

## Frontline staff the unsung heroes during COVID-19

COVID-19 presented unique challenges for many community service provider staff because they aren't trained to care for patients with an infectious disease.

So, the DHBs worked with NGO services and MHAIDS to create a joint protocol laying out how to manage referrals to crisis respite and housing/recovery facilities, and how providers can work safely with suspected COVID-19 patients while caring for their mental health needs.

The protocol gives clear guidelines about safety precautions for staff and patients, screening patients, when and how they should be tested, when to wear PPE, how to transport patients, the hand-over process for transferring patients and how to work with a COVID-19 suspected patient.

Chris Nolan 2DHB Service Development Manager Mental Health and Addictions says frontline staff are the unsung heroes, showing immense courage continuing to care for patients in very challenging circumstances.

"Some staff were apprehensive but still went to work and looked after people who were suspected COVID-19 patients. They organised their own accommodation so they didn't put their own home bubbles at risk. They are highly committed people."

A team met twice weekly to develop the protocol, chaired by Chris Nolan with support from project manager Kate Stewart, and included leads from MHAIDS, PACT, Emerge, and Pathways.

"Each provider stepped up and provided leadership in unique circumstances. They all responded above and beyond, did phone calls after-hours, trouble-shooting on Friday evenings and weekends. There were weekends in the early stages where DHB staff were hand delivering PPE."

One provider had an opportunity to put the protocol into use first-hand when someone displayed COVID-19 symptoms. The case was quickly escalated and the patient tested. Although it turned out to be a negative case, it showed all the steps of the protocol worked. A second similar situation with another provider followed. All involved were outstanding in their commitment to continue the service. Again, the case turned out to be negative and our joint protocol worked well.

In planning for a possible COVID 19 case, our local Kaupapa Maori service staff committed to caring for possible COVID-19 positive clients by locking down the whole service and planned to stay on to provide care.

Everyone is really proud of the frontline staff who maintained the services and continued to care for patients and clients.

"Not only have they been caring for patients, but they've also been looking after their colleagues. Some staff were more at risk and were working from home, so others stepped up and covered their roles – that's pretty special."