

# Parents' alarm at John of God threat to shut in funds row

By Michael O'Farrell

INVESTIGATIONS EDITOR

PARENTS of intellectually disabled children in care with St John of God are worried about the charity's threat to withdraw services completely in a year's time, if the HSE does not increase funding.

The move – widely regarded as brinkmanship – was announced by Clare Dempsey, the chief executive of St John of God Community Services.

She was one of 14 SJOGCS managers who controversially shared millions in secret top-up payments in 2013, even as the charity lied to the HSE to say such payouts were not occurring. Her €125,000 salary at the time was in breach of public sector pay rules – but has now become compliant.

Ms Dempsey's share of the secret 2013 payout was €59,815. According to a HSE audit €12m

## She shared in secret top-up payment

was paid in unauthorised top-ups to managers at SJOG over the years, which should be repaid, according to Health Minister Simon Harris.

But last night a spokesman for SJOGCS said it is better managed now after numerous governance improvements.

'We acknowledge the governance issues which existed some years ago and did express our sincere regret,' he said. 'There's been significant change across the organisation since 2016.'

SJOGCS received more than €140m from the HSE in 2017 and has been allocated €160m this year, but says it needs another €27m to stay afloat. And, in a stark ultimatum, it threatened to give a 12-month



### WORRY:

Aisling McNiffe and her son Jack. She believes the charity should be dismantled and started again

been facing an uncertain future since 2016 when SJOGCS first announced the withdrawal of intellectual disability services due to a lack of funds.

That move was postponed pending a review by the HSE which – three and a half years later – has yet to commence.

Last night SJOGCS moved to reassure clients attending its schools saying these were funded by the Department of Education and not the HSE.

'The current funding crisis does not impact on the St John of God Schools,' a spokesperson said adding that the funding issue of intellectual disability services was not new. 'The problem is systemic underfunding. We are simply not funded sufficiently to provide services, support, care and treatment to 8,000 people.'

Public sector union Fórsa said it was concerned for staff and service users. Paul Bell of Siptu's health division sought clarity from SJOG on which facilities may discontinue.

[michaelofarrell@newsscoops.org](mailto:michaelofarrell@newsscoops.org)

notice of termination if the money is not forthcoming by March 20. The move mirrors the strategy by Rehab which got extra funding last year after a similar ultimatum.

Last night, some parents of the charity's 8,000 vulnerable users, and unions representing 2,500 staff, expressed dismay.

'It's very worrying,' said Aisling McNiffe, whose Down syndrome son Jack attends St Raphael's in Celbridge, Co. Kildare. 'A lot of parents are

extremely worried. Having a child with special needs is already very worrying, never mind hearing of this. It's all ridiculously run, the whole thing needs to be dismantled and started again.'

A parent whose son attends St Augustine's Blackrock, Co. Dublin said: 'Ms Dempsey can't even be bothered to inform parents of what is going on even though it impacts directly on children like my son.'

Pupils at St Augustines have