

## **WE NEED PEOPLE LIKE: ANNE O'BRIEN, FOCUS IRELAND**

Caring- At What Cost?

IMPACT's Caring - at what cost? campaign is now taking the needs of community and voluntary sector workers directly to those with influence over financing the sector. The campaign has now concluded its pre-budget advocacy work and is entering into a period of high-level lobbying. As this engagement begins, it is essential that key decision-makers understand what their choices mean for the lives of workers on the ground. Front line staff have been continually asked to do more for less in very challenging circumstances. The community and voluntary sector has shouldered the burden of disproportionate cuts through the years of fiscal crisis. Homeless services worker Anne O'Brien reveals some of what that means for the staff, as they continue to provide vital services to our communities.



**We spoke to Anne O'Brien a Social Care Worker with Focus Ireland. We started by asking her to outline her typical workday. Here's what she told us:**

*"What we do for the most part is work with very, very vulnerable people who for some reason or another (more often than not through no fault of their own) need support to survive.*

*"A typical day for me could be anything from escorting an elderly person to the health clinic, to helping people with serious mental health problems deal with the normal obstacles of life - conditions like diabetes, a death in the family, suicide.*

*"I could then come back to support a mother whose children are being taken into care, and then an hour later be sitting with someone to discuss their increasing drug issues. Then an hour later I could be supporting someone in reconnecting with family, after that I could be changing someone's quilt because they can't do it themselves."*

**We then asked Anne whether she felt she and her colleagues were personally invested in the work they do at Focus and whether they had made any personal sacrifices to protect service levels in the face of severe cutbacks. She said:**

*“It’s very rare in the areas that I particularly work in that you would meet somebody who is not committed, on a personal level.*

*Anybody I have worked with does everything in their power to prevent cutbacks impacting on services. It could be that, because your income is so low, you can’t afford extra childcare so you’re looking for neighbours at the last minute to make sure your children are sorted and there is no acknowledgement of that. The wages we are on have never gone up in line with inflation or rent, so the sacrifices you have to make.*

*We’ve even noticed recently the type of lunches people are having, the clothes they are wearing - people are not going out to lunch, they are not buying clothes. Everybody is struggling to get to pay day. It’s just not enough for a very basic standard of living. We are not looking for anything exorbitant, we just want to be able to live.*

*It can be very stressful. Sometimes in this line of work you will prioritise individuals you work with over your own family. It’s not a case of doing it because you want to be a martyr or a hero, it’s because there is nobody else there to do it.*

*Over the past couple of years we have seen a big increase in sick days. I believe a lot of this has to do with stress.*

*the only thing that is keeping staff where they are is that in our line of work we are inclined to work for organisations that are in line with our own personal values. That is what motivates most people. It’s your commitment to the individuals you are working with”.*

**Next, we asked her if she felt that politicians and legislators understood the kind of work that organizations like Focus Ireland do. Here’s what she told us:**

*“They have no comprehension of it. They really don’t. An awful lot of our services are services that are provided by us because they are not provided by the Government. They are very specific services that are not being provided.*

*If the Community and Voluntary Sector stopped functioning in the morning I think there would be chaos.”*

**Then we asked her whether she had noticed colleagues in the Community and Voluntary Sector looking out for opportunities in other sectors where terms and conditions are improving. She said:**

*“We are hemorrhaging really really good staff. We are all degree level, minimum. More than 60% in my office are Masters level. We know we would earn more somewhere else.*

*Everyday colleagues look at jobs websites. Every single day. It’s got to a point where you’ll even get emails from other colleagues saying have you seen such and such a job that would be ideal for you. On a daily basis I would say 90% of my colleagues, at least, look at job websites. We are looking at it for one another, we’re not just looking for ourselves.”*