

GRA Conference 2021: President Frank Thornton's Minister Address:

I would like to welcome Minister McEntee to this year's Annual Delegates Conference and congratulate her on her return to office in what has been a milestone year in both her professional and personal life.

As we know, Minister McEntee made history by becoming the first Minister to give birth while holding office, and I believe this sent an important message to all, that you can continue to succeed in your career while retaining the ability to raise a family and strike a fair work-life balance.

In this country, and even within our organisation, we have not always respected and fully supported the wellbeing of young parents, but thankfully such times are changing, and we are beginning to put a firm focus on the wellness and wellbeing of our members which will lead to a more inclusive, respectful, and supportive place to work.

And speaking of support, we too rely on the support of your department, Minister, when dealing with attacks from both outside and indeed, inside, our organisation. I mentioned earlier in my opening address that one of the many challenges that our members have faced over the past two years has been in relation to a sharp rise in attacks and assaults on our membership.

Over the past five years there have been over 4,200 attacks on Gardaí while on duty. And the trend of acceleration is even more alarming with the number of 700 assaults in 2016 rising to 1,096 last year, an increase of 57% in that time.

Our members have had to deal with over 45,000 public order offences nationwide during the pandemic, which gives a flavour of the many challenges we have faced over the past 18 months, and these figures continue to serve as a stark reminder of the treacherous job description that is modern day policing in Ireland.

We have long been calling for mandatory sentencing for those convicted of assaulting Gardaí and other frontline emergency workers and we are pleased to see our former colleague, Senator Robbie Gallagher, introducing legislation to increase the penalty for such attacks on emergency workers, and we know that your fellow deputy, Neale Richmond, has been a vocal advocate for such a change in current sentencing policy. We are relying on you, Minister McEntee to support this legislation and help expediate the Bill to provide better protection to our members on the frontline.

Over the past 12 months we have watched as Garda Management called urgent press conferences and told the public that they would 'root out corruption within the force'. We were told of missed 999 calls, unilateral squaring of traffic offences and even sexual coercion – all under the umbrella of 'Anti-Corruption' with little or no figures, data, or evidence of the same.

We have seen suspensions of our members without charge or detailed explanation, leaving some dedicated members sitting at home while the rest of the force remains undermanned and under-resourced.

These claims and statements went unchecked in your absence, Minister, and that has got to change. We need you to challenge and investigate these claims before they are announced publicly for both the protection and morale of our members and the protection of public confidence which is of vital importance for our daily responsibility to protect and serve.

There was also a serious issue regarding vaccinations. While other frontline staff rightly were made a priority, we were told to 'take our place in the queue' after your government placed us in a low priority category. This was in spite of the fact that it was our members who were protecting the public in the face of uncertainty and adversity, dispersing crowds, policing public demonstrations, and addressing public order issues surrounding breaches of covid-related guidelines regarding outdoor dining and such events. Put simply, we were sending in largely unvaccinated Gardaí to police largely unvaccinated crowds, risking not just their own safety, but that of their families and loved ones.

Despite all of these issues, on the ground and in the communities, we serve, we have felt the unprecedented support and trust from the public. Since March 2020, we have taken on extra responsibilities within these communities to keep the vulnerable in our society safe and sound. And while we take huge satisfaction from this groundswell of public support, morale within our organisation remains low with many members feeling under pressure and undervalued.

Minister on more than one occasion we have received correspondence from our Commissioner suggesting that our Association and our spokespeople need to be mindful of the potential of undermining public confidence in An Garda Síochána. Such correspondence is generally received in response to statements or commentary made by members of this Association addressing issues of genuine concern to the members who rely on us for representation. I can assure you that any public utterances from this Association will always be well informed, properly researched and measured.

It is inevitable that the perspective of our members and their experiences will not always sit comfortably with Garda Management or Government, we will always stand over and be accountable for the accuracy of what is said in the name of our members.

Minister, our members are used to criticism and negative commentary, we accept and embrace oversight and accountability, we do not dispute facts but there is something fundamentally wrong when the Policing Authority Chair and the Commissioner of An Garda Síochána are making statements that damage the reputation of our members and undermine public confidence in advance of facts being established or reports being issued.

One of the fundamental principles that will guide any police officer is the need to establish facts and this Association and our members look forward to reading the report of Derek Penman because we have confidence that the facts will vindicate the members we represent, and our Associations measured response.

Minister, the theme of this Conference is ‘Communities Matter... And So Do We’ and I believe it is your job to now protect the protectors. Help us help you and most of all, help us protect the communities we serve without fear of backlash and recrimination.

ENDS.