

# Irish-run Moldova charity announces it is closing ...then asks for donations

By Michael O'Farrell

A CONTROVERSIAL charity run by Ireland's Honorary Consul to Moldova has closed down in the wake of serious financial governance concerns.

However, Outreach Moldova (ORM) is still seeking donations to pay the wages of staff who were laid off with little warning last November.

In the immediate wake of the layoffs, the charity's board members, its CEO and its lawyers refused to confirm the closure when asked by the Irish Mail on Sunday.

Now, after months of silence, the closure of ORM has been announced on the charity's website for the first time – together with a final appeal for donations.

Run by Irishwoman Suzanne O'Connell, ORM has been involved in running an orphanage in the Moldovan town of Hincesti for 25 years.

In that period the celebrity-supported charity, known for its glamorous fundraising balls in Trinity College and Dublin's Shelbourne Hotel, has raised more than €12m from donors. These funds have helped hundreds of orphans in need of care and a home.

An analysis of ORM's accounts shows the charity had been rais-

**'I couldn't get comfort and clarity'**

ing approximately €250,000 annually. Its staff costs are about €190,000 with chief executive Dr Suzanne O'Connell taking home €47,000. Judges in Moldova earn €9,000 a year.

Signs that not all was well at ORM first emerged in 2018 when Ed Dunne, a wealthy benefactor, raised concerns about how funds he had provided were being used.

In the wake of those concerns former HSE boss Frank Dolphin and ORM's then chairman Fergal Kelly resigned. These resignations took place after Mr Kelly travelled to Moldova to investigate the concerns.

'I couldn't get clarity and comfort on how the funds were being used locally,' Mr Kelly later told the MoS.

A subsequent review into governance at the charity by financial consultants Baker Tilly was then ordered. But the findings of this report were not made public until the MoS published them in 2022.

Issues highlighted by the Baker Tilly report included ORM's failure to comply with tax and charity laws in Moldova for nearly two decades. Another concern was the routine payment of remuneration in cash from a safe and the absence of valid employee signatures for cash paid out as wages and expenses.



**SIGN:** The charity has now confirmed it closed in November



**CONSUL:** ORM chief Suzanne O'Connell with former junior minister Ciaran Cannon

## Questions over charity house 'sale'



**REVEAL:** An MoS investigation about property transactions at the charity, top, and the MoS reports the findings of a review of governance at ORM

Baker Tilly also discovered that an accountant working at the charity signed his own expenses and often faked signatures for others.

Another problem was a lack of transparent record-keeping to allow large donors to know where their money was being spent.

Separately, an MoS investigation in Moldova in 2022 raised questions about property transactions between ORM, its CEO Suzanne O'Connell and her late father Des who had originally founded the charity. Our investigation in Moldova resulted in the charity admitting it had filed defective accounts. Corrected accounts were later resubmitted to the Company Registrations Office.

In the wake of these revelations, ORM moved to implement recommendations that the composition of its board be reviewed.

Meanwhile, fundraising contin-

**'We could not sustain our mission'**

ued with various events in Ireland. These included a black tie ball at the Shelbourne Hotel on February 23 last year. That was followed in May last year by a golf classic at Killeen Castle in Co. Meath. But last November, a scheduled

fundraiser at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) did not proceed. Within a day of that cancelled event, two of the new board members resigned. And within weeks of that, the MoS was informed by local sources that all staff had been let go in Moldova. The charity refused to confirm this at the time.

'Like any charity, there are financial challenges,' board member Kevin Quinn told the MoS in December. 'We are working through them at the moment so we are not going to make any comment.'

Now in recent days, ORM has posted messages online to confirm the closure.

'Despite our best efforts we could not sustain our mission in

these difficult times as global crises have diverse attention and support elsewhere,' the message reads.

'We had to cease operations in Moldova last November 2024 out of an abundance of caution when we cancelled our annual fundraiser in TCD.'

The ORM announcement also confirmed that all staff had been let go 'with little notice' on November 29 and contained a plea for further donations to pay staff.

This weekend the MoS sought once again to contact Ms O'Connell and board member Kevin Quinn – as we had done late last year. They did not respond. michaelofarrell@protonmail.com