

CITYWIDE DRUGS CRISIS CAMPAIGN

IMPACT OF COVID19 ON PEOPLE IN ADDICTION

Context of COVID19 for people in addiction.

- People in addiction are vulnerable at multiple levels including underlying health issues, mental health, social marginalisation, higher economic and social vulnerabilities, criminalisation and stigma.
- Community Drug Projects aim to provide an accessible, inclusive, and safe space where people who are in addiction are supported to reduce the harms of their drug use and to address the broader issues relating to their addiction.
- The support provided through the Projects and through organisations like NA and AA is essential to people's stability, recovery and abstinence. The impact of COVID19 has temporarily limited access to these safe spaces at a time of increased vulnerability.
- People are now trying to manage their addiction in homes that are often overcrowded, where family relationships are under strain, or in situations of isolation distant from family and friends. A significant number of people in addiction are homeless and living in hostels.

Feedback from Community Drug Projects on impact of COVID19.

- Dual diagnosis is a major issue for people in addiction and the combined pressure of coping with scaled back services and being confined to the home is leading to a significant deterioration in people's mental health.
- People are likely to use more drugs to help them to cope with the pressures and drug use may become more chaotic and increasingly risky, making people less likely to comply with the current COVID19 restrictions. Projects have become aware of people going through withdrawals without appropriate supports and/or detoxing inappropriately by using different medications.
- Projects are reporting a noticeable increase in domestic violence as a result of confinement in the home; this includes violence against women and against adult parents by young men. Increased levels of drug use can contribute to increased physical risk and danger that can be potentially life-threatening.
- Parents in addiction are finding it increasingly difficult to manage the care of their children without the supports that are normally in place i.e. provision of hot meals by schools, supports for children with special needs, afterschool services and homework clubs. Grandparents who are often a vital source of support are less available due to COVID 19 restrictions.
- There are reports of a significant rise in alcohol use in the home and of people congregating in public spaces to use drugs and alcohol. Some of this communal drug and alcohol use is seen as linked to boredom arising from the increase in unemployment, with every other social outlet shut down.
- The insecurity of drug supply resulting from COVID19 can be a major challenge for people in addiction. Disruption to the usual supply channels can lead to stockpiling, to people managing withdrawal without proper support, switching to different drugs based on what is available and also to ignoring COVID19 restrictions in order to access drugs.
- There are reports of drug debts being called in at this time, with all of the serious implications that brings for people in relation to intimidation and violence.

Responding to the issues impacting on people in addiction.

Community Drug Projects are committed to providing the services that are essential to the well-being of people in addiction, insofar as they possibly can, during this period of the COVID19 emergency. They have put in place a range of responses to ensure that they remain in contact with people who are vulnerable, including both individually targeted resources for people to use at home and access for people to group sessions online, where that is possible. This work must be prioritised in our national response and the projects have identified a number of key actions that would support them in carrying out their work and contribute to protecting people in addiction during this time of heightened vulnerability and risk.

Actions required for the covid19 emergency period

HSE to have clear protocols in place to ensure that medical and addiction specialists work together effectively on the treatment of any patient admitted with COVID 19 who is in addiction.

HSE and DSP to commit to responding positively to any additional costs that Community Drug Projects may incur when providing outreach services, in particular the cost of increased phone bills for project staff and of phone credit including data, for project participants.

Dept of Housing to cover the cost of making free Wifi available in all hostels so that people can have access to online supports that are being made available by Projects.

HSE Community Mental Health Services to link in with Community Drug Projects to provide pro-active outreach supports to people in addiction.

HSE to liaise with Community Drug Projects that operate in rural areas to ensure there is stability and certainty around access to methadone and other essential services relating to their addiction.

Dept of Justice/Túsla to ensure funding is available to provide refuge space that is appropriate for physical distancing and to liaise with HSE re protocols on access for people in addiction.

An Garda Síochána (AGS) to ensure that training on domestic violence has been provided to all gardai, including new recruits, who will be on the streets during the COVID 19 crisis and that all Gardaí have with them information about local domestic violence services.

Irish Prison Service to put in place adequate phone capacity to facilitate community support services in maintaining their one-to-one work with people in addiction who are in prison.

AGS to ensure that drug awareness training has been provided to all gardai, including new recruits, who will be on the streets and to task them with prioritising the health and safety of people in addiction over the seizure of drugs during this public health crisis.

Local Authorities to invite Drug and Alcohol Task Forces to become members of the Community Response Forums to provide the expertise required in providing community supports for people in addiction during the COVID19 crisis.