

# Dáil Éireann Topical Issue Debate 18<sup>th</sup> Oct 2016

## Services for People with Disabilities

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**Deputy John Brassil:**   I very much welcome the opportunity to speak to this issue. Since being elected in February, this is probably the single most important issue that has come to my desk. I have a fist full of correspondence from families and residents in St. Mary of the Angels, all of whom are extremely concerned about the future of the facility and the people within it. I have spoken to numbers of patients and some residents and I preface my remarks by saying it is the needs of the residents that are most important here. Within that, their families are very well placed to articulate their needs.

Communication around here has been poor if not very poor. Much of the problem and the issues now coming to the fore are as a result of poor communication. Elected members, including Deputy Michael Healy-Rae and a number of other Deputies and councillors, met representatives of the HSE yesterday, and they accepted that communication was poor. There is a need for clarity and to reassure each and every resident and their families that they will not be moved from this facility without their consent. If the Minister of State can give that assurance to me today, we will go a long way towards taking the heat from this issue and dealing with it in a calm manner that will bring about the best possible results. I accept there is a policy and a move away from congregated settings. I accept it is good for certain people to go into the community. In St. Mary of the Angels we have what I would consider a jewel in the crown and we cannot allow a one size fits all policy to be the cause of closure for it.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:**   I thank the Ceann Comhairle and his excellent officials for allowing this debate to be revisited this evening as it is very important. I warmly thank the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, for his support to date on this very important issue. I want the Minister of State to understand exactly what has happened. I appreciate his personal views on what we will call depopulation of centres like this. Equally, in Kerry we must hear the Minister of State on this.

The Minister of State must understand and appreciate that there are certain cases where people are not suitable for integration in the way that others may be. That is a very important point. Yesterday at our very important meeting involving 18 politicians from Kerry and the management of St. Mary of the Angels, we discussed this point. It was clear that there are some people who it

may suit and who may be able to be taken out of that setting and put somewhere else but not everybody is suited to that. I want to compliment the management and staff at St. Mary of the Angels for the loving care and kindness they have shown over generations to those who have been resident in the community. Remember, this was a family farm originally. The mother and father had one daughter who became a nun. They kindly gave the beautiful farm free of charge so that St. Mary of the Angels could be developed. Local people in County Kerry, relatives of the residents, fund raised and made the centre into what it is today. It is a centre of excellence.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy to conclude.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I was cut short on my time. I lost a minute ---  
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**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy lost half a minute.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I just want to make the point that three or four years ago the centre stopped accepting new people. The worry I have now is that if a young couple in County Kerry have a child with special needs who needs assistance, there is no acceptance into St. Mary of the Angels for that child. Is it true to say that it is closing?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Let us get the answer from the Minister of State. The Deputy got his half a minute back.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Obviously, it is going to change. I appreciate the Minister of State's support and his genuine interest. I know that he has an interest in St. Mary of the Angels.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath):** I thank Deputies John Brassil and Michael Healy-Rae, who have a particular interest in this issue. I have already spoken to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae about this and I recognise that both Deputies are prioritising people with disabilities in their constituency.

I will now go into some detail on the matter and answer the questions posed by the Deputies. In June 2011, a report entitled Time to Move on from Congregated Settings was published by the HSE. That report identified that in 2008 approximately 4,000 individuals with disabilities lived in congregated type settings. These are places where ten or more people reside in a single living unit or are campus based. The report found that notwithstanding the commitment and initiative of dedicated staff and management, there were a significant number of people still experiencing institutional living conditions

where they lacked basic privacy and dignity and lived their lives apart from any community and family.

Currently, 2,725 people live in congregated settings and our objective is to reduce this figure by one third by 2021 and ultimately to eliminate all congregated settings. At a national level, work has been ongoing to support the implementation of this policy. I am pleased to note that a significant amount of progress has been made to date, including the establishment of a multi-stakeholder working group chaired by Inclusion Ireland. A toolkit for transitional plans has been developed to support service providers in the development of project transition plans for individuals moving to more socially inclusive settings. Project action plans for priority sites have been developed to guide and support these sites to develop their action plans for transitioning individuals from congregated settings. A communication framework has been developed and disseminated which includes a key messages document and a stakeholder mapping tool to support providers to engage all stakeholders in a targeted manner and ensure communications are timely and appropriate. However, from what I have heard today, that has not happened. All of these communication documents, action plan templates, toolkits and an information bulletin can be viewed on the HSE's website. I would encourage the Deputies to review these documents as they give a comprehensive overview of the level of preparation that goes into moving people out of congregated settings.

