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'My son isn't a pawn on a chessboard' - Mother of son with intellectual disabilities hits back at Minister's apology



Ina O'Dwyer and son Bernard (41)

Claire Fox

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A mother, who wrote an open letter to Disability Minister Finian McGrath, in response to his statement that people with intellectual disabilities were often "dumped" in institutions has criticised the apology he has issued her.

Disability Minister Finian McGrath wrote to Ina O Dwyer from Cahersiveen, Co Kerry on Facebook on Tuesday apologising for his comments made on July 14. In an Irish Times article he said that "Dumping of relatives in institutions a key matter of concern in Government strategy".

In his apology, he said: "Sorry if my comments offended you. They were never directed at you or families like yours. I've always supported carers and their families. My comments were directed solely to people that never visit or keep contact with our disabled community.

"My plan this year is to move 223 people out of institutions with their agreement and

consent."

Ina, whose son Bernard (41), has resided in St Mary of the Angels care home in Beaufort, Co.Kerry since he was five years old, told Independent.ie that the Minister and HSE are treating people like her son like "pawns on a chessboard".

Commented on [Finian McGrath TD's public post](#)
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Finian McGrath TD Dear Ina,

Sorry if my comments offended you. They were never directed at you or families like yours. I've always supported carers and their families. As a p... [See more](#)
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"How can you get their consent [to move]? If they shake their head or rub their tummy in a certain way will that be seen as consent? Where is he getting that figure of 233? They are real people. This shouldn't be a numbers game. These people aren't pawns on a chessboard to make the figures look good," she said.

Ina said she recalls being "appalled" when she was notified last year by a staff member at St Mary of the Angels that Bernard's name had been given to Kerry County Council to be moved to a home in Milltown, Co Kerry.

"I was staggered. How dare anybody give his name? It was so hurtful. Bernard has the mentality of a one-year-old. He can't decide for himself."

The HSE'S 2011 report, Time to Move on from Congregated Settings, stated that it wants people with intellectual disabilities to move into homes in communities where they can "live ordinary lives".



Disability Minister Finian McGrath Photo: Gareth Chaney/Collins

Ina said that Bernard can't live an ordinary life and wants to meet the person in the HSE who wrote that strategy to ask them if they can make Bernard "ordinary".

"Is there a god in the HSE who can wave their magic wand and make Bernard ordinary? If I could've made Bernard ordinary I would've done that when he was a baby. He's not ordinary. He's extraordinary. I spent the first five years of his life pretending he was ordinary. I brought him to Lourdes and so many doctors in Kerry and Cork," said an emotional Ina.

"If the person in the HSE who made that policy has the guts to meet me, I'll ask them can they make him ordinary?"

Ina said that the comments made by Minister McGrath that people were often "dumped", "kidnapped" and "abandoned" in care homes brought her back to the horrific day in 1976 when she gave birth to Bernard.

"It brought me back to the day he was born in one fell swoop. You get on with your life and you move on but it brought me back to the terrible day on August 5 1976 in St Catherine's in Kerry. I had the most horrific birth. There was no doctor. It was just pure calamity. I was on a bed on the ground," she explained.

Ina added that from the moment Bernard was born that he was very ill and suffered 50 epileptic seizures a day. Initially she didn't want Bernard to live in St Mary of the Angels but came around to the idea when she saw the "love" that staff had in the care home.

She said: "I was 19 when I had him and didn't know anything about babies. I didn't want him to go in to a home but doctors advised me to. I couldn't accept that he wouldn't be normal. It made me face the future."

"Once I saw the love he was surrounded by I had no fears. He gets physio and OT, and there's a dental surgery and a doctor on call. There's a hydro therapy pool and Bernard loves water."

Bernard is like a an adult baby said Ina and needs 24-hour care that only homes like St Mary's can provide.

"He's exactly like a baby. Every single thing has to be done for him. I have to know when to feed him and if is he in pain and where is that pain. He dribbles all the time and he can't clean his nose."

"Food has to be matted to a pulp as he can't chew properly and my greatest fear since he was born is that he would choke. He loves his cup of tea."

With the HSE's campaign to move 233 people with intellectual disabilities from homes like St Mary's, Ina is worried for those whose families do not visit them and for the future of St Mary's as a whole.

She said: "He wants to move out the people who have no families visiting them and scatter them in homes around the county. This will isolate them even more. They'll be losing their friends and their community. I'm yet to meet anyone in Beaufort who isn't visited by their parents

"They're not taking new admissions or opening St Mary's to respite which is badly needed in the area. They're going to move out as many as they can. They are cutting staff and the only reason staff aren't walking out is because they know our children will be thrown out. They're working in terrible conditions."

Ina said that if she ever meets Minister McGrath that she will do everything she can to make him listen and to save homes like St Mary of the Angels.

"If I do meet Finian McGrath I would ask him to increase staff levels in order to support the children who need it and get rid of agency staff as they do not know the children's needs as they are not with them every day."

Why should government want to take these children away? Yes, they are adults but they'll always be children and it belongs to them."

Online Editors