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# 'Leave our loved ones in St Mary's'

Families reeling after being informed their adult children are to be moved out of Beaufort Care Centre

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PUBLISHED

01/10/2016 | 00:00

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*Debra, Danny and Dolly Lawlor Tralee, Philip and Jerry O'Brien Sneem, Thomas and Jeremiah Bambury Kenmare (back from left) Maria and Donal O'Sullivan Callinafercy, Pat Perryman Listowel and Jack Fitzpatrick Cahersiveen at the gates of St Mary of the Angels run by St John of God Kerry Services in Beaufort on Tuesday morning. Photo by Michelle Cooper Galvin*

Families of adults with special needs living at Beaufort's Saint Mary of the Angels are reeling this week after being told their loved ones will have to leave the place they have called home for decades and move into houses in towns and villages they are entirely unfamiliar with.

News of the shock move has heightened fears among other parents and families that the St John of God's service, which owns St Mary's, is escalating plans to move more and more residents into the 'community'- essentially single unit housing in towns and villages across the county.

This is in line with the HSE's national strategy providing for the transfer of people living in what the executive describes as 'congregated settings' into 'community settings' - a policy that was rolled out in 2011.

In a statement to The Kerryman on Tuesday titled 'Time to Move on from Congregated Settings', St John of God said it is 'obliged to comply with national policy'.

But parents are deeply critical of this model in respect of St Mary's. They describe the centre as a wonderful facility staffed by deeply caring workers in what they believe is a 'community' setting already, rather than a congregated setting of the traditional institutional kind.

They now fear St John of God is escalating its plans. A report by the service seen by The Kerryman, sets out as a priority the closure of two named residential units in the St Mary's campus. Parents and families affected have been left heartbroken by the development.

"We got a phone call a week ago to tell us our son would be moving to a house in Milltown," Cahersiveen man Jack Fitzpatrick told The Kerryman this week.

"We were given no choice and are, like the other parents, just devastated," Mr Fitzpatrick added.

His 40-year-old son Bernard, who has profound special needs, knows no other community, having lived in St Mary's since he was five years-of-age.

Wrenching him from one community for the sake of following a care-in-the-community model could have catastrophic consequences for Bernard, sister Laura said.

"It is so maddening...the thing is that Bernard is extremely happy where he is. He is surrounded by trees and flowers, knows everybody there, everyone knows him.

"This is his community, and if he ends up in Milltown or anywhere in the greater community he will lose everything he has. Bernard will think that all his friends have died."

She fears her brother would become extremely isolated. "They [residents] are very vulnerable. Who would he be living near?." Portmagee woman Noreen Devane received a call on behalf of management at St Mary's at 4.55pm on Friday, September 16, to inform her that her daughter Tracey (43) - a resident of 40 years - would be moved into a house in the Cromane area.

"They can't just come along and do this. We don't understand it, why can't they build more houses there and leave the children where they are?"

"It's a fabulous place. Tracey is very happy where she is. When she was moved to one of the chalets within St Mary's a few years ago it took her a long time to settle. What would it be like for her going down to Cromane, a place where she knows no one?"

At least two of Tracey's fellow residents are blind, Ms Devane said: "They know their environment by touch inside out, are they going to have to learn how to get around a new house now?" Ms Devane said the shock phone call was like a 'bolt from the blue'.

St Mary of the Angels was founded as a residential centre for children with disabilities by the Franciscan Sisters in 1968 on

land donated them to by local couple Denis and Mary Doyle in 1964. The service was amalgamated with St John of God Community Services Ltd in 2005, by which time St Mary's was long recognised as one of the best examples of a centre of its kind in the entire country.

76 adult residents live there today, most in bungalows on campus.

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) inspected St Mary's on two separate visits in October and December of 2015.

HIQA was satisfied that care was provided to a good standard by a 'kind and caring' staff, but pointed to a number of concerns ranging from sleeping arrangements, fire safety and access to community activities.

On the October inspection HIQA reported: "Some improvements, however, were required, most notably in the unit that was home to 11 residents in three multi-occupancy rooms and one single bedroom.

"This unit was not suited for its stated purpose due to multi-occupancy bedrooms with inadequate screening between beds that did not support the privacy and dignity of residents."

At the outset of its August 2015 Kerry Services Development Committee report, the St John of God Community Services Ltd cited the accommodation issues: "The original infrastructure was designed for children; however, today it is home to 76 adults with disabilities. Given the needs of the current residents, this demanding demographic has led to inappropriate accommodation...in some areas of the campus, inadequate facilities lead to a lack of privacy and dignity when tending to the intimate care needs of some residents and contribute to a higher level of risk attached to these activities for staff and residents."

That report pointed to renovation works that had already taken place and more that were planned, but said 'the campus has restricted any new admissions in order to improve the quality of life for the current residents.'

However, a breakdown of the individual housing units on the campus, the numbers of residents and staff within each under

the 'development plan' of the report, suggests that the service has already identified the towns and villages it plans on moving 'current' residents to.

"The St John of God Housing Association is actively pursuing the option of long-term leasing with the local authority on some of the properties rented by St John of God Community Services Ltd. Kerry County Council is supportive of the efforts to decongregate St Mary of the Angels, Beaufort, in line with the National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability 2011-2016," the report reads.

Furthermore, the report clearly states that two units in particular will be first in line for closure: "The facilities on campus are non-compliant from a regulatory perspective and it is critical that residents are housed in appropriate housing. The first priority areas will be the closure of St Brendan's Unit and St Fidelis' Unit, followed by other settings on campus.

Among the 'medium-term' goals set out in the report was the identification of sites at 'Kerry Services to develop housing options for people living on campus at St Mary of the Angels and those persons who are inappropriately housed in the community. 76 persons with a total of 24 bungalow style houses and four apartments.'

Catherine O'Donnell's 41-year-old brother Philip O'Brien has known no other community, having been placed there at the age of five. "It's one of the best facilities of its kind in Ireland and it is the only community he knows. I don't see how he could be expected to 'thrive' in the community in what would be a backwards step. I think it is nuts."

Joyce Bambury who is a member of the families' committee is urging the St John of God's and HSE to redesignate St Mary's - where her brother Thomas (39) has been in care since 1992:

"My big worry with these 'community' houses is that if they can't fund what they already have I seriously doubt they will be able to fund the houses to an adequate level of staffing for the needs of residents. It's mind-boggling. We're looking now to have St Mary's redesignated as a real 'community setting' as it is not a 'congregated setting'."

In a statement issued to The Kerryman on Tuesday titled 'Time

to Move on from Congregated Settings. A Strategy for Community Inclusion', St John of God said it is obliged to comply with the HSE's national policy': "We acknowledge that a number of families are fearful of community living and we will be working closely with the families as we progress with the policy. We understand that moving home is a stressful undertaking for the residents and their families."

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