



## Press Release – Mercy Law Resource Centre - Monday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2019

### Minister for Housing must better provide for homeless families and children

- **Launch of Annual Report by the Hon Mr Justice Frank Clarke, Chief Justice, with reflection on ten years of MLRC**
- **MLRC assisted 1,381 individuals and families in 2018 - 88% of new queries related to homelessness**
- **MLRC assisted 452 homeless families in 2018 – this constituted over a quarter of the total number (1,617) of families registered as homeless as of December 2018**
- **Three years after *Rebuilding Ireland*, the Government’s commitment to cease reliance on commercial hotels and B&Bs for homeless families has still not been met**
- **Decisive action is urgently needed to alleviate the suffering and distress of homeless families and children**

MLRC called on the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to urgently and meaningfully address the situation of homeless families and vulnerable individuals, and deliver on the commitment made in *Rebuilding Ireland* to move homeless families out of commercial hotels and B&Bs into suitable emergency accommodation. These concerns were expressed at the launch of MLRC’s Annual Report 2018, launched today by the Honourable Mr Justice Frank Clarke, Chief Justice. Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) is an independent law centre and charity which provides free legal advice and representation for those who are facing homelessness. MLRC marked ten years in operation at the event.

MLRC is alarmed by the damage being done to homeless children which is directly attributable to their placement in commercial hotels and B&Bs for prolonged periods. MLRC engaged with 452 homeless families in 2018 and saw first-hand the impact on children’s health, well-being and development. There are now 3,778 homeless children in emergency accommodation in Ireland, a 400% increase since 2014. Many of the families MLRC supported in 2018 had been in commercial hotels for over 12 months and some as many as three years with little prospect of moving on to long-term secure housing.

Whilst welcoming the Government’s commitment to address the homelessness crisis and the modest progress made further to the Government’s *Rebuilding Ireland* plan, MLRC calls for strong and immediate action to tackle the completely inappropriate emergency accommodation for children and families.

MLRC’s Managing Solicitor, Rebecca Keatinge, said:

“MLRC has continued to support acutely vulnerable families and individuals many of whom have been failed by homeless services. In 2018, we saw an increase in recourse to our service by homeless families, many of whom came to us as a last resort when other advocacy routes

failed. We advised 452 homeless families; 20% of our new queries related to complaints about conditions in emergency accommodation.

These families spend long periods in commercial hotels and B&Bs, some upwards of two years. They face intolerable conditions: cramped and unsuitable hotel rooms for months on end, cut off from family, community and school supports. We have seen first-hand the damage done to thousands of children who are stuck in highly unsuitable accommodation.

In *Rebuilding Ireland*, the Government committed to ceasing reliance on commercial hotels and B&Bs by mid-2017 – it is astounding and completely unacceptable that two years later, more than two thirds of homeless families in the Dublin region remain in hotels. MLRC calls on the Government to meaningfully address this over-reliance on hotels and B&Bs for example through the introduction of time limits on the period homeless families and vulnerable individuals can spend in emergency accommodation, as provided for in England and Scotland.”

At the event, the Honourable Mr Justice Frank Clarke, Chief Justice, recognized the need for MLRC’s committed and focused service, that is embedded in the community and provides a vital first step in access to justice. The Chief Justice stated that there is a compelling case for an increase of provision in legal aid. He said that the scope of legal aid needs to be deepened and broadened.

The event was live streamed and can be viewed at <https://www.pscp.tv/w/1PIJQVleMwDxE>

At the launch today MLRC:

- welcomed the Government’s long-term commitment to tackling Ireland’s grave homelessness crisis, particularly measures designed to reduce the unprecedented numbers entering homelessness, and the recognition that housing supply is the key to reducing the numbers in the crisis of homelessness.
- expressed ongoing concern that the specific objectives of *Rebuilding Ireland*, a plan that was published over three years ago, have still not been realized despite a target date of mid 2017.
- called on the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to urgently act on the issues affecting vulnerable individuals and families’ access to appropriate emergency accommodation.

MLRC calls for specific measures to alleviate the suffering of homeless families and vulnerable individuals including: a legislative amendment or Regulation under section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 to set an upper time limit, as exists in England and Scotland, on the length of time homeless families and vulnerable people can be placed in hotels and B&Bs; provision of adequate standards of accommodation and support to homeless families and vulnerable individual; reduced reliance on the ‘self-accommodation’ system by housing authorities to ensure homeless families are, in reality, able to access emergency accommodation; an obligation on local authorities to consider the best interests of the child in housing and homeless assessments.

MLRC strongly recommends immediate action to address these most urgent issues arising in the way emergency accommodation is accessed and provided. If not, this treatment will continue to have an extremely detrimental impact on the health and well-being of some of the State’s most vulnerable families and children.

**ENDS**

**For further information contact:**

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**Notes to editors**

1. Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) is an independent law centre, registered charity and company limited by guarantee. MLRC provides free legal advice and representation for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It also seeks to advocate change in laws, policies and attitudes which unduly and adversely impact people who are at the margins of our society. MLRC provides five key services: free legal advice clinics; legal representation in the areas of housing and social welfare law; legal support and training to organisations working in the field of homelessness; policy work; and a befriending service. MLRC's clients are local authority tenants and people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. They include people who are trying to move away from homelessness who may be struggling with issues often linked to homelessness e.g. addiction, leaving prison, mental illness and relationship breakdown.
2. MLRC has built strong working relationships with organisations working in the field of homelessness, including Focus Ireland, Crosscare Advocacy Service, and the Citizens Information Centres. Since our inception in 2009, MLRC has provided free legal advice and/or representation to over 8,000 individuals and families. In 2018, MLRC provided advice and/or representation to 1,381 individuals and provided support to 100 organisations working in the field of homelessness. For more about our work, see [www.mercylaw.ie](http://www.mercylaw.ie)
3. In June 2019, MLRC made a statement on child and family homelessness to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, raising urgent concerns about the accommodation provision to homeless families and making several recommendations. The submission is available [here](#).
4. In September 2018, MLRC published a report 'Children and Homelessness: A Gap in Legal Protection' identifying failings in the current legal protections for homeless children. The report is available [here](#).