

Support After Homicide marks 20 years service to Families of Homicide Victims

On June 7th 2016 **Support After Homicide**, a victim support organisation, marked 20 years of a dedicated service for families bereaved by homicide. The event took place at the Mansion House, Dublin with both past and present members in attendance alongside a number of noted eminent facilitators for the victim support organisation.

Speakers:

Lord Mayor of Dublin; Críona Ni Dhalaigh.

Tánaiste, Minister for Justice and Equality; Ms Frances Fitzgerald TD.

Garda Commissioner; Noirin O'Sullivan.

Director of Public Prosecutions; Claire Loftus.

Victims Rights Alliance; Maria McDonald BL.

Margaret O'Quigley, Chairperson : Welcome address

Michael O'Neill, Hon President; Master of Ceremonies

For the first time in the history of the state all the key stakeholders involved in service provision to victims of crime were brought together in one location. It was a very positive event, highlighting the changes which had taken place over the years, regarding families' needs and rights. All speakers recognised and focused on the importance of collaboration and co-operation between the stakeholders as vital in maintaining the necessary level of service provision. Final speaker, Maria McDonald BL, spoke about the Victims Rights Bill currently before the Oireachtas, emphasising the importance of provision of statutory rights to victims adopting a uniform approach across the EU.

In her address, Chairperson Margaret O'Quigley said, Support After Homicide is a national voluntary organisation which operates without premises or paid staff. Its' team of professionally trained volunteers provide support throughout the Republic of Ireland, confidentially, free of charge. To date it has never had a waiting list, something which members are very proud of. The time spent supporting a family typically ranges from 2 to 3 years.

She said "the members give of their services willingly; that It may also be said in return the members feel it is a great privilege to work with those bereaved in such a tragic way. Our members are very special people and come from different parts of the country. There is one thing all volunteers would say: that they are in awe of the great courage and incredible strength that clients show in coming to terms with the horrific crime of murder. It is our policy to support the work of the Gardai; we recognise that families need reassurance and also need to have confidence in the judicial system. We see our work as complementing the garda role."

In President's address, Michael O'Neill, provided some statistics, giving recent figures for years 2012 – 2015:

- SAH provided support to 112 families, supporting 1611 people.
- Over 5000 hours of support provided voluntarily.
- In 2015 volunteers using their own transport travelled 18,483 miles in the provision of support to families.

Mr O'Neill welcomed positive changes to victim support provision since 1996, which the organisation had actively supported:

- Family rooms at court.
- Reserved seating for families at court.
- Creation of position of Press Ombudsman.
- Prosecution barrister facilitating family briefing.
- DPP will now give reasons for a decision not to prosecute.
- Family Liaison Officer training much improved.
- Victim Impact Statement, extended to homicide victims families.
- Victim Liaison provision with the Irish Prison Service for victim's families.
- SAH is a founding member of the Victim Rights Alliance (VRA)

Mr O'Neill said the needs of families hadn't changed; they are broad and varied. The needs alter depending on what stage a person is at in their grieving or the stage of the criminal justice process.

Families need:

- Clear accurate information
- To be heard and understood
- To have as much information as possible about the death and subsequent events
- To be kept informed – even if there is no news “or nothing happening”, families need to know this.
- To have their needs met at different stages of the bereavement process and the different stages of the criminal justice process

In his closing remarks, Mr O'Neill paid tribute to statutory bodies and individuals who supported the organisation over the years, acknowledging the role they played in supporting and enabling the organisation to reach this milestone.

Also he thanked representatives from colleague organisation AdVIC who by their presence, shared in the event, representing all Irish families bereaved by homicide.

Tribute was paid to Angela Driscoll MIACP, an early supervisor of the fledgling organisation, who helped to create the volunteers' identity and affirm them in their role and also provided induction and ongoing training to members over many years.

To finish, floral tributes were presented to three people who participated in the first training course, and who are still active in the area of homicide support

Ann Meade MBE, whose brainchild this service was

Rita O'Quigley: now Trainer and Supervisor

Lorraine Stack, now Inspector, Garda Victim Liaison Office, and integral to the GARDA FLO service for families.