

Govt determined to close St Mary of the Angels

■ Dáil hears Beaufort centre will be shut in five years

THE CAMPAIGN TO save St Mary of the Angels from closure was dealt a crushing blow this week as the government made it clear that it will push ahead with closing the facility and moving the 78 residents into houses around the county.

BY AIDAN O'CONNOR

The Minister with responsibility for disabilities, Finian McGrath, told the Dáil on Tuesday night that he is determined to "end the whole idea of persons with a disability living in large institutions" and he has €100 million "to do something about it".

Minister McGrath, whose own daughter Clíodhna was born with Down's Syndrome, said that all of the 78 residents at St Mary of the Angels will be "de-congregated" over five years, in full consultation with family members, carers and service providers.

The plans have infuriated and hurt family members who are fighting a national campaign to keep the facility open.

They claim that the majority of residents - many of them with severe physical and intellectual disabilities - would not get the level of support they require in the community and simply would not survive.

Minister McGrath told the Dáil that the issue had been raised on a number of occasions and that families were consulted - a claim vehemently denied by family members in Kerry.

In 2011, a HSE report called *Time To Move On From Congregated Settings* outlined the long-term

policy to end facilities like Beaufort and move residents out into the community.

The family members connected to St Mary of the Angels are not opposed to 'decongregation'. However, their argument is that 'one size does not fit all' and the

policy only works for people with less severe disabilities.

They believe St Mary of the Angels is their family members' home - a place where their loved ones have medical care, recreational facilities and full-time loving care.

It is not an "institution", they argue.

They initially believed that only two units in Beaufort with 18 residents - which are of concern to health watchdog HIQA over fire safety - were earmarked for decongregation and closure.

However, Minister

McGrath told a Dáil debate on Tuesday night that the entire centre will be closed over five years.

"In total, 78 people who reside on the Beaufort campus will be supported over a number of years to move to more suitable accommodation in the community, depending on available funding and the source of suitable houses available in the community.

"As far as I'm concerned, the days of institutions are over but I will listen to parents and I will do it in full consultation," the minister said.

Daniel backs campaign to save St Mary's

LEGENDARY COUNTRY SINGER Daniel O'Donnell joined in the campaign to keep St Mary of the Angels open this week and posted a video message giving his full support to the residents, staff and family members.

A regular visitor to Beaufort over the years, the singing star has had many photographs taken with residents and also performed on a number of occasions when he called to see them.

In his video message recorded in the UK, Daniel said "I was sorry to hear of the struggle you're having to keep the place open".

"On my visits there I was so impressed with the care, number one, that everybody was given, but more than that, the atmosphere that was created for all that

live and attend there."

His message was prompted by a heart-felt letter sent to Daniel's management team by Laura Fitzpatrick, whose brother Bernard is a resident at St Mary of the Angels for the past 35 years.

"I know that many of the residents at St Mary of the Angels adore Daniel, so much so that there are pictures of Daniel on the walls there and Daniel has played for them in their home more than once," Laura wrote.

"Luckily Daniel has seen first hand that this place is not an institution and that all the special residents there are so loved, happy and well-cared for always.

"If Daniel can help us in any way, shape or form, we as distressed family members in this harrowing time would be eternally grateful," Laura said.

Within days, Daniel replied



Daniel O'Donnell

by video message, saying "I hope that something is able to be done that allows things remain as they have been for many years".

The campaign to keep St Mary of the Angels open has gathered huge support over the last two weeks. Their dedicated Facebook page has gathered thousands of followers and thousands more have read and listened to personal stories in local and national media.