



LEITRIM CALLING

THE IRELAND FUNDS IS HELPING FIGHT ELDERLY ISOLATION ACROSS IRELAND, ONE PHONE CALL AT A TIME.

Leitrim Calling is a friendly confidential telephone call support service available to older and vulnerable persons primarily across south of Co. Leitrim and its borders. Here, Marion Quigley, Co-Founder of Leitrim Calling shares how its services change the lives of older people.

Our service was set up in 2007 following a review of the 2006 Census figures which cited Leitrim as having a high percentage of older people living alone – 12.5% which was higher than the then national average of 8.2%. This reality was, in fact, the spring board for our decision to explore if we could in some way respond to this growing concern of rural isolation. This also coincided with a time when many young people within the communities had to emigrate for employment due to the country's financial uncertainty. In establishing the service of Leitrim Calling we sought to address the loneliness and rural isolation experienced by older people in Leitrim.

With the support of our area Health Service Executive, we began from very humble beginnings with 7 referrals for the service operating then 2 mornings per week. At the end of 2019 we had approximately 100 service-users, operational Monday to Friday, all bank holidays, through all holiday periods and anyone who is alone on Christmas Day receives a call from us.

The Power of The Ireland Funds Small Grants Award

Our relationship with The Ireland Funds began around 2014 when we made an application for a Small Grant Award to train additional volunteers in response to the rise in our service-user numbers. Between 2014 to 2018, we have received Small Grants of €4700 supporting us primarily around the very important work of volunteer management. The support from The Ireland Funds facilitated us to take on additional volunteers, provide them with training and further upskilling as required in specific areas such as bereavement support and early dementia support. Our service is always alert to the additional needs clients may have and we are very cognizant of the importance of early interventions. However, to provide that early intervention would not have been possible without the grants from The Ireland Funds to support us to, in turn, support our volunteers with additional and vital training.

Simplicity is Strength

The Ireland Funds has assisted us to deliver a service which not only checks in with people on a daily basis, but the additional training provided to our volunteers allowed us to bring our service to a higher level. It has been so heartening to listen to our service-users tell us what our service means to them.

It is true to say that Leitrim Calling is not only a calling/talking service, but also equally a listening service and I believe it is this practice that contributes to the success of our organization. What matters to our clients matters to us, and we are constantly moved and heartened by the trust our service-users place in us. The concept is quite simple, we both talk and listen; in fact, as one Mental Health Professional cited at an event – our simplicity is our strength. We have had tremendous success over the years with the caliber of volunteers who support our service – their dedication, loyalty and genuine commitment to care and empathy can never be underestimated.



The Pandemic Presents New Challenges

When COVID-19 imploded into people's lives in early March, Leitrim Calling changed overnight both in the necessity to move the service to a remote model and to address the immediate increased demand for our support. Local day centers and Active Age Groups across our counties had to close, so clients from those centers were directed to our service so that they would receive a phone call from us to keep an interaction and a sense of connection with people who were now placed in a situation of fear, confusion and uncertainty. We were in a situation where we had no opportunity to plan, we had to act immediately and respond. By now, our hours had extended, with call-backs for persons who were very frightened in how their lives had changed overnight. For some, our calls are literally the only constant in terms of connectedness that people have.

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Our service-user base has increased overnight by **60%** and it is steadily rising.

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Our regular client base of **85** clients overnight reached **145**

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Our weekly call output went from approximately **350** calls to over **450**

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At these numbers we would estimate annually a phone calling rate of over **23,000** phone calls.

Our local Gaelic Athletic Association sent out a call on our behalf for local volunteers and the response was so encouraging. Our volunteer call-out was responded to by students, teachers, people whose businesses had closed, Psychology students whose jobs were put on hold, parents working in the home and many others. It was, without doubt, very heartening.

Of course, due to our limited office space working remotely was the only way forward for us as a service. This necessitated providing all volunteers (19 at our highest peak) with mobile phones to carry out the phone calls. We needed to not only manage and support our now increased client base, but we needed to provide additional supports. We were in a daily situation of responding to different crises as they arose. When we realized that this was not a passing situation, we looked at our financial situation. In addition to the extra work in managing our increased client base we also needed to outlay costs (which we did not have) to train the new additional volunteers and ensure that they could confidently work remotely.

The Ireland Funds COVID-19 Response

As Coordinator of the service I approached The Ireland Funds to enquire as to whether there was any funding we could look to for support. I was received with a great sense of empathy and interest that we have, in fact, always experienced from our interactions with The Ireland Funds. Our concerns were listened to.

Within a short time, The Ireland Funds' team reverted to me. We received €3500 from The Ireland Funds to support our identified needs. Throughout the process I found the team so helpful, courteous and supportive. They were always on hand to answer any questions we had and the entire process resulting in the grant reaching our account was carried out in a very timely manner. We are extremely grateful for this support and for The Ireland Funds, again, placing trust in us.

We have trained our volunteers and trained additional volunteers, as some of our initial team had to return to their day jobs in September and we have a very good support system in place to manage our service-users. Some of our new (now permanent) service-users who came to us due to the COVID-19 pandemic have formed beautiful relationships with our volunteers. They have built up a great trust in our volunteers and in return our volunteers have gone above and beyond to be available and supportive to them.

Going Forward

We are obviously conscious and concerned with the realization that this situation is not going to change any time soon. People refer to it as a 'new normal'. While I consider it new, it is not normal. It will be a long time before our clients will feel confident to return to centers which were so much part of their lives and this is a sad reality. I see Leitrim Calling having a very significant role in supporting our clients as they transition to whatever kind of future lies ahead.

I see a great need for financial support to enable us continue supporting our clients and our volunteers.

While we are a much-valued service, we have never had the opportunity to invest money in service promotion other than through small local advertisements. It is a further source of gratitude on our behalf to The Ireland Funds to be afforded the opportunity to get our story out there to the wider audience.

Thank You

Over the years, the support from The Ireland Funds enabled us to take on additional volunteers and provide them with a very high standard of training and upskilling as required.

When the pandemic entered our lives, The Ireland Funds was there for us – it listened to our worries and with its support and financial assistance we were able to address our immediate concerns i.e. the fact that our volunteer base trebled – we were able to train our additional volunteers and are now training more volunteers who have replaced the initial group that has returned to college or work. We are also able to manage our increased client base journey through this difficult path by responding to the additional needs for support that have arisen since COVID-19.

We are exceptionally grateful to The Ireland Funds – your support, assistance care and for your genuine interest in our service.

