

Thank you for inviting me to your conference.

I am here today speaking on behalf of the Leader Alliance. The Leader Alliance was established to campaign against proposed cuts by the Government to the Personal Assistant service. As a group we have had our PA funding cut each year since 2008. I myself have been using a PA since I was 18. It was then I became a Leader, a leader is the term used within the independent living movement to describe that of a person who is employer/line manager of Personal assistants. The whole philosophy of independent living came to Ireland in 1992 and supported people with disabilities to move out of residential care and live within their communities in their own homes. As a result of having personal assistants this has enabled me to move out of my family home and live independently within my own home. I live in a two bed apartment in Portmarnock with the aid of 4 personal assistants, quite simply for me my personal assistants are my arms and legs. They enable me to do tasks that would otherwise be impossible and contribute to society. I work on a volunteer basis with an Air Corp charity with the assistance of my PA's who drive me to and from different meetings. The Government have cut over 14% in our PA funding in the last 4 years and are still proposing more cuts and it is a real fear of PA users that they will be further cut. PAs have taken a cut in wages several times over a number of years.

Our worst fears came true on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 2012, when it was announced by the HSE that €10 million was to be slashed, this would have meant up to a 50% reduction in Personal assistant hours so as a result the leader alliance decided that we should take to the streets and protest against this barbaric cut that could only have serious consequences for my life and many others. On Tuesday the 4<sup>th</sup> of September myself and my PA set out to government buildings to unite with other leaders in what I saw to be our biggest battle since I became a leader. I have to say I was delighted to see so many people had turned up, as so many times people with disabilities because of the nature of their disabilities cannot attend

such gatherings and ironically don't always have the PA hours to attend such events. When I arrived there I did a couple of interviews with some reporters, in the back of my mind I was half prepared to potentially stay all evening as this was something we as a group had discussed before. Around 7pm that evening Minister Reilly's own secretary came out and asked for a delegation from the group to go in and discuss the issue with the minister. 3 members of the alliance went in to Government Buildings. While this group were doing the negotiating, other Leaders from the Alliance spoke to the media. The media got wind that there was a meeting with the minister. Around 9pm it was stated on the RTE website that there had been a climb down and that Personal assistant services would not be cut. Our delegation came back out to the group and it was decided that whoever could and wanted to would stay out over night, this was very much a matter of principle as far as I and other members were concerned as it is very easy for the minister to say we won't be touched but to actually put it in writing is a different thing. I for one was not moving until we had that letter, as this is not a minor matter this is about my life. So we settled down for the night, 9 of us in total stayed out overnight I had sent my PA home to get a blanket and a sleeping bag as I knew it was going to be a long night. Thankfully it was a dry night so someone up there was looking after us. I have to say that I and as a group we were really struck by how generous the wider public was during the night, we had people bringing us tea, coffee and even whisky to keep us warm. One member of the public, who lived across the road in an apartment, even lent us out some duvets and pillows from his home. The thing that really struck a chord with me was that 1 or 2 people that had seen the coverage on the news that night had come in and joined us for a few hours. This kept up our spirits as it really showed that our protest had struck a chord with the wider public. As a result of our protest the leader alliance is now in discussions with the HSE to hopefully avert any need to stage such a drastic protest in the future. This method very much meets our philosophy of "nothing about us, without us!".