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Press Statement - IASW

The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) welcomes the announcement from the Dept of Justice that 650 beds have been secured to facilitate some people from Direct Provision practice social distancing or self-isolation.

Our members have been concerned about the vulnerability of many of those living in our Direct Provision system and the IASW supports the 'Move the Vulnerable Out' campaign. Social workers are on the frontline working with the most vulnerable people in our society, including refugees and asylum seekers, and work with them across all public services including primary care, medical, mental health, disability and child & family services. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' recent statement highlights the importance of the principle of non-discrimination in responding to COVID-19. They argue that everyone, without exception, should have the right to life saving interventions - we believe that this should include the rights of asylum seekers to engage in social distancing and to self-isolate, rights which have been difficult to uphold within the current direct provision system.

Prior to the Departments statement last night, there were approximately 7,600 people, including asylum seekers and those with status, being housed between emergency accommodation, direct provision and reception centres. The majority of residents are living in congregated settings where it is impossible for them to maintain social distancing or to 'self-isolate' to protect their own health and the health of other residents. While 650 beds will go some way towards alleviating this problem, much more action is clearly needed as a matter of urgency. It is important to note that it is 650 additional beds that are being provided, not 650 rooms. It is unclear whether these beds will be in an environment's where self-isolation and social distancing will be possible. The current reported provision for self-isolation across DP centres is wholly inadequate. Social workers on the ground are aware of residents who have been trying their best to observe the current guidelines on self-isolation and social-distancing but found it impossible to achieve this under the present regime, where rooms are shared, where dining takes place in communal areas and where toilets and showers are also often shared.

We remain concerned about three cohorts: Those who are in vulnerable groups, families, and health care workers. As the Vulnerability Assessment¹ which is a requirement of EU law² has not been conducted in Ireland since the Directive was transposed into Irish law in July 2018, it is unclear how many asylum seekers could be categorised as being within 'vulnerable groups' as identified by the HSE, but it is safe to conclude that the number is significant given the backgrounds from which many

¹ Under these Regulations a vulnerable person is "a person who is a minor, an unaccompanied minor, a person with a disability, an elderly person, a pregnant woman, a single parent of a minor, a victim of human trafficking, a person with a serious illness, a person with a mental disorder, and a person who has been subjected to torture, rape or other form of serious psychological, physical or sexual violence".

² On 6 July 2018, Ireland adopted the European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018 (S.I. 230 of 2018) through it which transposed the recast Reception Conditions Directive into domestic law.

have come and given figures in the general population. For families with children, the challenges at present are enormous; like all parents, parents in direct provision are doing everything they can to protect their children. However, doing so is particularly onerous given their living conditions. We are also aware that some of those living in DP centres are employed as Health Care Workers and also need to be protected. Many of these Health Care Workers share rooms with other residents to whom they are not related.

Despite the good news about the increase in beds being provided, we are still concerned that clusters of infection will emerge in DP centres in the same way that they have in nursing homes. It is evident that DP centres lack the space and medical facilities that are available to nursing homes. We echo the Irish Refugee Council's call to move at least 50% out of the existing DP provision to allow for social distancing. We also echo the call of the Children's Rights Alliance to move families out of Direct Provision. Additional empty hotels, holiday homes and student accommodation could be utilised for this purpose.

If our obligations under the Reception Conditions Directive, and the National Standards for Direct Provision Centres were implemented immediately, particularly the provision of Reception Officers in each location³, it would go some way towards ongoing planning for and meeting the needs of the medically vulnerable and help prevent the current situation getting completely out of hand and posing significant health risks.

In summary we ask that:

1. Those deemed to be at risk or vulnerable to COVID-19 be moved from over-crowded accommodation to suitable accommodation where they can properly protect themselves through self-isolation
2. People, in particular families, in over-crowded accommodation where social distancing is not possible are moved to more suitable accommodation
3. Those working as health care workers are also moved so that they can properly protect themselves, and those with whom they live, and so that they can continue to provide vital services.
4. Vulnerability assessments be introduced as a matter of urgency - if properly resourced, this is something with which the social work profession can help
5. Reception Officers be appointed to each centre as a matter of urgency.

Given the recent welcome improvements that have been made in response to Covid-19, it is clear that where there is a will, there is a way. This is the time to treat all those resident in Ireland on an equal footing - now is the time to address inadequacies of the Direct Provision system. We're not safe until we're all safe.

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³ A Reception officer is "suitably qualified and trained member of staff in each accommodation centre, whose main duties and responsibilities are to receive information arising from vulnerability assessments for each resident; to liaise with relevant services regarding the needs of the residents and to report to the appropriate authorities (RIA/HSE/An Garda Síochána) when a concern for a resident's health, wellbeing or safety arises within the centre".