



Kerry Traveller Health Community Development Project

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community

24th September 2019

“Kerry Traveller Health Community Development Project is a county-wide Project, whose Mission is to work towards developing a clear and pro-active position in relation to Traveller issues and rights. We work to ensure that Travellers in Kerry have equal access to opportunities and services, have improved mental and physical health, and have a recognised voice and a positive influence on social and economic life”

Introduction

Dha luin. Dia dhuibh ar maidin. Good morning. My name is Brigid Quilligan and I am a Traveller woman from Killarney and the manager of Kerry Traveller Health Community Development Project. I am joined by our Men's Health Worker Michael Mc Carthy, a Traveller man from Listowel.

On behalf of Kerry Traveller Health Community Development Project (KTHCDP), we would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to present on the topic of Mental Health issues affecting the Traveller Community

KTHCDP is county wide community development project which incorporates a health action zone. Our work involves working with Travellers who are static, those who are nomadic and those who have emigrated but find it difficult to access services abroad. We operate from the principles of community development – Equality, participation, empowerment, inclusion, and self-determination. We are 21 years working to support the local communities of Travellers in Kerry to respond proactively to the issues facing Travellers in Kerry. We have worked to develop innovative programmes and initiatives in the areas of:

- Health
- Education
- Culture/Identity
- Accommodation
- Leadership
- Traveller Economy /Employment
- Horse Ownership
- Gender Based Violence
- Youth Development

Our work has evolved over the years as has our analysis. We are fortunate to have the benefit of a strong HSE Community Work department in Kerry, strong links with Mental health services, a strong Traveller health Unit in the region and a Traveller community that is proactive and committed to creating change. Using a social determinants model of health, we see particularly clear health implications associated with poor living conditions, high levels of exclusion and discrimination faced by Travellers and lack of opportunities for progression. All these issues, experienced to a greater or lesser extent on a daily basis by most Travellers, impact negatively upon both mental and physical wellbeing. While we work on supporting access to Mental Health services, in order to have an appropriate response to prevention, we work on looking at the root causes of the Mental health and Suicide Epidemic amongst Travellers.

Travellers in Kerry

Travellers in Kerry are diverse. We have on the surface, the most beautiful county in the country. That beauty belies the mental health crisis that the Traveller constituents of Kerry are experiencing. A strong, proud, resilient community, we are at breaking point. There is no person in the community who has not experienced the devastation of losing someone you love to suicide. We watch our loved ones battle anxiety, depression, severe mental illness and addiction. In preparing this submission, we consulted with 61 individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds and experience within the Traveller community. The findings are that Traveller community in Kerry feel under siege externally and internally, and their mental and physical health is suffering

The 2016 Census showed there were 998 Travellers in Kerry. Conservatively, we believe the figure to be 50% higher. We have a large nomadic population in Killarney, the second largest in Ireland. The nomadic Traveller community from Kerry travels within Ireland, the UK, the US, Europe, Australia and Canada. There is a strong history and culture in Kerry of Travellers from all towns travelling frequently for short spells between the UK and Ireland for over 50 years. We have no research on this, but we do believe that Nomadic Travellers fare better in terms of their mental health. There is a national unconscious bias against Travellers. The last acceptable form of racism in Ireland. Being a Traveller, proud of your identity, feels like an act of resistance. There is no acknowledgement of the hurt, pain, abuse and racism that generations of Travellers in the Irish State have suffered. We have developed good initiatives, have good links with the mental health services, yet the mental health issues are increasing. The community is besieged with external and internal issues. These issues are outlined in depth in our submission but include:

- Identity and access to justice
- Economy
- Accommodation
- Education
- Physical and Mental Health
- Internal issues

Recommendations

1. Traveller mental health and suicide named as a national crisis

- Requires change in approach and willingness to address the cause and not just the symptoms. More emphasis to be given to the Social Determinants of Health as established by the findings of the All Ireland Traveller Health Study (Our Geels) and as defined by the World Health Organisation in 2008
- The link between the racism of and oppression of Traveller and the poor mental health of Travellers needs to be acknowledged.
- Root causes of mental health of Travellers
- Impact of racism on Travellers mental health and well being
- Childhood trauma
- Intra Traveller conflict
- Addiction

2. An independent national enquiry of the treatment of Travellers since the formation of the Irish State

- Denial of and erosion of Traveller Culture, history, language, ethnicity
- Health (including Mental health and addiction)
- Education
- Accommodation
- Economy
- Access to justice
- Historical abuse of Travellers in state care, schools and mother and baby homes
- Incitement to hatred of Travellers by people in positions of power ie Politicians, Judges, media figures
- Institutional racism

3. Enhanced legal protection of Travellers in Ireland

- Review and strengthening of Hate crime legislation
- Traveller Ethnicity enshrined in legislation
- Review of the the Equal status legislation and its impact on discrimination against Travellers
- Resourcing of a national Traveller Legal unit to ensure adequate access to legal representation for Travellers

4. Targeted National Mental Health Programme for Travellers

Increased funding for Local Traveller Health and Community Projects to develop the following grass root culturally appropriate mental health supports

- Traveller Mental Health Rapid Response teams
- Traveller counselling service
- Local Traveller Mental Health peer workers
- Engagement with service providers to build awareness re factors determining mental health
- Acknowledgement, Protection, facilitation and promotion of Traveller culture, history, language by the Irish State
- Targeted programmes to build self-esteem and self-identity. For example:
 - a. Building self organisation with Traveller men around horse ownership
 - b. Supporting leadership, identity and self-awareness with young Travellers

5. National Media Campaign

A national media campaign to tackle the inequalities in the headings across the social determinants of health. Culturally appropriate materials developed. A diverse range of Travellers to be engaged in the development and roll out i.e. nomadic, LGBT, different ability, geographical areas fairly represented.

6. A review of services to Travellers and the representation of Travellers across all departments in Ireland.

NTRIS to direct a review of all Services and programmes to Travellers. These services and programmes equality tested for access and outcomes.

7. Ethnic Identifier

An ethnic identifier to be implemented across all state services to monitor the uptake and effectiveness and outcomes for Travellers

8. Anti- Racism and discrimination training

Anti-Racism and discrimination training prioritized by the Department of health for all staff

9. To address the inequality of Travellers, Travellers need to be central to the design and delivery of services to Travellers.

All government departments are urged to develop an affirmative action programme of employment of Travellers within their departments.

10. The inequality in political representation of Travellers needs to be addressed by the Irish State.

Affirmative action measures are needed to ensure adequate political representation of Ireland's indigenous ethnic minority group

11. Community Development Departments within all CHO areas

The community work departments in the Kerry/Cork region have been hugely supportive to grassroots organisations. Where present, it results in a stronger relationship between the primary health teams, the clinicians and the Traveller organisation and community.

On behalf of KTHCDP and the Travellers in Kerry we would like to thank the committee for listening to our presentation and we would like to thank the community in Kerry for supporting our surveys despite the sensitive issue.

