



Submission to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters –
5th May 2022



Introduction

On behalf of WALK, I would like to thank the chairperson and the members of the Joint committee on Disability Matters for the opportunity for Joe Mason, the CEO of WALK, Olena Dmytriieva, a lady with lived experience of disability and the complexities of trying to survive in Kyiv during the war and then fleeing the Ukraine, which she will discuss with you later in this presentation and myself Catherine Kelly the Deputy CEO of WALK to present today on Article 11 of the UNCRPD ‘Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies’. I would especially like to acknowledge and thank Senator Mary Seery Kearney, Minister Anne Rabbitte and ASIam for the tremendous support they provided to WALK in March 2022 when we embarked on a humanitarian mission to Lublin in Poland two hours from the border of the Ukraine to return to Ireland with four families that had children with disabilities and/or autism.

A brief introduction to WALK; we are a progressive community and voluntary section 39 organisation based in Dublin and Louth and we have been supporting people with intellectual disabilities and autism for over 50 years. The services and supports that WALK provide are rights-based and are rooted in the belief that all people have the right to live self-determined lives within an equal and inclusive society. This is in line with the UN CRPD which obliges states to protect the rights of persons with disabilities in contexts of war (Article 11).

Context

During humanitarian emergencies, people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable groups because of their high levels of dependency and limited physical capabilities compared with the general population. Despite this vulnerability, sadly they have not traditionally been considered a priority group for humanitarian assistance. According to the European disability forum, there are approximately 2.7 million people with disabilities in Ukraine, while Inclusion Europe estimates there are around 261,00 people with intellectual disabilities. Charities trying to help people with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, within Ukraine are constantly highlighting the gap in terms of the “frightening lack of information or media coverage about these individuals and that in reality these people are “abandoned” in the Ukraine because as the NGO’s that WALK communicated with

clearly explained most of these individuals have not got the capability to even reach the borders and for them there is no escape. In the Ukraine children and adults with disabilities are often housed in large institutions many of them already cut off from their communities and as each day goes by the risk of them being abandoned and forgotten dramatically increases. This happens because firstly, social disintegration occurs as a result of the erosion of formal or informal social supports in response to war, which cause separation and dispersal of families and carers as they flee war torn towns and cities. Secondly, chronic dependency as a result of people with disabilities being cared for in large institutional settings means that when they are left alone they are unable to support themselves and are left to a fate worse than death.

Rationale for WALK's Humanitarian Journey

I think it is extremely important to provide a context to the committee in order to understand our rationale for WALK's humanitarian journey.

WALK were in touch with an organisation in Kyiv in the Ukraine where they gave practical examples of how people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the war for example shelters in Kyiv are inaccessible, so people with disabilities are forced to stay at home with no level of safety, adults and children are being left in institutions to fend for themselves with little or no access to food and water, there is no essential medication for lifelong conditions such as multiple sclerosis and epilepsy, power failures where electric wheelchairs become inoperable, and we have been told stories about the experiences of people with disabilities that have died unnecessarily because they cannot hide or navigate the cities surfaces that are now covered in rubble making them completely inaccessible for anybody with mobility issues.

The Ukrainian organisation we linked in with explained that they could try and support families to get to the border, but these families could not manage from there without proper support and they beseeched us to help. As we could not morally ignore this plea Joe Mason, our CEO and Kevin Power WALK's Director of Day Supports set off in a minibus to Lublin in the hope of returning to Ireland with the families of people with disabilities.

On our return we brought these four families to Dublin airport to complete all the necessary paperwork and avail of accommodation. However, when we arrived, we spoke with



numerous interpreters who explained that the families could be accommodated in a hotel for a night or even a week but may have to move to another hotel and that there were no facilities at that time designated as disability friendly. At this stage we had two children with disabilities that were ill and one child with autism who required medical treatment for epilepsy and the other child was experiencing physical deterioration as a result of their cerebral palsy condition. One of the children had left all of their mobility aids in Kyiv as they fled a bomb attack on their way to the border and so required constant assistance, he even had to be physically held by his mother so he could sit up straight. We could not in all consciousness abandon these families who had already suffered so much and traumatise them further by putting them into a system that was not suitable to meet their needs.

WALK developed a model of support that we felt would be sustainable. As you are all aware in Ireland the Time to Move on from Congregated Settings Report provided a road map for moving people with disabilities out of institutional and campus-based living and into homes in the community. The result is that many disability organisations now have empty houses and structures on their sites.

While no one is advocating a return to institutionalisation, a small investment into these houses could make them habitable as a source of accommodation for families for people with disabilities for the duration of their stay in Ireland. They are ideal because families with disabilities need accessible accommodation, rehabilitation, equipment, and additional supports.

A great practical example of this is that WALK worked with Cheeverstown House Ltd a Dublin based disability organisation who agreed to provide housing accommodation for two of the families. In addition to housing, a natural support pod was set up for each family in the local community to help them to orient themselves, navigate our systems and support them with life in general.

Disaster preparedness interventions and societal changes are needed to decrease the disproportionate environmental and social vulnerability of children and adults with disabilities to disaster and terrorism. We therefore call on the political leadership and all of



the disability sector to ensure that persons with disabilities are not abandoned and have full access to all humanitarian aid.

Joe Mason the CEO of WALK will outline the practical measures that if enacted could save lives:

Wheelchair accessible transport that is out of commission could be made road worthy. A fleet of these could be brought to the Ukraine or bordering countries, where some of this fleet could be gifted to NGO's on the ground who support people with disabilities to travel to the border and some of the fleet could be used to bring people with disabilities, their families, and their carers back to Ireland.

This transport should leave Ireland with essential aids and equipment and supplies that are required within disability institutions and transport as many people back as possible either by air or bus.

In Ireland deinstitutionalised settings should be repurposed to accommodate people with disabilities and their families, and this accommodation could be supported by Ukrainian support staff both from care settings and auxiliary services. This would increase the sustainability and self-sufficiency of this model.

I would like to thank the committee for allocating WALK the time to speak today on this matter and to introduce Oleana Dmytriieva who has kindly agreed to share her story.