

REACHING OUT TO DOMESTIC ABUSE VICTIMS

Oasis House's pilot scheme to take service on the road

The limited supports available to victims of domestic abuse in County Waterford, in addition to the volume of calls being received by the Oasis House Women's Refuge, has led to the creation of a new Domestic Abuse Outreach Service. The pilot programme, managed by Oasis House in partnership with Tusla (the Child and Family Agency) and the Waterford Women's Centre, comprises two outreach workers.

Speaking to The Munster Express, both expressed their hope that the mobility built into this new service will allow victims living in more isolated parts of Waterford to access services they'd not been previously capable of tapping into.



"This service was developed as a result of a local needs analysis conducted by Oasis House which identified a number of gaps in service provision for those suffering domestic abuse," said Rebecca, one of the outreach workers. "And when we talk about domestic abuse, it's across the spectrum: it's financial, emotional, physical and sexual abuse and coercive control. We're working at achieving the earliest possible intervention, to reach a point where women or men feel they can ring the helpline number at Oasis House (1890-264-364); the staff there will then put them in contact with myself or Eithne and we can go and meet them in the community, wherever they want, it's very much directed by them. We're there to listen and to talk. Of course we'd prefer if no-one had to have such conversations, but we just want to let people right across Waterford know that we're here to help."

Many misconceptions around the nature of domestic abuse persist, Eithne added. "If someone isn't being hit or beaten, they might not consider themselves as being abused," she said. "There are, of course, other forms of domestic abuse which victims may have grown up with, for example, being exposed to behaviour that they may consider as 'normal', when obviously that isn't the case. But through this new service, we hope we can provide information and some education in the sense that what they've been or are being exposed to is not okay. But through this new service we'll be in a position to raise awareness around what coercive control is, along with financial and emotional abuse."

The study's primary finding, reflecting the anecdotal evidence provided by women themselves to staff at Oasis House, focused on the sense of isolation abuse victims in rural Waterford have long since identified.

"Limited transport is linked into this too" said Rebecca, with Eithne adding: "and bear in mind you could also be talking about situations where there's one car between a couple and in addition to that, there may be abusive environments where the mileage on the clock is routinely monitored by the abuser."

In a statement provided to this newspaper, the Outreach Service further outlined: "For example, if a woman in Dungarvan with small children is reliant on the bus service, by the time she drops children off to school she would not have the time to get a bus to Waterford, access a support service and return to collect her children on time. Add money being withheld from her or taken from here, well, it's not possible at all."

As Eithne and Rebecca both referenced, victims who are marginalised due to "cultural reasons or language barriers" and may not have previously have been in a position to access refuge services, will be better served by the outreach service.



“Interviewing women from minority ethnic groups, it was clear that they didn’t know what services were available to them or where to go for help or support,” said Rebecca. “A common factor, however, was that the majority of women interviewed said that they went to their local Garda Station for help in regard to the domestic abuse they experienced. It was there that they were given information, support or brought to the refuge.” “We look forward to working collaboratively with services and agencies supporting individuals across the county”. Rebecca feels the service will prove its worth for a cohort of vulnerable individuals who’ve not been able to access supports previously.

“There’s such an increasing awareness of domestic abuse now, locally, nationally and internationally,” she said. “There is still a huge gap in the provision of domestic violence specific services so it’s a huge positive, I think, and very encouraging, that this programme has been initiated. It’s needed.”

The roll-out of this scheme has coincided with the Government’s enactment of the Domestic Violence Act 2018, legislation framed to “improve the protections available to victims of domestic violence under both the civil and criminal law”. Among the new protections to be introduced in the act under the criminal law is the creation of a new offence – coercive control. This has been defined by the Department of Justice as “psychological abuse in an intimate relationship that causes fear of violence, or serious alarm or distress that has a substantial adverse impact on a person’s day-to-day activities”.

According to Justice Minister Charlie Flanagan: “The new offence of coercive control recognises that the effect of non-violent control in an intimate relationship can be as harmful to victims as physical abuse because it is an abuse of the unique trust associated with an intimate relationship.” Rebecca echoed the Minister’s sentiments. “Coercive control is a huge factor in domestic abuse cases. It can also be categorised as emotional or psychological abuse which was never really thought about before. Most people who come out of an abusive situation would have experienced psychological or emotional abuse. There’s no hierarchy of hurt that a person experiences, but coercive control would, in our experience, figure prominently in the experiences of both abused men and women.”

The new service will also work from a “children’s first” perspective and seeks to “enable children who experience domestic abuse, where possible, to remain safely in their own environment”.

According to Eithne: “The abused person doesn’t always get to stay in the family home. And our research showed that in a domestic abuse situation, in a majority of instances, it’s the women and children who have to leave the house, interrupting children’s routines, taking them away from their home, their friends and often leading to homelessness.” As a branch of this new service, a 10-week Domestic Violence Support and Development Group will be run by the Waterford Women’s Centre on Manor Street.

Said Rebecca: “This programme is for women who are no longer in an abusive situation, in which they can discuss how they’ve survived and coped after leaving a domestic abuse environment. It will also give them a chance to increase their knowledge through speaking to fellow survivors. Once you come out of a domestic abuse situation, it’s not the end of it as such: the impact of the abuse remains, it can have an impact on a woman and her children for a considerable period afterwards, particularly children because children are not merely observers, they’re also victims themselves, they don’t just witness it. There are other programmes out there for children such as TLC Kids, run by Oasis House, and we will be working closely with women and their children, and that’s where the Children’s First perspective comes in.”

Referral for the Outreach Programme are now being taken by Eithne and Rebecca. For those who may not have previously been in a position to access such supports, a new form of assistance is now there for those who seek it.

The Oasis House 24-hour helpline is 1890-264-364. You can also call 051-370367 or email outreach@oasishouse.ie The Waterford Women’s Centre can be reached via 051-351918 or www.waterfordwomenscentre.com.