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IASW

Irish Association of Social Workers
Cumann na hÉireann um Oibríthe Sóisialta

2nd February 2021

Dear Dr Kelleher,

I am writing on behalf of the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW), requesting that we are consulted as a key stakeholder in future reviews of HPSC visiting guidance for the nursing home sector. Arising from our work with families and nursing home residents, social workers have key concerns about the current guidance. We also wish to share some solutions we have developed in response to these concerns.

We appreciate the work, collaboration and effort that has underpinned the development of the current guidance; however, we are concerned about the following:

- 1) Fundamental rights to family life are diluted as something to be measured on the basis of subjective compassionate grounds, one of which recommends visits in ‘circumstances in which a resident is significantly distressed or disturbed and although unable to express the desire for a visit there is reason to believe that a visit from a significant person may relieve distress.’ This core ground has been very distressing for families to understand and accept. Social workers also object to it as given family connection is known to be vital for well-being, waiting for signs of significant distress before sanctioning visits is both ethically and morally unacceptable. Visiting can either be safely managed or it cannot, subjectively testing human need for love and connection is neither acceptable or evidence based.
- 2) The guidance views nursing homes as entirely benign care settings and does not acknowledge the regulatory and safeguarding concerns repeatedly highlighted by HIQA and the IASW. There is a failure to recognise the safeguarding concerns which arise within nursing homes and the risks posed by the prolonged removal of protection offered through family life. Residents confide worries about care or abuse to family members and family members monitor and address quality of care issues during visits. Safeguarding social workers continue to receive concerns in relation to institutional abuse and as you may be aware, a wider social work investigation is underway in relation to the rape of a cocooned resident. Social work expertise must inform any process which removes the protective eyes and advocacy voice of family members from the daily lives of residents.
- 3) At 17 pages long, the HPSC guidance is complex, dense and is written by professionals for professionals. Families and residents have struggled to understand it. Clear information in plain English in accordance with NALA guidance must be provided to ensure those most impacted by visiting guidance are prioritised in communication about it.

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- 4) While the guidance highlights the residents right to decline visits, it fails to advise residents of their rights and ways to respond should the nursing home fail to grant visits. This has been an ongoing issue for families. In the absence of any guidance from government, social workers developed resources for Care Champions, a family run group to support families in exerting their rights to challenge unreasonable visiting refusal. Within the first week of use of this rights-based resource, dozens of families reported that nursing homes were able to reverse visiting refusal and facilitate safe visits.

The experience and learning from this ongoing work would greatly enhance current visiting guidance and support the development of accompanying information which is necessary to ensure residents and families understand the process and their rights within it. The Expert Panel Report clearly identified social work as an essential service within the nursing home sector, consultation should therefore be routinely arranged to seek our expertise and viewpoint.

Social workers bring solutions to the problems which arise in nursing homes on a practice and strategic level. Given the complexities of our nursing home sector, with known gaps in clinical oversight, it is essential that we work systemically to ensure service providers and most importantly, residents and families have every opportunity to maximise visiting opportunities, particularly now funding for safe visiting has been approved.

Finally, in April 2019, concerned about the impact of visiting restrictions, the IASW developed and proposed a liaison social work model for nursing homes to facilitate rights around visiting, communication, end of life care etc. based on pilot projects. This model has since been selected by The Economist Intelligence Unit for inclusion in their annual global report as the only international project to focus on the rights and needs of residents and families. While it is regrettable that social work expertise has not been included in HPSC work to date, we hope that you will welcome the expertise, creativity, and rights-based focus we will bring as stakeholder in 2021.

Kind Regards,

Aine McGuirk

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