



PRESS RELEASE (English)

German Disability Rights Group Faces Discrimination at Egmond aan Zee Beach

Egmond aan Zee, Netherlands – A recent vacation turned into a distressing experience for members of AbilityWatch e. V., a German disability rights organization, when they faced discrimination at a beach in Egmond aan Zee. This incident, involving the local beach bar owner Andries Konijn, underscores the ongoing struggles for accessibility and inclusion faced by individuals with disabilities.

On July 29th, members of AbilityWatch e. V., including wheelchair users, blind individuals, and people with other disabilities, attempted to spend the day at "Bad Zuid" in the Netherlands' tourist destination Egmond aan Zee. Advertised as one of the most accessible locations in the country, Bad Zuid was chosen for its wheelchair accessibility, with the group staying in a nearby accessible hotel. All other nearby beaches were unsuitable for the seven wheelchair users in the group.

At around noon, AbilityWatch e. V. arrived at "Bad Zuid" the only wheelchair-accessible place at the beach. The group ate, drank, and enjoyed a sunny day. As evening approached, Konijn, the owner of the kiosk and nearby beach equipment rental, confronted a member of the group, stating that they were not welcome as they would be blocking a cemented path in front of the kiosk - a path ending in the sand shortly after. Konijn argued that people on foot would not be able to pass; people that would switch to walking on sand some meters ahead anyway. Konijn, who was asked to comment on the events, says, "The first day, the group with their companions of about twenty people came to my terrace and were the whole day there. They blocked the footpath to the other side and took umbrellas without asking anything." The group consisted of seven wheelchair users and eight people on foot at maximum height and moved around publicly available umbrellas to have some shade from the burning sun. They also rented and paid for two umbrellas from Konijn's beach rental store.

The following day, on July 30th, the group returned to the kiosk at 1 PM. Almost immediately, the owner approached them again, insisting they could not remain at the location. When asked if anyone had complained about their presence, Konijn claimed it was problematic for "everyone." A person at another table overheard and attempted to mediate, suggesting people on foot could simply walk around the group through the sand, while the wheelchair users had no other place to stay. Yet again, the group had lunch and drinks at the location. It is to mention that at all times there was enough space for everyone with a walker or stroller to pass by. By 4 PM, the owner returned with his girlfriend, now both insisting that the group should leave the premises or stand beside each other in a row, thus not being able to talk to each other. "They didn't listen to her also and she called the local authority (not police) what to do with the situation. They said you can refuse the group and advised to do so", Konijn responds.

That same night, the path used by the wheelchair users that connected to the platform of the kiosk was blocked with sand, preventing any further access. On July 31, members of the group attempted to connect with the national discrimination helpline but received no response. The Bergen municipality returned a message saying they cannot do anything about it as it's the business owner's decision. By the evening of July 31, the sand was removed.

On August 1, the situation escalated when three members of AbilityWatch got threatened by the owner with a forklift who he used to block the path, leaving no exit route for the wheelchair users of the group. "I have experienced a lot of discrimination in my life, but never before have I feared for my life like this", says Thomas Schulze zur Wiesch, one of the affected persons. "He said he would take matters into his own hands now", Schulze zur Wiesch recalls. The other two people on scene confirm that the situation felt extremely threatening. Konijn, on the other hand, states he did not threaten the group but blocked the path.

The police was called, arrived at the scene, listened to both sides and inspected the area, but no report was filed. AbilityWatch e. V. was sent off of the premises. The local police's press department has not yet responded to AbilityWatch's questions but Senior Spokesperson Felicity Bijnaar sent a message stating, "It's very unfortunate to hear you had this experience in Egmond aan Zee. No one should feel unsafe or discriminated in anyway. [...] As I understand the police were called and were told about the situation. I understood they tried to mediate between those involved and explained the legal possibilities. Nonetheless, you can always file a police report. Whether it is about discrimination or regarding threats." Bijnaar further writes that a fork lift, any car or another object that aren't designed to be a weapon could be considered as a weapon, depending on circumstances how they are used. Moreover, the threat of violence against a person can also be considered a crime.

"This kind of discrimination is unacceptable. Public spaces, especially those advertised as accessible, must be truly accessible to everyone. The actions of the beach kiosk owner are a clear violation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was also signed by the Netherlands," commented Constantin Grosch, a politician and wheelchair user.

Nancy Poser, a judge and member of AbilityWatch e. V., added, "We need stronger enforcement of accessibility laws and greater awareness among business owners about the importance of inclusivity. What happened to AbilityWatch e. V. at Egmond aan Zee is a blatant example of the hurdles people with disabilities continue to face in all areas of their lives, even when they simply want to spend a day at the beach."

According to the police department's spokesperson, the police have also nationally implemented the UN CRPD through their program "Politie voor Iedereen," which translates to "Police for Everyone." "Throughout the study at the police academy, students get knowledge of discrimination, minorities and legal rights. During their career colleagues are informed through our nationwide program 'Politie voor Iedereen'. This gives police officers tools to recognize discriminations and act on incidents concerning discrimination. This can be mediation, referring to antidiscrimination-organizations or reporting crimes. This all depends on the circumstances," says Bijnaar.

AbilityWatch e. V. is a dedicated organization advocating for the rights and inclusion of individuals with disabilities in Germany. The organization focuses on ensuring accessibility, fighting discrimination, and promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities. The recent incident at Egmond aan Zee serves as a stark reminder of the barriers that still exist, even in so-called accessible destinations. Despite the violation of international human rights, the behavior of the kiosk owner lacks basic empathy and understanding of the challenges faced by people with disabilities, emphasizing the need for increased education and awareness in society. "I don't hate disabled people and they are welcome", Konijn adds. The

police were not able to comment on whether there have been conflicts at this location in the past due to privacy concerns and data protection.

AbilityWatch e. V. urges authorities in the Netherlands to investigate this incident thoroughly and take appropriate action to improve measures that ensure all public spaces are genuinely accessible to everyone. Furthermore, the organization calls on private business owners to comply with accessibility standards.

Contact Information

For more information about this press release or to schedule an interview with a representative from AbilityWatch e. V., please contact:

Karina
AbilityWatch e. V.

Sturm

k.sturm@abilitywatch.de