



Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Mental Health Issues Affecting the Traveller Community.

October
2019

Good morning, everyone,

I'm the Managing Director of Offaly Traveller Movement and I'm also a social worker by profession and a very proud Traveller. I welcome this opportunity to speak to you today.

It's not often that the local context is presented at a National level and I am here today to talk to you about the lives of Travellers in County Offaly. I will tell you about the important work that we do at a local level, in an organisation that is managed and driven by Travellers and an organisation that focuses on human rights and social justice. I want you to understand the importance of the local Traveller Movements, and what it means to the Traveller Community whom it serves. As a Traveller, and a mental health social worker, today is an important opportunity to shine a light on the very significant issue of mental health within my community and the need for improvements in the mental health services and supports for my people.

In Offaly, 127 Travellers are living on the side of the road or in unofficial halting sites. This means that they live daily with no running water, no toilets and no refuse collection. This figure includes 71 children. Travellers in Offaly suffer discrimination on a daily basis; this in recent years has increased. An example of this is following the Presidential election last year when we experienced an increase in racist incidences being reported to us. To add to this daily racism my community fare badly on every indicator of disadvantage; social exclusion, unemployment, health status, life expectancy, formal education and to be honest I could go on and on. But what I want to say is that it's the multiplicity of these issues that are causing a mental health crisis and high rates of suicide that are devastating my community and it's really important that we are resourced to work together to change this.

As we work with the most marginalized and disadvantaged community in the county we ensure that our services and programmes are culturally appropriate, innovative and creative and fully engaged with by the local Traveller community. One such service we offer is the 'Travelling To Wellbeing' mental health service that I want to talk to you about today. Travelling to Wellbeing was established in Offaly Traveller Movement in 2012 as a response to our countywide community consultation with Travellers in Offaly and also the All Ireland Traveller Health Study. This service employs a full time dedicated mental health professional who responds to local needs in a culturally sensitive way.

When a Traveller presents to our service it is not just with one issue, it's a multitude of complex issues that have escalated over many years due to a lack of engagement with services. The issues that people present with include: suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, issues relating to abuse, welfare rights, housing issues, relationship breakdown, family issues, bereavement and substance misuse to name a few.

Since 2012 the number of Travellers accessing this service is steadily increasing. Between 2013 and 2015, 124 Travellers engaged with this service. However, last year from May to September, a 5 month period, we had 137 Travellers access this service with 400 interventions. 29 of these interventions were a response to suicidal ideation and attempted suicides. This year we are seeing even a bigger demand for the service, and one which we are struggling to meet.

The major success factor of this service is that it is based in a well-respected and well renowned Traveller organisation. I cannot stress to you enough the importance of trust and of a service that is working from a community led context that is respectful and supportive to the culture and identity of Travellers. Travelling to Wellbeing links Travellers to mainstream mental health services, however this can take a very long time to achieve due to the ongoing issues of mistrust and fear of being rejected and misunderstood within the mainstream services. We have found in the majority of cases that we are often the first point of contact for Travellers accessing mental health support.

It's evident that Travellers are experiencing alarming rates of poor mental health and suicide. In fact one of my colleagues openly said to me that 8 of his first cousins have died by suicide and do you know the saddest thing about this is.....he's not the only Traveller that has lost multiples of relatives to suicide, families destroyed before our eyes... and despite considerable efforts by the Government to reduce health inequalities and improve the health and wellbeing of the nation Travellers continue to experience poorer mental health and higher rates of suicide compared to the general population.

If I could leave you with one thing it is this.... I am asking you to ensure that our evidence based Travelling to Wellbeing service and other similar programmes that are working and supporting Travellers are properly resourced so that stories and statistics like this become a thing of the past.

To the Irish government, I would like to say "How can you watch" How can you watch my people suffer and die and do nothing about it.....

We need action, the time for talk is over, we need your support, we need a national Traveller Mental Health Strategy with ring fenced funding. We need fully resourced mental health teams in every county based in Traveller led organisations and we need the existing mental health services to respond to this epidemic in an appropriate way. Only then can we have hope.