

How families and communities are faring under lockdown: a snapshot

Information and insights provided by member organisations of SSPA, April 2020

Families and communities are facing significant challenges in daily life as a result of New Zealand being placed at Alert Level 4, with all except some essential workers being required to remain at home. Social service providers are working in new ways to support families thorough this time. This Snapshot highlights what some SSPA members have told us they are seeing amongst the families they are working to support and how they are responding.

Many families are living in poverty or who have suddenly become unemployed and this is impacting their ability to manage in lockdown:

Food supply that is affordable is the biggest issue:

- Families are noticing that food is more expensive, with fruit and meat being identified as having the most impact of the budget.
- Getting enough groceries to last a week is proving difficult for many families.
- Many did not have the means to prepare ahead of time with buying additional food, and so they have required assistance with food parcels or by having food or medicines delivered now that the lockdown is in place.
- One provider got an MSD grant of \$5000 and put that into food parcels and has been able to provide food for 100 whanau that were identified as having challenges.

Loss or major reduction of income is hitting families hard:

- Providers are supporting families where one or both parents have lost their jobs, or had their wages reduced. Providers are advocating on behalf of clients with Work and Income to access emergency food grants and unemployment benefits.
- South Auckland: big reductions in income for Maori and Pacific families who were working and are no longer in employment, with consequent stress placed families. Typically, there is a sole earner in the family, and they live in a private rental house. After paying the rent, they barely have had enough to feed the whanau. Major lay-offs are happening of Maori and Pacific workers in skilled roles and the wage subsidy is not preventing this.

There are particular concerns for some Kainga Ora (HNZ) families

Providers in Auckland say high needs (higher than usual) are emerging from families in Kainga Ora housing. They are working with mothers with 2, 3 or more young children, many without cars. They are providing emergency welfare packs that comprise of nappies, wipes, pamol, blankets and children's clothing and also trying to organise some fridge packs.

"One of my managers gave a grandma food out of her own cupboard and \$40. She spoke very little English. These requests / referrals came in from Kainga Ora over the weekend."

Single parents are finding things tougher than usual

We know statistically that families led by one person have numerous challenges and are some of the worst off compared to other families led by one person in the OECD, have lower rates of employment, lower incomes and more health challenges. The pandemic has only exacerbated these challenges.

Providers focusing on one-parent families have reported the following challenges for their clients:

- Many do not have enough food or heating and the food that is there are the higher priced brands as the lower costs ones have gone
- They are finding that the pandemic is impacting negatively on their mental health
- Visiting supermarkets is difficult if you have no one to supervise your children so there is more need for delivery services from NGOs
- Respite care for children is lacking when parents need a short break (even 15 minutes) from looking after them
- Disabled people face specific challenges in caring for a child or managing a family when the caregiver themselves has a disability
- Finding out how exactly many people need help in terms of serious mental health issues is challenging as people cannot always be reached by telephone. We also do not have accurate data on the impact of the lockdown on children and young people with mental health issues.
- The requirement to live within one or two bubbles is challenging when families do not conform to the 'norm'.
- Difficulties in accessing technology due to the inability to buy enough data to stay connected
- We are uncertain as yet about the impacts of violence in families, we have not seen evidence of increased family harm on the ground due to the lockdown but note that the community is generally relying on reported incidences. It does not mean that violence is not happening.
- Unemployment or job security is also of concern.

Here are two examples of particularly challenging situations, where the provider is working to support them:

- One is a 67 year old grandmother who is looking after a 2 ½ year old disabled child. She has limited support and only one other in her bubble, the child's grandfather, who does not live with her and is also on his own. The grandmother feels alone as the normal support services are not able to come into her house.
- Another young client is in a bubble with her 4 year old son. She has anxiety and depression. She has no one else to help her and is dependent on herself to get groceries and needs to take her son with her. She is also worried that she might get unwell and has no one to care for her son if this happens.

They have suggested potential solutions:

- Flexibility on the numbers of bubbles a child or children can belong to as long as the whole family stays within that bubble and guidance on how to visit the supermarket if you don't have someone to supervise your child/children.
- Ability for two families led by a single person to join as one bubble so the families can support each other.
- More support for mental health services and support for those entering or re-entering the workforce after the lockdown is lifted.
- Continued monitoring of the situation to ensure there is no increase in family violence.
- A partnership deal with Technology companies to give discounted or free access to more data.
- A whole of government approach to provide a comprehensive plan to help people back into employment or into new jobs when the virus is under control or more income support whilst people are training.

