

Press Release – embargoed to 7am, Monday 25th September

Minister for Housing must protect vulnerable families – Mercy Law Resource Centre

- **32% increase in case load in 2016 as housing crisis deepens**
- **Strong action needed to tackle lack of emergency accommodation for families**
- **Unlawful refusals by local authorities continues to increase**
- **Launch of Annual Report by Ombudsman for Children**

Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) has called on the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to urgently and meaningfully address serious issues affecting access to emergency homeless accommodation by vulnerable families and individuals. The concerns were expressed in the MLRC Annual Report which is being launched today at 11.30am by Dr. Niall Muldoon, the Ombudsman for Children.

MLRC is alarmed by a continuing increase in unlawful refusals by local authorities to provide homeless accommodation to those at risk of sleeping rough, and the frequent placement of families with children in unsuitable hotel and B&B accommodation for very prolonged periods with no upper time limit. In 2016 MLRC advised on 1,077 cases - a 32% increase on the previous year. Of great concern is the increasing urgency and distressing nature of a growing proportion of the cases.

Whilst recognizing and welcoming the Government's renewed commitment to address the worsening homelessness crisis and the modest progress made further to the Government's *Rebuilding Ireland* plan launched in July 2016, MLRC called for strong and immediate action to tackle the worrying lack of emergency accommodation for children and families.

Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) is an independent law centre which provides free legal advice and representation for those who are facing homelessness.

MLRC's Acting Managing Solicitor, Rebecca Keatinge, said:

“MLRC's legal service has continued to support acutely vulnerable families and individuals who in some instances have been failed by homeless services. These families and individuals access our service as a last resort, and we have seen a sharp increase in the need for our support last year. Many families we have assisted have been refused emergency accommodation or have been put on the self-accommodation option of homeless provision by local authorities, meaning they must source their own hotel and B&B accommodation.

In the absence of proper provision of emergency accommodation, these families have had to sleep in their cars, or in extreme cases, in public parks, with small children. Many of those who have been provided with a placement in emergency accommodation face intolerable conditions, where they live in cramped and unsuitable hotel rooms for extremely prolonged periods, cut off from family, community and school supports.”

At the launch today MLRC:

- Welcomed the Government's long-term commitment to tackling Ireland's deepening homelessness crisis, particularly measures designed to reduce the unprecedented numbers

entering homelessness, and the shift towards a policy direct builds of social housing by local authorities and housing bodies.

- Welcomed Minister Murphy's recent commitment to increase funding to deliver improved homeless health supports and services in emergency accommodation.
- Expressed ongoing concern that the outcomes of the recent review of *Rebuilding Ireland* fail to commit to specific improvements to the provision of emergency accommodation
- 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 continues to call for specific measures to avert recurrence of these urgent issues including: reduced reliance on the self-accommodation system by housing authorities to ensure homeless families are, in reality, able to access emergency accommodation; a full engagement with homeless families at the point they initially present, so the most suitable emergency accommodation option is provided to meet their needs; a legislative amendment or Regulation under section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 to set an upper time limit, as is operated in the United Kingdom, 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 individuals.

MLRC's Acting Managing Solicitor, Rebecca Keatinge, continued:

"We worked with one family last year whose young primary school children missed eighty percent of school during the academic year, due to serious shortcomings in their emergency accommodation provision. MLRC is concerned at the failure to adequately address these shortcomings in emergency accommodation provision to date and remain concerned that recent commitments made by the Minister fail to commit to the changes necessary to avert further similar cases arising."

MLRC strongly recommends immediate action to address these most urgent issues arising in the way emergency accommodation is accessed and provided. MLRC is concerned that if strong and immediate action is not taken to address these issues they 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 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. Our Annual Report 2016 is available [here](#).

2. MLRC has built strong working relationships with organisations working in the field of homelessness, including Focus Ireland, Crosscare, and Dublin Simon. Since our inception in 2009, MLRC has provided advice and/or court representation in public interest litigation to over 5000 individuals, families and organisations. In 2016, MLRC provided advice and/or representation to 1,077 individuals and provided support to 50 organisations working in the field of homelessness. For more about our work, please see www.mercylaw.ie
3. On 30 June, MLRC sent a submission to the Minister for Housing, Planning, and Local Government on Urgent Issues in Relation to Provision of Emergency Accommodation by Housing Authorities. The submission is available [here](#).
4. In 2016, MLRC represented several families refused emergency accommodation by Housing Authorities. MLRC threatened litigation in several cases and brought High Court litigation in two cases, both of which were reported on by the Irish Times: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/courts/high-court/homeless-family-who-took-council-to-court-to-be-housed-1.2530884> and <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/courts/high-court/homeless-family-get-order-quashing-refusal-to-accommodate-them-1.2898095> All cases resolved in our clients' favour. MLRC continues to represent families in comparable situations - who are homeless and/or face serious difficulties in accessing emergency homeless accommodation.