



ALONE presentation to the Oireachtas Sub – Committee on Mental Health

19 May 2021

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About ALONE

ALONE is a national organisation that supports and empowers older people to age happily and securely at home. We support individuals and their families, work with other organisations, and campaign nationwide to improve the lives of older people.

We have a network of 80 staff and 3,000 volunteers across the country.

ALONE provide social, practical and housing supports. We use individualised support plans and provide a contact for older people to access health, social care, housing and other services to improve physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.

COVID-19 impact on older people

Early March 2020, more than 10,000 cases of COVID-19 had been reported worldwide. The gap in community services for older people became very obvious at the start of the pandemic and we now know from statistics that older people were the most negatively impacted by the arrival of COVID-19 in Ireland. This gap in services across the country must be addressed and we must learn from it.

ALONE were invited to become a member organisation of the National Public Health Emergency COVID-19 Subgroup for Vulnerable People, to work in collaboration with the Department of Health, the HSE and the Department of Rural and Community Development on a coordinated national response to support older people who have concerns, may be at risk or who have contracted COVID-19.

In March 2020 we implemented a seven days a week, 12-hours a day, National Support Line. Within two weeks of the Support Line launching it began to receive thousands of calls from older people. Three quarters of callers lived alone. This line which was used in all government publication gave access to an integrated response of all our services and 100's of partner organisations and other AGE Organisations. There was wonderful support from civil society, the Gardaí, An Post, the GAA and many more but despite this effort a lot of older people were left to struggle.

Calls to ALONE's National Support Line increased up to 1,100 calls per day. Research conducted by *QJM: the International Journal of Medicine* indicated that the cocooning measures may have had a significant impact on the physical and mental health of older people;

- Nearly 40% of older people reported that their mental health was 'worse' or 'much worse' while cocooning.
- Nearly 60% of older people in the study reported loneliness; 1 in 8 reported that they were lonely 'very often'.
- 50% also reported a decline in their quality of life.

While cocooning measures may have been necessary at the time, there is no denying that this had a negative impact on older people. We noticed that older people using the Support Line were becoming increasingly distressed by these measures.

The vaccination process has provided hope; however, there are still challenges that must be addressed to allow older people to re-emerge into society. We and our partners in Age Alliance are concerned about the physical, mental and social challenges older people will now face as they break their period of social isolation and loss of supports.

There is apprehension, worry and anxiety around re-emerging back into society and we must plan to step services up, clear backlogs in health and housing and give encouragement and confidence to older people to volunteer and participate in society again.

ALONE's Work

Since the start of the pandemic, ALONE has operated 365 days a year, operational seven days a week from 8am – 8pm.

In 2020, ALONE;

- Received 41,160 calls to the National Support Line
- Made 138,600 calls by ALONE staff and volunteers to older people
- Delivered 12,500 units of practical supports via ALONE volunteers and Partnerships
- Supported 14,800 older people on an on-going basis.

Re-emergence Plan

ALONE has recently called for a re-emergence plan for older people to be developed as Ireland navigates through the Government's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery Plan for 2021. Older people have been dealing with the repercussions of social isolation for over one year now, and still have a long-road ahead to rebuilding their confidence and reintegrating into society. ALONE's primary concern is that they are adequately supported in their re-emergence with proper care and plans in place. This can be achieved with a stakeholder group to address the issues arising as older people and more vulnerable re-emerge into society and as the vaccination programme progresses.

Loneliness

Loneliness and social isolation has become an increasingly important issue, particularly in the context of COVID-19 as many older people reduced their social participation.

Loneliness has been linked to an increased risk of early death, with some studies highlighting that older people experiencing high levels of loneliness are twice as likely to die within six years compared to those who are not lonely.

ALONE co-founded the Loneliness Taskforce and produced the Connected Island report, which contained five key recommendations for government to implement to address loneliness. The Taskforce has been recently reformed with a broader representation of organisations working to address loneliness.

We need a strategy, an implementation plan and funding to address the issues of loneliness and clarity is needed on who is responsible for same. This should be linked to a public campaign to destigmatise and make people aware of the effects of loneliness

Conclusion

In order to help support older people as they return to society, plan for our aging demographic and learn the lessons from COVID-19, ALONE is calling for the following;

1. A strategy and a public campaign are needed to fully address and raise awareness about Loneliness.
2. More housing with onsite staff support as an alternative to nursing homes
3. More access to technology that supports empowerment, self-care and aging in place.
4. The right to Home Care regardless of age.
5. That we implement or replace the National Positive Aging Strategy.

ENDS