

COVID does not discriminate. Does it?

COVID – 19 has not discriminated. It has held everybody at gun point; an enemy that nobody can actually see. It has not differentiated between rich or poor, nor between people who are free or otherwise. It has not discriminated between children who are loved by their family or with others who need our protection.

The Foundation for Social Welfare Services has in fact continued as one of the essential service driven workplaces on our islands.

We still work on child protection, we still care for our children in alternative care, we still deal with domestic violence, we still operate from our community services and from Gozo too.

Child Protection Services

To date our Child Protection Services have been operating on a rotational contingency roster. To reduce the possibility of local transmissions, teams have been created whereby members are scheduled to work together, and there is no change in the team members.

Residential Services

In the meantime, the Foundation's residential services are still operational, including;

-Ghabex which is a residential service for female victims of domestic violence and their children, who require immediate protection and

-the Children Residential Services run by the FSWS's Agenzija TFAL (Alternative Care). There are various residences and they cater for minors in need of alternative care.

Community Services and Home Based Therapeutic Services (ACTS)

As we write, our front liners at the Agency for Community and Therapeutic Services are still operating from three main centres, Qawra, Birgu and Valletta with the main aim to facilitate and encourage a process of change within the community they operate in, through local participation.

These services strive to enhance the local potential, offer optimal individual and family social work services that are aimed especially at the most vulnerable in the community, whilst taking into consideration the context, culture and everyday life of the residents. At the same time we still aim to offer a therapeutic service to multi-stressed families within the community through the Home Based Therapeutic Service which due to COVID-19 has changed its way of operating. The beneficiaries of this service are experiencing multiple problematic issues, which are related to poverty. These include drug abuse, violence within the families, mental health problems and risks, sometimes imminent, of potential care orders and this is why we aim to continue to give a service even if through other means rather than one to one.

Due to the pandemic, all staff serving the Agency for Community and Therapeutic Services are directed to work from the main centres on a roster basis. All three centres have counselling rooms equipped to attend to service users, whenever we have intake sessions for people who are asking for support.

Throughout the FSWS, all professionals are maintaining ongoing online contact with service users. The expectation is not just to call service users to check in on them, but to undertake therapeutic interventions online.

Helpline 179 and 1772

All professionals are covering the national helpline 179 and the newly set up helpline 1772 shifts.

In fact, the 1772 loneliness helpline has been set up by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services to address the various issues that people are facing during this time of social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Various professionals working within the FSWS including social workers, psychologists, family therapists, community workers and other social welfare graduates are providing a listening and empathic ear on a 24/7 basis on 1772 to all those people who are experiencing loneliness and wish to stay connected.

The professionals on the line try to support and strengthen the emotional wellbeing of callers by listening to them, valuing their background and unique life story and providing information and referrals to other social welfare services if the caller wishes.

Gozo Directorate

Gozo is no different. The Foundation for Social Welfare Services has Social workers providing service at the Gozo General Hospital too. All our professionals in Gozo are keeping ongoing online contact with service users whilst our Emergency On-Call Service has continued uninterrupted. The Foundation has coordinated with the administration of Dar Padova in Ghajnsielem, Gozo, which used to operate as a night shelter for the elderly, to be transformed into a 24 x 7 shelter for the homeless. This shelter welcomed the first two people experiencing homelessness on Monday 30 March. In addition to Dar Padova, Dar Emmaus and Dar Gesù Nazzarenu are prepared to host more people experiencing homelessness if the need arises.

Our Gozo Operations Branch also took the initiative to set up a food bank whilst a cohort of 65+ residents have been identified as possible beneficiaries for support and each of the Gozo Operations Branch staff members have been given the responsibility of a locality in Gozo.

Food Packages Distribution

In the meantime, the Foundation for Social Welfare Services has been entrusted by the Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity to implement the twice yearly distribution of food packages to approximately 20,000 vulnerable families within the Maltese society. This scheme complements the fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, (FEAD), by extending further to include cohorts not reached by FEAD. These sectors mainly include the elderly, persons with a disability who are unemployed and low income families. Outreaching to such cohort enables the Foundation to get in contact with vulnerable families and offers other support to facilitate their social integration. In times of COVID – 19 this is even more essential and due to the current exceptional circumstances, the distribution of food packages will be affected through home deliveries.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, through her professional unsung heroes, remains resilient. The Foundation has risen up to the occasion by re-engineering its essential services to continue meeting both current and emerging needs posed by its service users. It has reached out further by extending its services through the provision of an additional helpline to emphasise its ethos, that of 'being here for you.' During this time of heightened awareness about public health and safety, the Foundation shall continue to be the leading example in the social services sector through its commitment of continued support to the most vulnerable within society.

