Social Affairs**

Ministers, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured and delighted to address this closing conference for the European Year of Disabilities 2003 in Rome.

Eleven months ago, I had the pleasure of opening the Year in Athens. The Year has been supported by the foundations of the twin capitals of ancient Europe. I am grateful for the political support the Year has received from the Greek and Italian Presidencies as well as from all the Member States. Throughout the Year, I have participated in events, conferences and meetings with people with disabilities. This experience has been inspiring and enriching for me personally. I would therefore like to thank all the people involved for their commitment, their enthusiasm, and their passion to make this European year a success.

Why was this Year so important? Why did we need the Year? Why did we need it now? Let's recall what we said eleven months ago, at the launch of the Year in Athens.

I said I was confident that the Year would act as a catalyst to drive forward the political agenda for full integration and participation of people with disabilities in our economy and society. We hoped it would contribute to creating a truly inclusive society - a society which provides real access to fundamental rights and values a strong social model in support of the strategic social and economic goals that the European Union set itself in 2000 in Lisbon.

The Year was designed to promote a European social model which sees disability as a social construct and which emphasises the full social and economic integration of people with disabilities. It is a model which empowers and enables people to join the mainstream of every aspect of life. It is a model which improves accessibility - to buildings, to services, to information technology, to education. All these are areas where improvements are essential to a good quality of life.

It is still too early to draw final conclusions on the medium and long term impact of the Year. Nonetheless I am proud to state that the Year has made a wonderful contribution to removing the prejudice, fear, misconceptions and ignorance which still too often surround disability. In this respect, the Year has achieved its objectives of raising awareness, exchanging good practices and reinforcing cooperation between the various stakeholders in such a way that disability becomes a matter of concern for everybody. The exceptional mobilisation of stakeholders throughout the Year has demonstrated a broad desire to move with determination towards concrete social integration and the full achievement of equal opportunities. The Year is the beginning of a new dynamic process improving opportunities for all people with disabilities.

Last but not least, the Year has acknowledged the European dimension of disability issues. Across the whole European Union, people with disabilities have sent all of us a very clear message : disability does not mean inability, nor does it equate to lack of ability.

Across Europe, people with disabilities have expressed clearly what they want. And people with disabilities simply want what all of us want. Equal Rights. A decent job. A fair wage. A chance to fulfil their potential. To participate in society like everyone else. And to lead a full life.

Across Europe, people with disabilities have also made it clear that disabilities can be overcome if we all take our responsibilities to break down barriers and make our environment, our goods, our services accessible for everyone. So it is now crucial to transform the momentum triggered by the Year into an on-going and sustainable process of change in designing effective policies bringing about far reaching and lasting improvements. We must seize this opportunity since the conditions for success have never been as favourable as they are now. That is precisely the reason why we are all here today.

What did the year bring along? With a budget of 12 million Euro, – tiny by European standards – it ~~organised~~ ~~lots of special activities across the Member States, and beyond.~~ There was a march to raise people's awareness of the issues. The bus travelled all over Europe – not only crossing the state borders but also common prejudices against people with disabilities.

The Member States have taken the European Year as an opportunity to launch new initiatives such as national Action Plans on disability, or to begin the process of revising their legislation. The European Parliament once again showed its commitment to breaking down the barriers faced by disabled people in Europe hosting a parliament of people with disabilities one month ago. I am particularly pleased that the Commission was able to help make this event possible, by bringing to Brussels people with disabilities from all across the EU and the candidate countries.

The Year has been an opportunity for companies to review how they respect their employees' legal rights and minimum social standards. Companies have taken steps to improve transport, accessibility and work environment in general for disabled employees.

And NGOs and public authorities have been extremely active in the movement. I especially welcome the dedication of the European Disability Forum to taking forward issues important to disabled people. Their determination will strengthen the involvement of stakeholders in the policy dialogue and will help to bring about far-reaching and lasting changes within the economy and society as a whole which make sense to people with disabilities.