Foster and residential care is more challenging under lockdown and incurs extra expenses

Foster carers are doing excellent work at a challenging time and are being well supported. They are incurring additional household expenses, such as increased data use and increased food costs during level 4 conditions, but more importantly they are quietly getting on with an essential service within their own homes keeping children safe. One major provider of foster care services said: *"It would be great if foster carers could get some public acknowledgment and thanks for what they are doing – they are a hidden essential workforce."*

Providers of residential care have noted that many young people are missing physical contact with their whanau and some are struggling with the rigours of isolating. This provides real challenges for staff in managing already traumatised young people.

But the provider noted that young people do appear to be supporting each other. They have provided advice they can offer each other – “Stay calm with others in your bubble and take yourself off to your room when you are feeling stressed to avoid snapping at others” ; “try and do stuff you did as a kid” and “Remind them that there are others worse off than us”.

Many are experiencing real difficulties arising from isolation

Loneliness and isolation can be an issue for people of all ages. Providers have mentioned that the lack of connection is beginning to affect people, particularly older people, families struggling with children who have disabilities, and people who don't have family or friends to maintain social connection.

While some clients are not wanting to have intensive therapeutic interventions during this time, there are many people saying that they appreciate having phone or Zoom contact for support and checking in.

Access to technology is a barrier for many

While there are technology solutions available to maintain some contact, for many there are major barriers which providers are working hard to overcome:

- Establishing remote contact services to stay connected, which requires clients having access to the internet.
- For some clients, communication is difficult, as cell phones don't always have money on them and they have no landlines.
- There is a real concern as many whanau in already poverty stricken communities who have worked and are working reduced time and facing reduced income, and consequently connectivity has become an unaffordable luxury, compared to food and rent.
- This lack of connectivity impacts on the ability to access government and community services and obtain information. Attending an office is therefore the only option, largely impossible in a lockdown.
- These barriers are especially true in the many rural areas, where cellphone coverage is patchy at best.

Providers are working hard to support families via technology:

- All report that support in this area has increased, as services are adapted for remote operation.
- Access to phones, top ups, internet and food are currently the most requested supports.
- Some providers bought pre-paid phones to provide to the most at risk and isolated clients, before going into lockdown so they could maintain basic contact.
- Staff are delivering modems and supporting via Facetime to assist whanau to connect to each other and services that are available at this time.
- Accessing new learning resources and opportunities is becoming more evident.

Rural areas are experiencing particular challenges

Rural isolation takes on additional challenges in a lockdown. Providers report having requests to meet the needs of elderly and families who live in rural areas and do not have access to transport, and have limited food. This involves transport to the area, volunteers, or members of an essential service wearing PPE (which has been hard to obtain). Community organisations have been busy [with deliveries for older people in their regions](#).

The limit of grocery items that can be purchased impacts rural people negatively. Many people shop fortnightly or monthly, but are not able to do that currently because they cannot purchase the amount of milk, bread, flour and other essentials to cover that time. This can mean considerable additional travel is required to keep buying groceries.

They report that some rural families have not had the means to plan for this pandemic - both financially, emotionally and to prepare their physical bubbles.

A provider in one rural area noted farmers had been dealing with drought conditions which added stress prior to Covid-19. With the reduced processing at meat works, many farmers are having to hold stock that they cannot feed. The Rural Support Trust report that they have been extremely busy due to these additional pressures on rural families.

The pressure is mounting for parents with children being at home in lockdown all the time

Parents feeling pressured to 'structure' their days and incorporate education for their children as part of this lockdown time. This includes:

- Special concern has been expressed for the children who were being fed with KidsCan support at school. These are families who were already struggling to feed their children.
- Many families are saying that they are needing to spend more money on groceries to feed the children all day. For families on a reduced income this may not be possible.
- Social media is full of activity ideas, which can serve to make some parents feel inadequate either in their resources or skills.
- Families are finding it hard to keep children / young people occupied

A provider of services focused around educational needs is also responding to requests for support for whanau as they endeavor to provide activities and entertainment for some tamariki and rangatahi with complex needs.

In the lockdown, we are seeing escalation of many forms of family harm and there are challenges in providing support

As expected, families are having different responses to the lockdown. Some clients report that they are set up well for isolation, are able to shop and are connected with their families or neighbours.

For many other families, this is not the case. Most providers report that there are heightened levels of anxiety and depression, where parents are anxious about their health and that of family members, financial security, uncertainty about how long lockdown may continue and the impact on them. In some cases the situation has exacerbated pre-existing conditions. Providers are endeavouring to keep in close contact with these clients. There are concerns that if the lockdown is extended, these situations will worsen, and providers will need to try to step up their contact and support.

One provider reported continuing strong demand for their in-home services across regional NZ – families are still very keen to engage certainly for support to manage families and stresses during the lockdown period.

