

Witness Statement to Joint Oireachtas  
Committee on Disability Matters  
7<sup>th</sup> October 2021  
from Isolde ÓBrolcháin Carmody

I am a visually-impaired wheelchair-using artist, and I've been working in the arts for over 20 years. My practice is deeply informed by my unparalleled perspective as a disabled person in an abled world. My community arts work focusses on hearing voices that are routinely silenced and sidelined.

I'm sure you haven't heard of me or my work. This is partly because I've undertaken most of it unpaid. If I get a grant from the Arts Council or a commission, it is counted as means (not income), and is taken directly off my Blind Pension. If an organisation employs me for a particular project, it cannot exceed €140

per week without coming directly out of my Blind Pension.

And our Social Welfare system expects me to let them know any time my income changes. An artist's income changes all the time. Plus, informing Social Welfare triggers a review. Reviews are intrusive, extensive and stressful. They can take months, during which time we don't know if we will lose everything on which we depend to survive.

All of this is based on the principal that disability payments are means-tested. We also have to undergo dehumanising medical audits. We have to somehow prove that the long-term disabling condition, which I personally was born with, has not magically fixed itself.

Means testing is demeaning. It takes no account of the actual cost of being disabled. It takes no account of the real cost of living. It takes no account of the fact

that being disabled is not the same as not being able to work.

Last year, the initial estimate for the PUP weekly rate was €350. With my Blind Pension at €203 per week, even the extra €140 I'm "allowed" to earn does not bring my income to this threshold. Added to this, the estimated cost of living with disabilities is €200 per week. By this calculation, I should be in receipt of €550 per week, just in order to survive. That is more than double my Blind Pension income.

Then, there are the so-called "Secondary" Benefits: Medical Card, Rent Allowance, the Free Travel Pass, Fuel Allowance.... These are the first casualties as soon as you start earning. And the loss of these is more acute when you are disabled. We have fewer choices about where we can live and work, because of an ableist built environment. We have fewer options for

transport for the same reason. We interact with the health care system on a more regular basis than our non-disabled peers, even for supports that are entirely non-medical. These are not secondary benefits to us: these are basic necessities of survival.

The precariousness of all these systems keeps disabled people well below the poverty line, and in a constant state of fear and anxiety. These fears are not irrational: disabled people make up 27% of our homeless population – twice the national average. And this system is clearly preventing disabled people from working, with the worst unemployment rate in the EU.

The state of fear in which we live is exacerbated by the ableist culture within Social Welfare. One of the most common and pervasive forms of ableism we encounter is when we are not believed,

and suspected or accused of lying. Every interaction we have when seeking support is based on a requirement to prove that we are not lying or cheating. Proving that we really are disabled. Proving that we are disabled enough. Proving that we are not secretly millionaires. Proving that we, not doctors, are the experts in our own conditions and assessing our own needs. This is exhausting.

The fear also manifests in secrecy. I've been working with Emilie Conway since last year to identify and challenge the barriers faced by disabled artists. But most disabled artists are terrified of speaking up. They are terrified of losing the scraps on which they survive. They are terrified of being audited and landed with reduced income or a loss of supports. And they are terrified that if, like Emilie and myself, they are forced into becoming an accidental

activist, there will be no time or energy left to be an artist. They are not wrong.

These issues cannot be solved by tinkering round the edges. This tinkering resulted recently in Catherine's Law, allowing those on Disability Allowance to take up a post-graduate scholarship or bursary without affecting their benefits. I'm not on Disability Allowance. I'm one of 1069 people on Blind Pension. Administered by the Old Age Pension office. They have little experience of educational bursaries.

There should not be a difference between Blind Pension and Disability Allowance. Changes to these payments needs to be reflected in Partial Capacity Benefit and Invalidity Pension. And while we're at it, can we agree that using the term "Invalid / in-valid" to describe a disabled person is a shocking injustice?

The whole system of supporting the fundamental rights of disabled people needs to be restructured from the ground up. A new system, based on the Social Model, not the Medical Model, must be created. It must penetrate every Department. After all, as artists, DADA first sought to engage with our minister, Catherin Martin. We are constantly bounced back to Anne Rabbitte in DCDIY. Disabled people are everywhere, a concern of every Department, and the current system actively prevents us from being full human beings.