



***Minister Says Increase In Number Of Mediation Services
Reflects Growing Demand From Couples Coping With Modern
Day Stresses & Pressures***

**Seamus Brennan Opens New Midlands Mediation Service
Offices In County Laois**

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D., said today that the rapid expansion in recent years of the Government funded Family Mediation Service - which helps couples who have decided to separate or divorce to negotiate their own terms of settlement - reflected the increasing demand for the service from those coping at particular times in their lives with enormous stress and pressure.

Minister Brennan announced that the number of Family Mediation Services run and funded through the Family Support Agency has now increased to 16 - compared with only two services, in Dublin and Limerick, less than a decade ago in 1998.

Minister Brennan said: "The Family Mediation Service is becoming increasingly important as a free, professional and confidential service that is a sensitive, yet vital, conduit in helping couples who have decided to divorce or separate to reach agreement on central issues such as post separation living arrangements and finances. But, most important of all, is the critical role it can play in the working out of agreed parenting arrangements that facilitate the children involved and allows them to retain close bonds with both parents."



Department of Social and Family Affairs

The Minister made his comments when opening the country's 16th Mediation Service offices in Portlaoise, Co. Laois. The opening of the new offices in Portlaoise is in response to the growing awareness of, and demand for, mediation services in the Midlands since the opening of the Mediation Service in Athlone in 1998. In addition to this office in Portlaoise, a centre in Letterkenny opened in June of this year to further expand the service in the North West.

Minister Brennan also released the most recent statistics for the numbers of people in Co. Laois who are benefiting from welfare entitlements and supports. In total, over 19,000 benefit, including some 10,914 people on a variety of welfare support schemes and 8,086 families who receive Child Benefit on behalf of 16,297 children. A breakdown of the welfare support schemes shows 1,980 on unemployment or jobseekers payments; 2,799 (State Pensions), Retirement Pension: (963), Pre-Retirement Pension (162), Disability Benefit/Allowance (1,870), Widow's & Widower's Pensions (1,719), One-Parent Family Payment: (971), Supplementary Welfare Allowance (292) Carer's Benefit/Allowance (362).

The Minister said that in 2005, through the Family Mediation Service, almost 1,500 couples were assisted when they sought advice on separation and the desire to reach agreement on many issues, especially the most important and sensitive area of all, the consequences for the child or children of their relationship.

Of those couples who finished the mediation process, 54% reached agreement. The figure of 1,500 couples assisted last year compares with an average of 250 couples a year who used the Service from 1986 to 1997 before its nationwide expansion.

A total of 42 staff are currently employed in FMS offices. There are four full-time offices in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway with part-time offices situated in Athlone, Blanchardstown, Castlebar, Dundalk, Letterkenny, Marino, Sligo, Tallaght, Tralee, Waterford, Wexford and, now Portlaoise.

Minister Brennan said: "In an increasingly pressurised society the role of family mediation services is of enormous importance in assisting couples who have decided to separate. We are living in a society that is full of pressures and increasing demands on individuals and families. Coping with these demands, pressures, and expectations can place enormous stress on couples and families.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Increasingly, research evidence is highlighting the considerable importance of mediation services for those who want to reach an agreed separation, and marriage and relationship counselling services and supports in assisting couples with difficulties and in assisting them in building new relationships. That is why having supports in place, and increasing awareness of the help that can be availed of, is so imperative. In the rapidly changing society we have in Ireland today such supports are of increasingly critical importance and the services they provide are invaluable."

Minister Brennan said that since it was established three years ago the Family Support Agency has gone from strength to strength and this was reflected in the commitment each year to further increases in funding. This year, funding from the Department of Social and Family Affairs has increased to over €28 million, more than 60% up on the funding level for 2004.

Minister Brennan also visited Kilkenny and called into the Social Welfare Local Office, the Citizens Information Centre and the Kilkenny Money Advice and Budgeting Service. He also was the guest of honour at the 10th anniversary celebrations of the Fr. McGrath Family Resource Centre.

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