

Dear Ms. Lynch,

As requested, please see below my Opening Statement.

OPENING STATEMENT – “WASTING TIME WITH PEOPLE?”

Thank you for your invitation to meet with you on this critical issue. I welcome this opportunity to give you my views and to hear yours.

My comments are based on my day to day hands-on work since 1973 with people who find themselves homeless. Please see below links for my biography and information leaflet on our work in the Alice Leahy Trust.

<https://aliceleahytrust.ie/about/alice-leahy/>

<https://aliceleahytrust.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ALT-Information-Leaflet.pdf>

I know everyone in the Houses of the Oireachtas and beyond is concerned about the plight of homelessness. However, we must ensure that this very complex question receives a complex examination if we are to find a resolution. After working in the field of homelessness for almost half a century now, I would have hoped we could have reached a better outcome than the one so graphically evident on our streets. Unfortunately we have not done so and, in spite of the efforts of many and the spending of immeasurable resources, the overall situation has, if anything, worsened. We have still not reached that point of a holistic, cross-agency, State-sponsored pragmatic response.

- You will note the title of my Opening Statement “Wasting Time with People?” This is based on my experience of meeting so many people in the statutory and NGO sector who find themselves accused of wasting time with people who perhaps just want a little time devoted to them alone. A lot of time is required in order to build up relationships with vulnerable people and it is only from that base that we can hope to see some change.
- Homelessness must be looked at from at least two angles. The structural causes due to lack of housing which can be eased by increased housing supply – this is the simplest of the two. The social and personal issues that can lead to homelessness are much more complicated and require early intervention if we are to halt the slide of vulnerable human beings onto our streets.
- The people we meet who present as homeless have myriad of social problems related to the complexity of their own personal and unique human condition.
- Inter-generational poverty relating to poor finance and education, absence of opportunity to work or have a stake in society all combine to undermine the person.
- Struggling families where child poverty, neglect, violence or abuse have never been addressed or acknowledged can all lead to low self-esteem and often result in homelessness.
- Mental health issues are too often dealt with through a “medical model” response alone.
- Relationship breakdown can be a factor.
- People become homeless because of their drug/alcohol problem and the challenging behaviour associated with it. We have a very serious drug problem in our city and in our country. Wider society needs to be aware of its responsibility and culpability when it comes to the use of recreational drugs; people who use recreational drugs must recognise the reality that they are supporting a vicious industry.
- We at the Alice Leahy Trust on Bride Road in the heart of Dublin, regularly meet people from all over the country and from other jurisdictions. Some of these people are linked into services in other areas and this can cause considerable challenges for those attempting to meet their needs in terms of providing shelter.

- Tragically, we see people who are homeless dying on the streets; we help but sometimes, in spite of our best efforts, it is not always possible to save each and every one. We must support and comfort, give all we can in terms of compassion, but sometimes we just cannot enable change.
- Government/Inter-Departmental/Inter-Agency collaboration is required to address these profound issues but it is meaningless unless the views of frontline workers are listened to.
- Building up relationships must start at accepting people in all their vulnerability and listening to them; they have a right to be heard.

Just recently an American author Sarah Jaffe wrote about frontline workers in New York and she said nurses said the following *“and they would tell me that they were getting told in these exact words do not waste time on things that were non-productive, by which the hospital bosses meant caring, getting to know patients”*. It is quite clear that working hands-on with people with complex needs takes time, commitment and a belief that anything is possible. However that is much harder than “ticking boxes” and the comfort of bureaucracy. It is necessary if we are ever to make a real difference.

Alice Leahy
Director of Services
Alice Leahy Trust