As expected, providers are seeing an increase or escalation in a number of forms of family harm in families under stress. Some examples:

- There are high levels of concern from providers that family violence is escalating but the lockdown is preventing women leaving for their own safety. Providers report they are increasingly responding to issues of lack of safety for women and for tamariki in homes where there is family violence, as tensions and anxieties mount, and limited access to usual forms of external safety.
- In one rural locality it was noted that family violence has been exacerbated by the lack of temporary accommodation available in that area. One high risk perpetrator, who assaulted his teenage son, was bailed back to his own property to live in a tent on the section, as there were no other options available to the Police or the Courts. The provider is extremely concerned about the lack of ongoing safety for this family.
- One client's partner was released into her care from prison seven days ago. This has the potential to be a problem as there are limited resources for them to call on to help with integration into the home and community.

We are hearing about reluctance to "trouble" the health system for non-COVID illnesses:

- Some people are tending to ignore their own health issues, not wanting to put the health system under further pressure.
- Delays in people seeking GP appointments, as they are waiting for the lockdown to be over or believe they may not contact their GP by booking an appointment, or via the telephone.
- Access to pharmacies is more difficult now.

Parenting challenges abound:

- Supervised contact arrangements have mainly been suspended, so the non-custodial parent and their child are isolated from each other
- Parents are reporting stress when trying to get children to complete homework, and that having everyone at home is disruptive.

- They appreciate the contact to keep some normalcy to their day and in being reminded to have routines and set goals albeit revamped ones. Some are needing to think about the impact of not having routines manifesting as challenging behaviour arisen from boredom, children's behaviours such as toileting regressing with usual routines not in place

Access to support services is more difficult:

- People are reporting that they cannot use the counselling services available by phone or video conferencing while their families are all home together. There is a risk to their privacy which makes this support challenging to provide for them, even though this service is needed.
- Several 'at risk' community members have continued to shop in store at the supermarket because the click and collect service is booked out for weeks ahead and they haven't known what else to do.

Helplines for young people are assisting:

- Calls have doubled in last 10 days but volumes are returning to more normal levels.
- Young people are talking about missing their friends, key adults in their lives such as teachers who help them through difficult times; family dynamics being under strain "my parents fighting, I think they will get a divorce".
- They are also offering some good advice for other young people – "Just stay strong because this is only temporary not permanent and like everyone says the worst must happen for the better to come in the future! That's all you need to know." and "Keeping going, try new things, this will all be over soon"

All providers have worked hard to adapt their services to provide the best possible support in the circumstances. The flexibility enabled by MSD and Oranga Tamariki in relation to current service agreements and funding levels has been a great help in this regard.

Child care for essential workers is providing hard to supply

There are significant levels of demand for child care for essential workers. A provider states that at this stage they are unable to meet the demand. They had over 300 families who had approached them for support which they haven't yet been able to offer.

Access to and co-ordination of government agencies can be problematic

While there are excellent examples of collaboration between government and community agencies, there are also many gaps, duplication of effort and poor information flows. There is significant regional variation evident.

There is a lack of information about what government and community services are available, and how to access them. The role of the local CDEM people is unfamiliar to many communities.

We have heard many instances of difficulties with getting through to Work and Income.

Other points raised by providers

- "I want to say I believe saying flowers are not an essential item is disappointing. I have been leaving flowers at the gate of vulnerable people and it has brightened their day immensely."
- Whanau passing over this time is something that is new and has significant impact on whanau left behind who are unable to manage their grief in their usual manner. However there appears to be a response of using IT and networking and communicating within whanau.
- South Auckland covid19 testing: 51% Maori, 19% Pacific and 29% Indian coming in for testing.
- Strong concerns at the situation in South Auckland and a plea for a concerted and different approach to supporting this mainly Māori and Pacific community.

In amongst the concerns and issues, people are also speaking about the positives.

Providers are working hard to support their client families, whilst maintaining the safety of themselves and their own families. They have shown great adaptiveness and innovation.

Alongside the challenges they are experiencing, they have also noted positives arising from this crisis situation in many communities:

- The Civil Defence local phone number for support for household goods and services is working well (in some areas)
- The many community agencies working together to make sure members of the community are supported.
- Greater sense of community evident
- Many families are enjoying the slower pace without the rush of work and school commitments.
- They report community connection with family, getting to know neighbours, sharing resources and support.
- People are expressing their appreciation of contact from providers, including practical support such as food parcel and wood delivery, meals on wheels, personal care support, flu vaccinations, and grocery deliver.
- There is a feeling of uncertainty, but also hope and good will.

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