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Single Equality Bill Team  
Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister  
Room E3.18  
FREEPOST NAT17679  
Belfast  
BT4 3BR

Dear Sir

**Re: Consultation on A single Equality Bill for Northern Ireland**

I write to object to the proposed inclusion of volunteers in the above bill. Volunteers have been involved in the work of this hospital for over 25 years and although they are not involved in patients' direct clinical care their role is complementary to that of paid staff and are not used for job substitution or to fill gaps left by absent staff. Volunteers give a precious 'gift' of their time and are involved in many roles throughout the hospital spending quality time talking to patients, reading stories, playing board games, helping with arts & crafts, escorts on outings, social events etc. Others provide complementary therapy, help out in the hospital shop, plants and gardening, helping meet and greet patients and visitors arriving at the hospital, Red Cross Therapeutic Services.

While I support the equality of opportunity as central to good volunteer management practice there are serious reservations to be considered if the above Bill was to include volunteers. It is of paramount important to maintain the voluntary nature of the volunteer role and relationship and not to create any barriers. As volunteers are **not employees**, to classify them as such would have major implications as it is fundamentally against the volunteering ethos, which is defined as follows:

'Volunteering is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, the environment or individuals outside one's immediate family. It is undertaken **freely and by choice** without concern for financial gain'.

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*Protecting Patients First*

Contd ...

Whilst I am in agreement that the protection of volunteers from discrimination is an important practice issue I propose that perhaps a separate category should be considered that would mention how volunteers should be treated fairly and that no volunteer should suffer from discrimination of a voluntary code.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johanna Bell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Johanna Bell  
Voluntary Services Manager