

Government's Crimestoppers campaign 'could fuel disability hate crime'

Outraged campaigners say a new government-backed benefit fraud campaign could expose disabled people to hostility and violence in their own communities.

The national campaign has been launched by the "crime-fighting" charity Crimestoppers and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and centres on [a poster featuring eight members of the public](#) looking angry, shocked and hostile, and even threatening violence at the idea of benefit fraud.

The poster is headlined: "WelUNfare: Don't Let Benefit Fraud Make You Mad," and encourages people to phone a hotline anonymously if they suspect someone of fraud.

Posters are being displayed on bus shelters, with online advertising on Facebook, as well as through other posters and leaflets, and adverts concentrated in Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow.

But activists say disabled people are already facing accusations from the government and in the media of being "scroungers" and "benefit frauds" and the campaign will put them at even greater risk of disability hate crime.

Only last month, activists linked the conviction of a man who called his disabled neighbour a "benefit scrounger" during a hate campaign, to hostile stories and comments about alleged disability benefit fraud that have come from the media and the government.

Crimestoppers has refused to withdraw the posters, or to say whether its campaign originated from the DWP.

Anne Novis, a leading disabled campaigner on disability hate crime, said the poster suggests that hostility towards disabled people is acceptable.

She said: "I am appalled that yet again disabled people are being targeted by this government, as so many people already are scared to do anything outside their homes, due to the hostility we face."

Stephen Brookes, a coordinator of the [Disability Hate Crime Network](#), said he was "saddened and appalled" by the "badly misguided" campaign and its potential for increasing hostility towards disabled people, and warned that it would lead to "false and mischievous" allegations being made.

Katharine Quarmby, another coordinator of the network and author of [Scapegoat](#), a ground-breaking investigation into disability hate crime, said: "We have already seen emerging evidence that some disabled people are being both verbally abused and even physically assaulted because of the campaign by some newspapers and the government against 'scroungers'.

“A charity that seeks to reduce the fear of crime should not become involved or appear to be involved in whipping up hatred, fear and prejudice against disabled people – or indeed, against poor lone parents or any other scapegoat for this recession.”

A DWP spokesman admitted the government had approved the campaign and poster, but said: “It is in no way designed to incite hate crime.”

When Disability News Service suggested that the poster and campaign could expose disabled people to more hostility, he said: “I think that is just untrue. I do not think it will contribute to disability hate crime.”

And when asked whether DWP was completely comfortable with the poster, he said: “We support the campaign to encourage people to report benefit fraudsters.”

A Crimestoppers spokesman said the charity had received “almost 500 pieces of information” that it passed to DWP in the first week of its campaign, and that all information received was “evaluated closely before being sent to DWP, so any that appear to be malicious or without substance will simply be ignored”.

He said: “The idea of the posters is to connect with society and feelings of anger against those who commit benefit fraud, not towards those who claim benefits lawfully.

“Strong visuals are integral to our campaigns and the more eye-catching they are, the more impact they will have, which will hopefully result in more people contacting Crimestoppers to give information about crime.”

He added: “While we sympathise with those that have not received this campaign as we would have liked them to, we cannot apologise for attempting to stop a crime that hits the pockets of the general public.”

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News provided by John Pring at www.disabilitynewsservice.com