

Press Release – Mercy Law Resource Centre calls for urgent reform to better protect homeless families and children

- **Launch of Annual Report by Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O’Brien**
- **MLRC assisted 1,611 individuals and families in 2019 - 88% of these cases related to homelessness**
- **MLRC assisted 489 homeless families in 2019 – this constituted nearly a third of the total number (1,548) of families registered as homeless as of December 2019**
- **Programme for Government’s commitment to tackling homelessness is welcome, but Government must act on the recommendations of Oireachtas Committee reports on family and child homelessness, published in December 2019**
- **Decisive action is urgently needed to alleviate the suffering of vulnerable homeless families and children**

Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) today extended sincere thanks to Minister Darragh O’Brien for formally launching MLRC’s [Annual Report 2019](#).

Today MLRC is calling on the Minister to urgently and meaningfully address the situation of homeless families and vulnerable individuals, and deliver on the recommendations made by the Oireachtas Committee reports on family and child homelessness published in December 2019.

Whilst welcoming the Government’s commitment in the Programme for Government to prevent and reduce homelessness, today MLRC calls on the Minister to prioritise urgent policy and legal reform, to properly protect homeless families. Specifically, MLRC calls on the Minister to prioritise reform of homeless legislation to place a statutory obligation on local authorities to consider the best interests of children in the homeless assessment. In addition, MLRC strongly urges the Minister to prioritise other recommendations made by the Oireachtas Committee on Housing last December, including reform of homeless legislation so that there is a duty and not just a discretion on local authorities to accommodate homeless people.

MLRC is also highlighting extremely worrying current cases of vulnerable families being left to sleep rough in the Dublin area, during the ongoing pandemic. MLRC has serious concern over an emerging pattern seen through our work, of families from ethnic minorities being refused emergency accommodation, and such families having extremely limited recourse to supports to enable them to overcome apparent obstacles to essential services. MLRC believes that it is entirely unacceptable for children to be sleeping in parks and calls on local authorities to undertake homeless assessments in line with the statutory framework.

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 2019, we saw another 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 489 homeless families during the course of 2019, up from 452 assisted the previous year.

These families spent long periods in commercial hotels and B&Bs, some upwards of two years. They faced intolerable conditions: cramped and unsuitable hotel rooms for months on end, cut off from family, community and school supports.

MLRC welcomed the quick response of local authorities in March 2020 in the early days of the pandemic. A number of homeless families supported by MLRC were swiftly moved out of overcrowded B&Bs to more suitable emergency accommodation. MLRC also recognises the concerted and ongoing efforts of local authorities more generally to move families out of unsuitable 'self accommodation' in B&B and hotel accommodation into more suitable accommodation.

MLRC is however deeply concerned about the health and welfare of a small number of families who are currently being failed by the system, refused accommodation and left to sleep in parks with their young children. We have intervened positively in the cases referred to our service yet remain concerned however about the lawfulness and transparency of the homeless assessments. MLRC seeks an explanation for an apparent shift in policy by local authorities, as yet unpublished, in relation to their initial refusal to support homeless families from certain ethnic minorities."

At the launch today MLRC:

- welcomes the Government's commitment to tackling Ireland's grave homelessness crisis and the recognition that housing supply is the key to reducing the numbers in the crisis of homelessness;
- expresses ongoing concern that the needs of vulnerable families and individuals, particularly those of ethnic minority including members of the Traveller community, are not being properly met;
- calls on the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government in conjunction with local authorities 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.

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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 for 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. discrimination, 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 10,000 individuals and families. In 2019, MLRC provided advice and/or representation to 1,611 individuals and provided support to 100 organisations working in the field of homelessness. For more about our work, see 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 December 2019, MLRC published a report 'The Lived Experiences of Homeless Families' bringing the voices of homeless families to the fore and setting out recommendations for policy and law reform to improve protections for homeless families. The report is available [here](#).
5. In November 2019, the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs published reports on family and child homelessness, incorporating several recommendations set out by MLRC. The reports are available [here](#).