



Minister Says Mediation Service Is Playing Vital Role In Helping Separating Couples Cope With Stress & Reach Agreement

Brennan Visits Midlands To Open New Family Mediation And Support Services In Athlone & Ballymahon

Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D., said today that there has been a significant increase in the numbers using the Family Mediation Service which is a free, professional and confidential service that assists couples who have decided to separate to reach agreement on a range of related issues.

Minister Brennan said that in situations where couples have decided that relationships are in serious difficulty, and a decision has been made to separate, the 14 Family Mediation Services run by the Family Support Agency - it will increase to 16 within months - is a vital conduit in helping both parties to reach agreement on central issues such as post separation living arrangements, finances, and parenting arrangements that facilitate children retaining close bonds with both parents, where possible.

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 consequences for the 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.



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Minister Brennan was speaking in Athlone, Co. Westmeath where he officially opened new Family Medication offices in the town. In Athlone, the Minister also visited staff in local Social Welfare offices as well as staff in the MABS and the Citizens Information Centre in the town.

Minister Brennan also officially opened the new Bridgeways Family Resource Centre in Ballymahon, Co. Longford which provides a range of community support services and links to advice agencies and groups.

Minister Brennan also released the most recent statistics for the numbers of people in Co. Westmeath and Co. Longford who are benefiting from welfare entitlements and supports. In Co. Westmeath, some 26,800 benefit, including more than 11,000 families who receive Child Benefit on behalf of over 22,000 children. In Co. Longford, almost 13,000 benefit, including 4,500 families with over 9,000 children.

** (Full details of welfare benefits in both counties are attached).*

In Athlone, Minister Brennan said: "In an increasingly pressurised society the role of family support and counselling services is of enormous importance in assisting couples who are coping with difficulties or have decided to reach a separation. 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.

Increasingly, research evidence is highlighting the considerable importance of 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."

The Family Support Agency's Family Mediation Service started operating in Athlone in October 1998 in the Citizen's Information Centre in St. Mary's Square. Demand for the service has been constant and continues to increase necessitating their move to new offices at Inish Carraig Business Centre.



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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, Marino, Sligo, Tallaght, Tralee, Waterford and Wexford.

Speaking in Ballymahon when opening the new Family Resource Centre, Minister Brennan said that local community groups around the country have a pivotal role to play in helping to addressing the needs of men, women and children in their locality who may be going through particularly stressful times in their lives.

Minister Brennan also confirmed that the target set by the Government under the National Development Plan of funding 100 Family Resource Centres by the end of 2006 will be delivered. There are currently 88 core-funded groups in the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme, with an additional three Resource Centres having recently signed contracts with the Agency. A further 9 groups have already been approved for inclusion in the Programme. Funding for the Programme has increased substantially from €317,500 in 1994 to over €12.9 million in 2006.

Minister Brennan said: "The Government recognises the critically important contribution that Resource Centres make to combating disadvantage and reaching out to the vulnerable and marginalised. The services provided by community resource groups, such as here in Ballymahon, are often emotional and practical lifelines for those who may be going through particularly traumatic situations and experiencing a range of problems that combine to leave them feeling isolated and powerless".

The Bridgeways Resource Centre has as its core objective the creation in the community of a safe and friendly environment where the needs of all participants are recognised. The town of Ballymahon has a population of 1,518 and a high proportion of local authority accommodation. The number of people in receipt of social welfare payments, including jobseekers, lone parent, invalidity and illness, as well as pensions, widows and carers, is in excess of 600 or 40% of the population.



It is intended that the Centre's support activities will include:

- Youth Development Activities (to provide space and activities for the young people that will support their development in every aspect of their lives).
- After Schools Project (to support young people in school who are particularly at risk of leaving school early).
- Supports for Older People (activities for older people particularly those confined to home and have little access to transport to overcome isolation and to live full and contented lives in their late years).
- Development of Project Premises (provide a premises that will be welcoming and accessible to all participants in the community).
- Support Groups (facilitate the setting up of two support groups, the Men's Development/Support Group and the Parent and Toddler Group).
- Lifelong learning & Development Courses & Development of voluntary management committee.



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* APPROXIMATE NUMBERS BENEFITING IN THE WESTMEATH AREA ARE DETAILED BELOW:

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| Unemployment Payments: | 3,658 |
| Old Age Pensions: | 3,386 |
| Retirement Pension: | 1,404 |
| Pre-Retirement Pension: | 118 |
| Disability Benefit/Allowance: | 2,364 |
| Widow's & Widower's Pensions: | 2,428 |
| One-Parent Family Payment: | 1,478 |
| Supplementary Welfare Allowance: | 433 |
| Carer's Benefit/Allowance: | 527 |
| Child Benefit recipients: | 11,028 families with 22,069 children |
| Total benefiting in Co Westmeath: | 26,824 |

* APPROXIMATE NUMBERS BENEFITING IN THE LONGFORD AREA ARE DETAILED BELOW:

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| Unemployment Payments: | 1,736 |
| Old Age Pensions: | 2,053 |
| Retirement Pension: | 574 |
| Pre-Retirement Pension: | 88 |
| Disability Benefit/Allowance: | 1,253 |
| Widow's & Widower's Pensions: | 1,206 |
| One-Parent Family Payment: | 709 |
| Supplementary Welfare Allowance: | 264 |
| Carer's Benefit/Allowance: | 378 |
| Child Benefit recipients: | 4,502 families with 9331 children |
| Total benefiting in Co Longford: | 11,763 |

Press Release Ends:

