

THE CHILDREN'S LAW CENTRE

Using the Law to Promote, Protect,
and Realize Children's Rights

The Children's Law Centre in Belfast (CLC)

was founded on the principles contained within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, specifically that children have the right to have their voices heard in all matters concerning them.

In Northern Ireland, where the next generations of children are emerging from decades of sectarian conflict, there are still many matters to be addressed. For too long, sectarian issues diverted attention away from addressing concerns around the mental, social, and physical well-being of Northern Ireland's children. Today, the CLC is at the forefront of these issues.

Connect magazine sat down with Kathryn Stevenson, Head of Legal Services at Children's Law Centre along with Paddy Kelly, the Director and Founder of the Centre to learn about their work and how a grant from The Ireland Funds will assist the CLC in providing training, outreach clinics and accessible information to parents of children with special educational needs.



Kathryn
Stevenson,
*Head of Legal
Services*



Paddy Kelly,
*Founder &
Director*

Q. How did you start the Children's Law Centre?

Paddy: In 1995, as we were emerging from our conflict here in Northern Ireland, there was a realization that while human rights was a big issue during the conflict, children's rights had very little focus. Our children had suffered as a result of the conflict, yet there was no framework to actually address some of those deficits in terms of children's rights because children's rights are human rights.

So a group of people managed to get together and get a very small amount of funding, and I set up the Center in 1997 with two staff members. The idea was to have a multidisciplinary team, using the law to improve children's lives.

Q. How do you serve children today?

Paddy: Through our free phone legal advice line, we provide advice and help individual children, but we also monitor what is wrong with the way society treats children. We listen to children with mental health needs, or children who can't access education, or children who are suffering discrimination because they're disabled. We take strategic cases where we change the law by setting precedent or by engaging with government. We're always hoping not to improve the life of an individual child, but all children.

We are often the voice that guides government on how they should change their policies to ensure that all children benefit from proper health-care and educational support and access to child appropriate mental health services. We also have a group of young people who are peer advocates.

Kathryn: The Ireland Funds will be helping us advocate for children who have special educational needs. There are 74,000 children with special educational needs in Northern Ireland. In 2014/15, CLC dealt with 590 advice issues relating to children with SEN and the numbers are rising.

Q. How will support from The Ireland Funds impact children with special educational needs?

Paddy: The biggest issue that we get calls about is the child's right to education. This is particularly significant for children with additional learning support needs, disability and mental health needs. It's also really important because education is the single biggest determinate in terms of future life chances. The money we've received from The Ireland Funds is going to be so critical for those children and young people. We are conscious that in areas where children are living in poverty, children and families may not know we exist. They won't be able to come to our Center or even know to lift the phone to call our helpline.

So what we're doing with the grant from The Ireland Funds is to go out to those communities. To reach out to them and say this is the type of service we have. To go to groups who are working with parents of children with additional needs, whether it's autism, Asperger's, ADHD or another need and support them to get whatever facilities or services their children are entitled to.

Q. You also focus strongly on mental health needs in Northern Ireland?

Paddy: Our Peer Advocates, young people who are in the community and on the ground, did a piece of research recently that revealed a scary statistic which was that 27% of our children here have identified as having mental health needs. Families who have been most impacted by the conflict tend to be in areas that are socio-economically deprived. They don't have safe parks or sufficient community resources. So these are very vulnerable children. The lack of services and support for children with mental health needs is staggering. Less than 8% of the total mental health budget is spent

on children. That's despite the fact that children make up nearly 24% of our population. Both Protestant and Catholic areas are affected. There are a high number of young people taking their own lives. Parents have suffered loss as a result of the conflict. Some parents have been in prison. Mental health issues are compounded by poverty and those areas have not benefited from our peace process.

Q. So help us understand—how does a child come to you?

Kathryn: Children and families often have difficulty in accessing friendly legal advice. At the Children's Law Centre, we have a dedicated Mental Health Solicitor. We empower children to be involved in their own cases. There's one regional child and adolescent inpatient facility for mental health assessment and treatment, based in Belfast. It serves the whole population of Northern Ireland. There's another facility that we work closely with, which deals with children who have severe learning difficulties and mental health needs. So with those two units, we will go in and we will meet with the young people. We will take their instructions and we will advise them in relation to their case and we will also assess whether or not they're in a position to give us legal instructions. We will support their families, we will meet with their parents, and sometimes their grandparents and we will provide legal support.

Paddy: The other thing that's just an example of what we are trying to do in terms of mental health links in to homelessness. We had a case involving a young person who came from a very troubled family really should have been looked after as a vulnerable young person. He had been living in transitional accommodation but had identified with his doctor that he had mental health needs. So he was admitted into a mental health facility for a short period for medical assessment.

What nobody had told him was that once he'd gone in there, he'd lose his place in the accommodation he was in. He was only 16. He became homeless and was a very troubled and vulnerable young person. So our Mental Health Solicitor took that case to the High Court. Kathryn and her colleagues set a legal precedent in this case. As a result, there is now clarity regarding the duty that Northern Ireland's health and social care providers have to assess and accommodate all homeless 16 and 17 year olds. So that one case changed the lives of a huge number of children.

Q. What makes you different from other law resources?

Kathryn: We're proud that we have very positive feedback from parents and also from professionals. We're a not for profit organization so we won't always go for the jugular, just to take the case. What we'll try to do first is mediate. We have very strong, established relationships with health and education professionals, including mental health professionals and also with a large number of stake holder organizations who are involved in strategic partnerships in relation to children with disability. We get a lot of referrals in from other agencies who will say, "We've tried to solve this problem but you have the legal expertise. What would CLC do? Can we refer this client to CLC?" There's minimal legal aid for many of the cases we take on. Therefore it's not lucrative for private practitioners to engage and do this type of work. So we provide that service and fill that gap.

We have a reputation now. We have a highly qualified and experienced staff. We don't take vexatious cases, we don't make vexatious complaints. When the authorities get a letter saying we're threatening proceedings, they realize there must be an issue here, and there will be an engagement. They know that we can take it through.