

PRESS RELEASE

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SIMON COMMUNITIES OF IRELAND CALLS FOR INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT HIGH MORTALITY RATES AMONG PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS

The Simon Communities of Ireland has called for comprehensive healthcare services for people who experience homelessness, in order to meet the target of ending homelessness by 2010.

Speaking at the launch of Simon's Annual Review today (11/12/07), the organisation's Chief Executive, Patrick Burke, said, "people who are homeless experience complex health problems ranging from a physical complaint to addiction or mental illness. However, treatment is difficult to access because many don't have a medical card, and they simply cannot afford to pay for a GP consultation."

"On becoming homeless, people initially experience physical health problems. After a sustained period of homelessness, mental health problems affect many. In a health profiling exercise undertaken by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs (2005), it was found that ninety per cent of people experiencing homelessness had a physical health complaint. Almost half of those profiled reported a psychiatric health problem. The majority indicated they had a problem with alcohol or drugs.

"The extent and range of these health problems requires a multi-disciplinary approach, which is outside the scope of a regular GP. This is why we are advocating for the establishment of specialist health teams for people who are homeless in key locations throughout the country. An existing model of best practice is already in place in Cork, where a multi-disciplinary initiative has been set up by the HSE. This delivers medical, psychiatric and addiction treatment services to people directly within homeless services.

"While in many areas throughout the country the HSE recognises the specific and complex healthcare needs of people who are homeless, services are patchy and in some areas are non-existent. Where they are absent, people who are homeless simply do not have access to any kind of healthcare."

Simon's Annual Review revealed that 55 people who used its services in 2006 met with an untimely death: 25 people supported by Cork Simon died; Dundalk and Galway Simon lost four and eight of its residents respectively, while 18 people supported by Dublin Simon passed away last year.

According to Patrick Burke, "the average age of those who passed away was just 42. This compares with an average life expectancy of 78 years for Irish people. What these figures tell us is that homelessness kills, and without timely and comprehensive responses, it will continue to result in untimely and unnecessary deaths."

Today's report was officially launched by the Minister for Housing, Batt O'Keeffe TD. The launch was hosted by EBS, who have partnered with the Simon Communities in the provision of permanent move-on accommodation for people who are homeless.

During today's launch, Simon said that while the budget mentioned homelessness, it was still unclear what new provisions or additional spend – if any – is being made to address the problem.

"While the problem of homelessness was mentioned by the Minister for Finance in his budget speech, we are still largely in the dark as to provisions in health and housing budgets specifically aimed at people who are homeless," said Patrick Burke.

"The announcement to acquire or deliver 9,000 social houses next year is a welcome measure but, in our experience, those who are homeless tend to be last in the pecking order when it comes to the allocation of these homes. Besides, the promise of these social houses will only come good if local authorities move on their delivery.

"There is now a unique opportunity to invest in social housing and specific move-on housing units for homeless people. Simon is of the view that, in light of falling construction costs and slow-down in the industry, the Government and local authorities should take advantage of the environment to frontload housing targets by accelerating its building programme. Not only would this approach maintain jobs in construction, but it would be an important measure in meeting the target of ending homelessness by 2010."

To meet this target, Simon also identified a need for further investment in homeless service provision.

"Funding, as well as strict controls, need to be put in place to address the remaining gaps in homeless accommodation and services. All homeless services should conform to best practice so that those using such services can be given the maximum opportunity to progress out of homelessness.

"Furthermore, reforms are required in the welfare system to ensure that when a person moves out of homelessness they have the means to meet rent payments. Initiatives need to be developed to address barriers to education, training and employment services for people experiencing homelessness to ensure that they can completely break out of the cycle of homelessness," added Patrick Burke.

ENDS.

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The Simon Communities of Ireland comprises Communities in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, South East, North West and Mid West. In 2006, Simon delivered support and services to 3,346 individuals and families who experienced – or were at risk of – homelessness.