The St. John of God service in Kerry has been identified as one of the priority sites for decongregation. The HSE is committed to working with St. John of God Services to transition 17 residents who are in ward style accommodation from their current unsuitable accommodation on campus to more appropriate settings in the local community. The comprehensive transition plans I have described will ensure that there is extensive engagement with the people themselves, their families, carers and advocates, as well as the service provider, to ensure successful and sustainable transitions into the community. In total, 78 people currently residing on the Beaufort campus will ultimately be supported over a number of years to move to more suitable accommodation in the community, depending on available funding and the ability to source suitable houses in the community. HSE representatives met public representatives from Kerry yesterday and were clear in stating that St. Mary of the Angels will close over time. I believe that was said at the meeting. I would particularly like to assure any concerned residents, family members and my colleagues in the House that the process of moving a person with disabilities out of a congregated setting is not something that happens overnight. The process of moving people to more suitable accommodation in the community will take place over a number of years and will be done in full consultation with all residents, advocates and their families.

**Deputy John Brassil:**   Obviously the Minister of State's reply greatly

concerns me. What he is saying is that St. Mary of the Angels will close and that the process for moving people into suitable accommodation will take place over a number of years and will be done in full consultation with residents, advocates and their families. What about the residents, advocates and their families who do not want to move? What about those people who are happy and have been so as long as they have been living there, in this idyllic setting and who have a wonderful life in a wonderful community? What about those people? They have been lobbying us. They are in existence; they are real people but we are now saying to them that their future is uncertain. That is not the right position to take. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work in these particular circumstances.

I ask the Minister of State to ensure that a detailed, individual future care plan for each of the 78 residents be drawn up, in consultation with the individuals and their families. Once that is done, I ask the Minister of State to revert to us and let us know exactly when and how the future of these people will be cared for. There is a future for St. Mary of the Angels, Beaufort. The Minister of State must believe me that there is a future for that centre.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:**   The trouble with the Minister of State's response is that it makes no allowance whatsoever for the resident who is unable to relocate. I am pleading with the Minister of State on behalf of parents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters of the people who are resident in this wonderful location. One of the most upsetting things that the Minister of State has said is that he wants to take the residents out of that place, that home and integrate them into the community but the community they are already in is a community in itself. It is a wonderful, beautiful setting where an awful lot, if not the majority, of the residents are happy, safe and content and they want to be left there. There are people in St. Mary of the Angels today who would be unable to integrate into any other place and it would be unacceptable to their families to try to do so. They are safe, happy and content and are getting excellent care from excellent care providers.

I urge the Minister of State to think of my late father, who always said, "If it's not broken, don't try to fix it." St. Mary of the Angels is not broken. I urge the Minister of State not to try to fix it because it is not the proper thing to do.

**An Ceann Comhairle:**   The Minister of State has two minutes to respond.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:**   I accept the concerns of my two colleagues. However, I have a plan to ensure that we deal with these particular issues. I have visited centres for people with disabilities where residents told me that they wanted to get out of congregated settings. I visited a lot of centres over the summer.

In the service to which the Deputies refer there are 17 residents in ward style

accommodation which, in my view, is not suitable for any person. Of course I totally accept the important point that not all people residing at St. Mary of the Angels in Beaufort will be suitable for transitioning to community living. I am giving a commitment today that the HSE and St. John of God Services will liaise with the residents, the family members, the advocates and the staff members to ensure these issues are addressed. The HSE wishes to assure all residents and families that any proposed changes at St. John of God adult services will be fully discussed and that no changes will proceed until this consultation process has been completed. I am saying we will listen to the concerns of the families.

Of course I accept that one size does not fit all. I am trying to change the services for younger and, in this case, older adults with intellectual disabilities to suit people with disabilities. We have managed to get nearly 2,000 people out of congregated settings. There has been a fantastic response. As I listen to the Deputies, I am aware that the transition might need to be managed in other ways for certain people because of their medical and physical needs or particular issues. I assure them that this is not going to happen tomorrow morning or against anybody's will. I will not force anybody into a situation he or she does not want to be in.