

**West Limerick Resources- Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Special Issues
affecting the Traveller Community.**

Tuesday 8th of October 2019

Introduction

Cathaoirleach,

Good morning, my name is Niamh Keating, I am the Project Coordinator of the West Limerick Primary Health Care Project for Travellers and I am here today with my colleague Myra O' Brien, Community Health Worker. On behalf of the West Limerick Resources and the West Limerick Primary Health Care Project for Travellers, we would like to thank you, the chairperson & the members of the committee for affording us this opportunity to present on the topic- Mental Health issues affecting the Traveller Community.

West Limerick is an area of County Limerick with four main towns, Abbeyfeale, Askeaton, Rathkeale and Newcastle West (map in amendment). The area bounds Limerick City to the East and West along the Cork/ Kerry borders with the Shannon Estuary forming the northern boundary. There is a large Traveller population living in West Limerick equating to approximately 52 % of Travellers in Limerick overall. Today's presentation is framed within the local context of West Limerick where the Traveller community, by in large experience rural disadvantage with less access to services & service provision, limited public transport, less opportunities and more exclusion.

The West Limerick Primary Health Care Project has been operating for 9 years since 2010, it is solely funded by the Traveller Health Unit in the HSE. The project consists of, 6 qualified and experienced Community Health Workers all members of the Traveller Community and a project coordinator. The aim of the project is to improve the health and well-being status of the Traveller Community in West Limerick. The Community Health Workers deliver peer led health information and education to their community, helping to achieve positive outcomes with long-term effects. We are currently undertaking a Baseline Health Survey of Travellers in West Limerick. This survey will demonstrate the effectiveness of the peer led approach in improving the health and well-being of Travellers. We expect that the survey results will evidence that the Primary Health Care Project structures are really good investments, that need to be properly funded and resourced. This presentation will refer to figures and statistics from the Clare Baseline Health Assessment Report, a Primary Health Care Project in our region that recently launched their report.

We are very fortunate to have the benefit of a strong HSE- Traveller Health Unit, Social Inclusion, Community Development Department & the National Suicide Prevention Office. We also have strong

links with Limerick Sports Partnership, the Limerick Clare Education Training Board, Limerick Children and Young Person Service Committee (CYPSC) & other statutory, voluntary & community organisations.

Traveller Health inequalities have been well documented over the last number of years, in the All Ireland Traveller Health Study (2010), the ERSI (2016) publication 'A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland', the 2017 National Traveller- Behaviour & Attitudes Survey and the National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy (2017). All of the above publications identify that addressing the root cause of health inequalities, requires an understanding that health is determined by complex interactions between social & economic factors, the physical environment and individual behaviours. The Primary Health Care Projects operate within the social determinants of health framework which recognises that many factors impact health including education, employment, accommodation & living conditions.

Within, West Limerick we consider the following factors to greatly impact on poor health & mental health, these include but are not limited to poor living conditions, poor educational attainment and discrimination.

Poor living conditions

Poor living conditions have adverse impacts on Traveller health including poor mental health, it contributes to poor respiratory and it exacerbates existing health conditions. While the majority of Travellers living in West Limerick live in standard accommodation, including housing & trailers many are in situations of overcrowding with no safe place to live or play. The Community Health Workers report regularly of families waiting for long periods of time on a housing list and the difficulties Travellers face in securing private rented accommodation.

To address poor living conditions & the housing needs of Travellers we recommend that ring-fenced funding allocated to local authorities should be spent on Traveller accommodation and the returning of these monies to the exchequer is not acceptable. Furthermore, we recommend the employment of Traveller Accommodation Link Workers in each Primary Health Care Project for Travellers throughout the country. The role of this worker would be to link with Travellers and advocate their accommodation needs and living conditions to the local authorities.

Low levels of educational attainment

To address the mental health and health needs of Travellers we need to acknowledge the poor educational outcomes that many Travellers experience, this combined with poor school experiences,

early school leaving, reduced timetables along with lower teacher expectations, lack of culturally appropriate provision in schools and bullying all contribute to poor transitions from primary to secondary school and from education into training or employment. Many Travellers are leaving primary school unable to read and write to an acceptable level.

We propose the following to address the educational needs of Travellers, more resources need to be available to schools we believe that these provisions need to be made available in the mainstream and are targeted to each individual's need and should be sensitively addressed.

Supports need to be holistic and should always be framed from a human right and strengths-based approach. Schools could be encouraged to link with local statutory, community & voluntary services to support the child/ young person's holistic development, where opportunities for learning are life-long, where a 'cradle-to-grave approach' is adopted. To achieve these types of initiatives, further funding is required, we suggest that funding needs to be available to both local service providers and schools to adequately address the individual needs. After all education determines how healthy you are going to be.

