



Speech

by

Mr Martin Cullen TD

Minister for Social and Family Affairs

at the official launch of the

Congress Centres Network booklet

"A Short Guide to the Irish Social Welfare System"

on Wednesday 23 January 2008

check against delivery

in the Gresham Hotel, Dublin , 1.30pm



Introduction

Ms Patricia McKeown, President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions;

Mr David Begg, General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions;

my colleague, Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Integration Policy, Mr Conor Lenihan TD;

representatives from the Embassy of the Republic of Poland and from any other Embassies present;

Mr Gerry Mangan, Director of the Office for Social Inclusion;

Ms Kathleen McCann, Programming Manager at the Congress Centres Network and any members of the Network who have travelled to be with us today;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank Patricia McKeown, President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), for her kind words of welcome and I am delighted to be here this lunchtime to launch at the invitation of the **Congress Centres Network**, their booklet "**A Short Guide to the Irish Social Welfare System**" which has been published today in five languages - English, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Russian.

Social security makes a major contribution to the well being of our citizens and other residents in Ireland. It is a system that has stood the test of time and it is estimated that in 2008 we will spend €17 billion on the services administered by the Department of Social and Family Affairs. We currently make weekly payments to over 1.5 million customers, including around 420,000 pensioners. Over 570,000 families receive child benefit in respect of approximately 1.1 million



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children. Over 4,800 staff administer the system. As such, therefore, it is in its totality and by far, the biggest social programme in the state.

This new free publication, which I am happy to launch here today, explains the kinds of payments and entitlements available within the Irish Social Welfare System; how they can be accessed and answers clearly and concisely questions such as what happens when you become unemployed or ill or you find yourself parenting alone. This publication should prove to be a very practical resource within the Network itself and all the people you assist, and among the statutory bodies, voluntary groups and non-governmental organisations.

The design of the booklet reflects high quality standards in terms of information provision and I congratulate all those involved in its production.

Congress Centres Network

Most of the Centres which make up the Congress Centres Network came into being as ICTU Centres for the Unemployed during the 1980s, a decade in which Ireland experienced sustained high levels of unemployment and emigration. These Centres were initially established by the trade union movement to provide support, resources and a range of services to growing numbers of unemployed workers, both trade union and non-trade union members. Over the years as you know, the Centres have become firmly embedded in their local communities and provide valuable services within those communities, with a particular focus on individuals and groups who may be experiencing marginalisation or social exclusion.

Today there are 25 Centres within the Congress Centres Network, located all over Ireland. Their core activities include the provision of high quality information, lifelong learning and employment-related services to a wide range of client groups. At national level, the Congress Centres Network is a Social Partner in its



own right, and is represented on a number of Social Partner bodies including the Community and Voluntary Pillar and the National Steering Group for "Towards 2016".

Work with migrants

As the economic and social climate in Ireland underwent rapid change in the 1990s, Centres had to adapt quickly to new circumstances in order to remain relevant, vibrant and viable. One of the most significant outcomes of our economic growth has been the rapid change in Ireland's status from a country of emigration to one of significant immigration. Since 1996, each year more people have entered our country than left it. Most of those migrating to Ireland are doing so in search of work, most recently in particular from the new European Union member states of Central and Eastern Europe.

In recent years, Congress Centres have been to the fore in providing information and support services to migrants and their families, and in advocating on their behalf. In doing so they have cooperated with national migrant organisations to help provide outreach services via their network to migrants throughout the country. Current services to migrants provided by Congress Centres include free and confidential information on social welfare entitlements, getting a job, employment rights, taxation, education and training, health and medical services, accommodation options and information about life in general in Ireland. Centres also provide much needed local meeting space and points of contact for migrants and their families in the localities. The Network has also worked closely with Congress and the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland to deliver rights and entitlement information seminars in a number of languages to groups of migrants around the country.



“A Short Guide to the Irish Social Welfare System”

One of the key challenges identified by Congress Centres and by migrants themselves is the problem of accessing clear, accurate and reliable information around complex issues in a variety of languages. While many migrants are working to improve their English language skills, these may not be sufficiently developed to allow them to access key information such as how the Irish Social Welfare system works. This in turn can put them at risk of unnecessary hardship, marginalisation and even exploitation.

Within the migrant population accessing Congress Centres, Polish, Lithuanians, Latvians and Russians have been identified by the Congress Centres Network as among the most common and widespread nationalities. The most recent Census figures suggest that there are over 63,000 Polish people, around 25,000 Lithuanians, 14,000 Latvians and 5,000 Russians living in Ireland at present.

I fully endorse the importance of developing services to a population base that is more diverse than a decade ago, one which presents new and different challenges and calls on us all to be more innovative in finding solutions. As a result, my Department has been delighted to provide the necessary funding to the Congress Centres Network to publish this “Short Guide to the Irish Social Welfare System” in English, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Russian. I am confident that these guides, which I understand will be distributed widely, will enhance information already available and will promote a greater understanding of and access to, rights and entitlements around Social Welfare provision.

Cooperation with the Department

The publication of these guides is the latest achievement in what has been a lengthy and positive relationship between the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Congress Centres Network, particularly in terms of Social Welfare



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information provision. Building on the successes of our collaboration to date, we look forward to a fruitful future association to help meet the challenges we face in continuing to build an economically and socially inclusive society in the years to come. I know too that the Network receives funding support from the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Fás.

I am delighted that my colleague **Minister of State, Conor Lenihan TD** is here today. Having a Government Minister specifically focusing on **Integration Policy** is indicative of the importance of this area of work and of the Government's commitment to serve the continuing social, cultural and economic aspirations of our immigrant population.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to congratulate the Congress Centres Network on the publication of these booklets and for the work they are doing with migrants and other groups within our communities across Ireland.

In particular I would like to thank **Patricia McKeown**, President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions; **David Begg**, Congress General Secretary for the continuing support given by Congress to the work of the Congress Centres Network around the country; and **Kathleen McCann**, Programming Manager at the Network and her colleagues for the publication of these booklets.

It gives me great pleasure now ladies and gentlemen to officially launch the "Short Guide to the Irish Social Welfare System".

Thank you all very much.

ENDS