

## **ONE - 2020**

**By**

**Colm Campbell Chairperson Board of Directors ONE**

The origins Óglaigh Náisiúnta na hÉireann (ONE) are indelibly connected with the Defence Forces whose own geneses lie with the foundation of the Irish Volunteers, Óglaigh na hÉireann, in the Rotunda Rink in Dublin in November 1913. The first thirty-eight years of the Defence Forces existence was marked by the achievement of independence, a divisive Civil War, mobilisation during WW2, and demobilisation of the Forces in the post Emergency period. ONE was formed to address the consequences of that demobilisation in the middle of the twentieth century on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1951 in the Mansion House, and has evolved into a charity that seeks to address the needs of veterans in the twenty-first century. These needs are complex and varied and because we use the collective term veterans, there is a danger that these essential requirements are wrapped up into a nice neat parcel. Generalisation is dangerous because it takes complicated issues and turns them into easy superficial figures of speech. The needs of our veterans developed from difficult situations, and the circumstances in which some veterans now find themselves are both real and challenging.

Every one of our veterans, whether Permanent or Reserve, volunteered to join the Defence Forces to defend our country, to protect vulnerable communities at home and overseas, and to support the other institutions of state. History teaches us that defence and security doesn't just happen. It demands people of character and competence. It requires sacrifice, and generations of men and women willing to volunteer to serve their country at home and overseas. A plaque at the Korean War Memorial in Washington has the following inscription "Our nation honours her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met." We could use those same words about the volunteers who served in the Congo, Cyprus, Sinai, Lebanon, Syria, the Mediterranean and the many other missions around the world in which our veterans have served. This year is the sixtieth anniversary of the deployment of the Defence Forces to the Congo. A total of about six thousand Irish soldiers served in ONUC (Opération des Nations Unies au Congo) between 1960 and 1964, of whom twenty-six lost their lives. The largest loss of life was in Niemba on 08 November 1960 when nine members of an eleven-man patrol were killed. ONE honours their sacrifice annually and will do so again this year on 07 November 2020 in Cathal Brugha Barracks. We also honour their memory in how we care for our fellow veterans in their time of need.

Our Patron, Michael D. Higgins Uachtarán na hÉireann referred to the spirit of comradeship in an address on 11th September 2019 in Áras an Uachtaráin when he stated that

“The spirit of camaraderie and solidarity among serving and retired soldiers, sailors and Air Corps personnel is an innate and vital part of the culture of serving in the Defence Forces.”

The President went on to state that “It is something I have witnessed. I have, for example, had the privilege of visiting Brú na bhFiann, the residence for homeless former members of the Defence Forces. On the occasion I visited, I was moved by the spirit of kindness, compassion and solidarity ... in looking after their comrades and in extending that work into the local community.” He further stated that “Your shared experience gives you perhaps a unique empathy and a deep understanding that men and women who have given so much in the service of the state should not have to experience such difficulty.” The difficulties referred to by our Patron were exacerbated during the pandemic but ONE Hostels continued to operate in line with Government and HSE guidelines and directions. Our hostels have always worked to the highest standard possible and it is those very standards that enabled them to sustain the high quality of service that they continue to provide for our veterans. We owe the staff of our hostels a deep debt of gratitude.

Robert W Cox, a Canadian Political Scientist, advanced the argument that there are three categories of forces that interact in a structure: capabilities; ideas; and the institution. ONE constantly examines its capabilities to support veterans and details of further developments will be outlined later in this article. There is no shortage of ideas in ONE and the challenge lies in implementing the multitude of very good ones. The last element is the institution itself. Institutions have a predisposition to stay the same and take on a life of their own. ONE is resisting that by continually evolving, challenging itself to do more, and not standing still. ONE lives through action rather than relying on words. That action is represented in its foundation in the post Emergency period, the opening of its current three hostels, the development of fifteen veterans support centres and thirty - six branches nationwide, its plans for additional hostels, and other support for our veterans in its new Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. ONE is a positive organisation, marked by a willingness not to blame others for the plight of our homeless veterans. Instead we have a host of volunteers and professional staff wanting to find solutions and accepting, in the spirit of comradeship, responsibility for their fellow veteran. Instead of asking questions about what others are doing, we must continuously challenge ourselves to do more.

ONE would love to forecast an end to the plight of homeless veterans but we believe the situation will continue to dis-improve. That is why we are constantly developing our services. Since January 2020, ONE has

- Increased the number of rooms for homeless veterans from thirty to thirty-five in Brú na bhFiann. The number of rooms provided is subject to the terms of a Service Level Agreement between ONE and Dublin Regional Homeless Executive and is not an arbitrary figure.
- Developed an Ante Room (Day Room) in Brú na bhFiann for residents.
- Employed a Veterans Support Officer to develop a counselling service in Brú na bhFiann for veterans in partnership with the HSE.
- Continued to improve the seven-bedroom facilities in Beechwood House Letterkenny and Custume House Athlone.
- Progressed the development of a further hostel in Cobh with five bedrooms for homeless veterans co-located with a Veterans Support Centre. A long-term lease has been taken out for the building with the Office of Public Works (OPW). Plans have been approved and the project is now out to tender. The development of a similar facility in Cork City (six bedrooms) is being considered, leading to the availability of sixty single bedrooms for homeless veterans countrywide.
- Furthered the development of fifteen Veteran Support Centres, eleven of which are located within a Defence Forces' installation, with four located outside - Athy, Cavan, Cobh and Limerick. The Programme for Government, which was agreed on 15 June 2020, provides policy imprimatur for our Veteran Support Centres.
- Completed a training/education course for Branch Welfare Officers in February 2020. ONE conducted four Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Courses in 2019, two courses in Dublin, one in Galway and another in Cobh. These courses are funded by the Leopardstown Park Hospital Trust and are open to veterans from all organisations. Sixty-three veterans trained as MHFA in 2019 and are operating throughout the country. Further training/education courses will take place when conditions allow.
- Cooperated with Section 38 Hospitals to create a pathway for veterans who need long-term care. The first Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed with the Royal Hospital Donnybrook in 2019. Having met the Leopardstown Park Hospital Board together with IUNVA and ARCO, an MOU is being developed

between the Hospital and ONE. Discussions had also commenced with Clontarf Hospital but an arranged meeting was postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

- Initiated a strategy to ensure that ONE is a diverse and inclusive Veteran's Organisation that draws from the breadth of those who served in the Defence Forces; gains strength from that range of knowledge, experience and talent; and welcomes, respects and values the unique contribution of every individual.

Finance is required to support many of the foregoing initiatives, however all of the usual fundraising events were cancelled or postponed due to COVID-19. This includes the Annual Fuchsia Appeal, Flag Days, Church Gate collections, etc. The Annual Veterans Ball, organised by the Swan-batt Group and which normally raises around €10,000 for development work in Brú na bhFiann, cannot take place in 2020. New fundraising initiatives will be launched and your enduring support is deeply appreciated. In conclusion, the magnificent work of the staff and members of ONE during the pandemic is deeply appreciated. Together with veterans of other organisations, they have provided outstanding support to other veterans and the wider community. The pandemic has reminded us about the value of comradeship and that the services of ONE are now more relevant than ever.