Discrimination

Despite the Irish state's recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority group in 2017, Travellers still experience significant levels of discrimination from Irish society. Discrimination and prejudice are clearly felt and internalised by the Traveller community with 94 % of Travellers in Clare reporting that they experience discrimination and 87 % worry about discrimination some or most of the time. This hugely impacts on Traveller mental health. The Clare report also identified that Traveller identity, membership of the Traveller Community and Traveller culture were important to 98 % of respondents, however many reported having to hide their identity when seeking employment to improve their chances of securing employment.

We believe that Traveller history and culture needs to be celebrated. We suggest that Traveller history needs to be incorporated into the primary & secondary level curriculums. We feel that there is an opportunity for the Minister of Education and his colleagues in the Department of Education to incorporate Traveller history and culture in the proposed reforms of the Junior Cycle History Curriculum. Furthermore, we believe that there is a need for intercultural training for all public sector workers particularly in the fields of education, healthcare, social protection, employment and housing etc.

Barriers & recommendations

As outlined above there are many factors that affect the mental health of Travellers, I will now outline some barriers Travellers experience in accessing services including mental health services and outline some recommendations.

1. There is a strong stigma and fear associated with accessing mental health services- many Travellers are reluctant to engage in services, due to fear. 31 % of Traveller respondents in the East Limerick Traveller Health Report launched last week, stated that they had feelings of embarrassment and 27 % felt uncomfortable when accessing health services.
 - a. Travellers often present to services in times of crisis, seeking an immediate response, many services are not equipped to respond in this way. Mental Health services need to understand Travellers in order to respond in a sensitive and culturally appropriate manner, to adequately address their needs.
 - b. In the Clare, Baseline Health Report, 96.4 % of Travellers reported feeling down in the past 30 day for an average of 10 days in the month. Travellers in general regularly attend their GP and many speak to their GP about their mental health issues. Again, in the Clare report, 83 % of Travellers reported that they had been to their GP in the last 12 months however only 4.8 % of respondents stated that they had attended a mental health service.
 - c. As a project we feel there is an opportunity to convene mental health services in local clinics and in local health centres or GP practices, this may help to protect people's privacy, while also encouraging people to seek help when they need to. Transport can be a barrier for Travellers in accessing services and attending appointments, particularly in West Limerick.
 - d. We recommend the employment of Designated Traveller Community Mental Health Nurse that are attached to the Community Mental Health Teams. A similar approach to the Designated Public Health nurses for Travellers in Traveller Health Unit could be adopted. Their work would be to de-stigmatise mental health, to link people with appropriate services, support engagement in the mental health services and provide training to empower the Traveller Community to understand mental health issues that affect their community.
 - e. Additionally, we see the need for more upstream services to support health and well-being, the funding of more early identification/ intervention services and supports needs to be considered. Current service provision is in the crisis stage, however a more cost- effective approach would be much better placed to

addressing people's needs before they present in a crisis situation. We suggest that local funding should be made available to each Traveller Health Unit region to address local needs.

- f. We commend the pilot initiative in our region- the Traveller Youth Mental Health Initiative. This initiative is 1 year long, peer led programme, for young travellers aged between 18- 25 years. It is expected that the Traveller Youth Mental Health Advisors will in consultation with young people in their community, develop communication materials to get messages out on youth mental health. We hope this initiative will receive further funding and that the development of more upstream initiatives like this project will be developed throughout the country.
- g. The lack of employment opportunities is seen as a significant negative factor contributing to mental health issues. There is a need to develop tailored sheltered employment opportunities to provide positive working experiences for Travellers to enable onward progression into mainstream employment.

Conclusion:

To conclude, we strongly believe that the Peer- led approach, as demonstrated in the Primary Health Care Projects throughout the country are effective structures, with positive results, outcomes, and a good return of investment. Primary Health Care Projects need to be properly resourced; to improve the health and well-being status of the Traveller Community throughout Ireland. Additionally, we recommend that there is a need to expand the employment opportunities within the Primary Health Care structures. We see opportunities to expand the peer approach, with the employment of Traveller Accommodation, Traveller Education & Traveller Employment Workers, which would help to respond to the broader social determinants that contribute to poorer mental health in the Traveller Community. Lastly ring-fence additional funding for local initiatives that will help to address and respond to the local needs that are evident in different geographical areas throughout Ireland, particularly in areas where Travellers experience rural disadvantage and where transport is a barrier to accessing services.

Thank you.

Appendix

Map of West Limerick:

