

Social Services Kaimahi Hauora Stories:

Poata's story

Poata's story highlights the crucial role that leaders of community-based social services play in helping create workplaces where the wellbeing of social services kaimahi is genuinely supported, respected and valued. It also shows the importance of supporting kaimahi through change, and recognising the links between kaimahi toiora and the outcomes kaimahi are able to create every day working with whānau and hapori.



Growing up, I learned the value of whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, being grateful for small things. These are values I've carried throughout my career, my education, my kapa haka, my sporting and reo journeys.

I was fortunate, I grew up in Ngaati Maniapoto, the King Country, and learned old-school work ethic from my Mum and Dad. We also had a garden, lived in the bush, we knew from a young age how to hunt and fish.

I ended up at university and this was where things took a shift for me. I got my BA and ended up going into the community, and never looked back. I loved the mahi because it was about people. I've worked in the DHB, been a prison director, worked for Corrections, in special treatment units, and in facilitator roles in the community. My mahi has taken me into kaupapa Māori settings, Māori organisations, governing boards, and I'm now fortunate to be Chief Executive Officer of Tuu Oho Mai.

Manaaki, kotahitanga, wairuatanga – I've found that if you hold those close as a leader, it's a wonderful foundation to lead from. It's not always an easy one! But I do go back to this foundation from my parents.

We've been on a big change over the past four years in our organisation. The organisation had celebrated its 30 year birthday when I walked in, but it was clear that some things needed to transform and shift up, so that we could meet the demand in the community, and do the mahi professionally. We are kaupapa Māori, working to prevent family violence and sexual violence and respond to it. Over the time I've been here, the number of individuals who have been through our kaupapa has increased significantly, and we meet their needs through our 40 staff.

When I arrived at the organisation, I noted a lot of focus had been on recruiting kaimahi who had their own lived experience. I quickly came to see that some of the kaimahi hadn't yet been able to do their own healing, and behaviours could play out under pressure. Transference in the workplace ultimately creates risk for whaanau.



To help shape the change and shift, and to understand what needed to happen, we actually stopped the usual mahi for two days. All kaimahi had a two-day hui, we also brought hapu in for this. It was the first time kaimahi had been involved in decision-making in this way – they felt they had a voice, they felt valued and seen. It was a powerful foundation for everything that has come since.

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Following on from this, we had to look at our culture and capability, and things like our salaries. Things were outdated. It was unclear what we were doing to retain our kaimahi. Big mihi to our Executive Board here, for the trust they put in this mahi, and their level of commitment to enable change. They supported the modernisation of frameworks, and ensuring we had the rights skills amongst kaimahi to be able to transcend and transform.

Having manaaki and aroha for people to shift up and change up through the process of organisational change has been really important. Big change isn't easy. Providing both accountability for people to do this, and support for them to be able to be part of the change has been essential. Having hard conversations safely is part of this – we talk about mana hihiko and seek to practice this – conversations filled with mana and integrity.

So much of how our sector works is transactional – we need to change this! Our kaimahi have told me that they feel we are in a really strong place now as an organisation, because of the focus we have put on their work environment, and their wellbeing. We've moved away from the transactional – it's truly about them as people, as whānau.

When it comes to worker wellbeing, we use the term 'kaimahi toiora'. 'Toi' is ultimately potential – it's synergy, vibration, a wairua, a mauri that connects us, allows us to connect together. So, 'Toiora' – the art of wellbeing, the intent of wellbeing, the journey of wellbeing. This is what we're on, and it enables the hard mahi to be done. The journey of maaramatanga, an in-depth understanding of the tangible and intangible – we focus on this a lot too in our organisation. Wairua is fundamentally an important ingredient for your journey, no matter who you are. In our space it's also about the wairua for the mahi, the people who come through the doors.

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Things that might seem small, can make a big difference, too. Something we are really conscious about is the use of language. It's very powerful in the spaces we work in, like family violence, and being mindful of this is important. For example, we don't use the word 'perpetrator'. Instead, we use 'Raupuutohe'. This kupu allows for growth, allows people to transcend and transform, to choose their own path. The vibration of the kupu we use is important, it has an impact on the people who we are referring to, and on the kaimahi who use the kupu in their mahi.

Our big focus on kaimahi toiora has taken some time to get to. We really got into it after I'd been in the organisation about two years. I needed the foundation, the platform, the tuurangawaewae first. We had to get that right, and then build on it. Again, working with our kaimahi to understand what would support them was crucial.

We also recognised that if we're really committed to our kaupapa and a toiora focus where kaimahi feel valued and we cater to their needs, valued in the kaupapa, it needs an appropriate level of investment. Kaimahi told us they wanted to be physically fit, and that a gym was a way to do this. So we said, what's stopping us from investing in a gym? We pulled a working group together from the kaimahi from our various business arms, they did their own rangahau. This helped us to understand things like that we couldn't have free weights, because someone needed to be on site to supervise. So that led us to a gym based around low impact kinaesthetics. We've also brought in people to share knowledge around self care, invested in things like ergonomic seats, stand up sit down desks – things that do cost a bit, but are an investment in our people's toiora. I really believe in the koorero – "you're worth it". That's what I think about my kaimahi, it's a beautiful koorero, and committing authentically to their toiora, grounded in a really strong purpose, is so important.

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Other things help too. We have karakia at 8:30am every day, and on Mondays, managers take turns to give motivational koorero at karakia. We have 'pens down' on a Friday afternoon – everyone, myself included – we all come together for a few hours for a group activity. Everyone gets one hour mirimiri a month, and our Maaori practitioners have access to a toohunga. Recently, we've introduced a one-off chiropractor appointment per kaimahi per year.



And when it comes to kaimahi safety, that's also paramount. Staff have to feel safe going out, we learned a lot about that during the lockdowns, which we worked right through. The reality of the mahi is that staff experience threats and violence on a day-to-day basis. We ensure all staff going out have strong training in dealing with aggression in tactical ways. We have practical safety protocols, and we have a pretty special security system, which enables staff to let everyone else in the organisation know their location if they feel unsafe. I also keep in touch with what kaimahi are doing out and about, I jump on the radio regularly and just keep in touch, and sometimes go out with the teams. It's another way to show manaaki for our kaimahi.

When I talk with other leaders, people often tend to talk about clinical supervision, cultural supervision, these things as being toiora. But that's practice-based – these things don't necessarily acknowledge wairua and growth in personal ways. The fact is we can't support others if our own wellness isn't intact, when we're constantly depleted. So kaimahi toiora is about taking much bigger view of things, seeing the connections.

We're in a time right now where there's a big increase in whaanau using social services like ours, but not much increase in resources. There's an absence of dollars. This does make it hard – how do we look after the wellbeing of kaimahi in the absence of increased resource? I'd love to see this change for our whole space.

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Others might frown on the big focus we have on kaimahi toiora in our organisation. But I'm proud that my kaimahi feel valued and that they value the focus we have on this. They see the effort and resource we're committing to their toiora – it's taken four years, and a financial culture where we invest in toiora consciously. This enables us to respond to kaimahi dreams and aspirations.

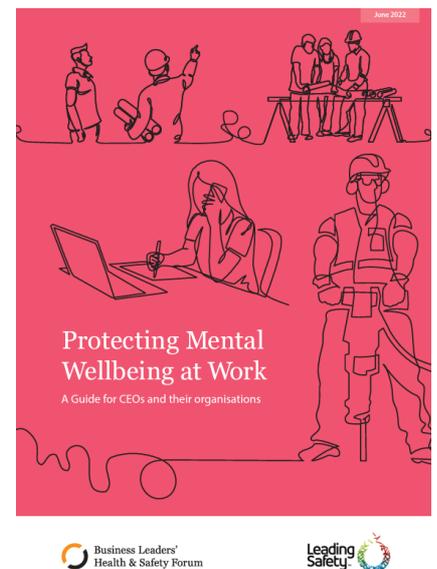
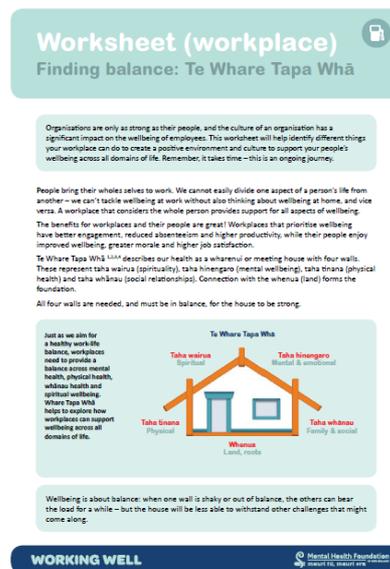
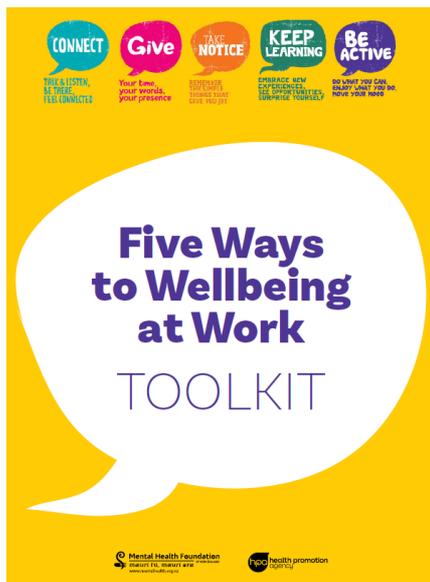
As CEO, I make sure I'm visible and engaging, sometimes I just sit at lunch and hear them, and grab my guitar. If you have a highly motivated workforce, just imagine the toi that they will share for those who we serve – it's huge. I don't always get it right, but being courageous enough to listen, actually go to the kaimahi and listen is important for toiora, and for making it a place where people feel that manaaki and aroha when they come to work.



As told to Social Service Providers Te Pai Ora o Aotearoa, August 2023.

Leading the way on workplace wellbeing

If you're a leader in our community-based social services, we hope this story is a reminder that when it comes to putting a focus on workplace wellbeing, starting small, involving kaimahi, and intentionally building on progress is a great place to start. You might also like to check out these sources of information, for further practical guidance and support. They are useful to help you get started with a focus on kaimahi toiora in your organisation, or to deepen your organisation's commitment. Click on each document to view.



Places to find support

Even though every day in our mahi as social services workers we're caring for and helping others, sometimes we need some help ourselves. If any time you're feeling distressed or need some immediate support, you can free text or call [1737](tel:1737) the National Telehealth Service to talk to or txt with a trained counsellor at any time.

For additional support if you need it at any time, you can get in touch with one of these organisations:

Lifeline – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Tāmaki Makaurau
Anxiety New Zealand – 0800 ANXIETY (0800 269 4389)
Suicide Crisis Helpline – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)
Healthline – 0800 611 116
Rural Support Trust – 0800 787 254
Samaritans – 0800 726 666

For free counselling support for children and rangatahi, get in touch with:

0800 What's Up – 0800WHATSUP
whatsapp.co.nz
YouthLine – 0800 376 633 / free txt 234

