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AFTERCARE: WE A NEED A COMPREHENSIVE SERVICE, NOT AN AFTERTHOUGHT

Last week I attended 'Out on my own,' a conference on Aftercare jointly run by EPIC (Empowering People in Care) and Care Leavers Ireland. As well as strong words on the importance of aftercare by President Michael D Higgins, the most powerful aspect of that day, for me, was hearing the accounts of young care leavers of their experiences of leaving the care system. Some spoke of their positive experiences of inspirational (and persistent!) Aftercare workers who played key roles in supporting young people in their transition from being in care to setting up on their own, transitioning to college, and accessing the particular supports they needed along the way. However, far more commonly young people spoke about receiving little or no preparation for leaving care, and a sense of being abandoned by their 'corporate parent' (i.e. the State) once they reached their 18th birthday. One young person stated, 'One week I was putting up my hand to ask the teacher could I go to the toilet, the next week I was expected to be a totally independent adult'.

This is in a society where the average age for young people leaving home is now 25 or 26.

Huge upheaval, huge challenges

Children and young people in the care system have already encountered huge upheavals and challenges in their lives by virtue of the issues which led to their care placement, the experience of being placed in care, and being separated from their families and often communities. Surely these young people are in all the more need of, and entitled to, a comprehensive aftercare service which begins their preparation for leaving care well in advance of them turning 18, and continues to provide them with ongoing support in their journey to independence.

Currently in Ireland we are at a key moment in terms of aftercare provision. To date provision is patchy, inconsistent and inadequate, often depending on location (Report of Oireachtas Committee on Aftercare Bill July 2014). Great advances were made in this regard by the passing of the Childcare Amendment Act (2015) last December which progresses aftercare from being wholly discretionary ('Where a child leaves the care of the Child and Family Agency, the Agency *may*…assist him for *so long as the Agency is satisfied for his need for assistance* **–** Childcare Act 1991), to being something which must be provided to all young people leaving the care system.

Examining the legislation

The main provisions of this new legislation are:

- *Every* care leaver *entitled* to aftercare plan and aftercare support, based on an assessment of need
- Assessment covers education, finance, training and employment, health and well-being, personal and social development, accommodation, and family support
- This plan can be reviewed upon request where need identified
- Aftercare support provided up until age 21 (or 23 if in education)

However the Act falls short in that it states that the implementation of the young person's aftercare plan is 'subject to the resources available'. None the less, this legislation is a very significant step forward as it clearly places some sort of responsibility on the State for all young people leaving care, albeit limited.

Surely that has improved the situation for young people leaving care in 2016? Unfortunately it hasn't. The government are stalling on the implementation of the legislation – it has not yet been enacted.

Aftercare – do you care?

Last week the young people of EPIC (EPIC Youth Board) launched a campaign (Aftercare – do you care?) calling on the Minister for Children Katherine Zappone to enact this aftercare legislation, and properly resource aftercare in Ireland. It is important that the social work community (practitioners, students and educators) join with them in this and use their influence to progress this issue which has a profound impact on the lived experience of care leavers every day in Ireland.

It is vital to support these young activists!

All young people need support transitioning to independent living, most young people in Ireland have the support of parents and families well into their 20s. It is so wrong that those young people, whom the State has had the responsibility of parenting are often left, on their 18th birthday with no aftercare services, zero support, and are left to fend for themselves, resulting in many facing huge challenges and often ending up in homeless services.

How can we support this campaign?

The petition can be found @ https://my.uplift.ie/petitions/real-aftercare-for-real-people

SWAN urges everyone to sign the petition and to circulate it via social media platforms. So…

- Communicate (email, letter, Twitter) with your local TDs and Government Ministers calling on them to enact the Childcare Amendment Act 2015 and properly resource aftercare services. Given that the current stalling in relation to the legislation is occurring at a political level, pressure needs to be applied here to move it on.

- Raise this issue at a media level – again bringing this issue to the attention of relevant media correspondents via email or social media.

- Raise this issue among colleagues, and within agencies – the higher profile it can get, the more attention it will receive

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