

17 June 2020

Ministry of Health

Re: COVID-19 Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Recovery Plan

Tēnā koe

Regional Public Health (RPH) is the public health unit for the greater Wellington region (Wairarapa, Hutt Valley and Capital & Coast District Health Boards). Our purpose is to improve and protect the health of the population in the greater Wellington region with a focus on achieving equity.

RPH welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Ministry of Health (Ministry)'s COVID-19 Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Recovery Plan. RPH actively worked on the COVID-19 response with Ministry and now, as RPH returns to a 'new normal', we are hearing of the many challenges faced by the communities we serve and are conscious of the importance of investing in psychosocial, mental and cultural wellbeing at this time. It is also crucial to draw on learnings from previous emergencies, as well as the existing strength and resilience of our communities.

The contact point for this submission is:

Demelza O'Brien
Demelza.O'Brien@huttvalleydhb.org.nz

Naku noa, na

Dr. Alexandra Greig
Public Health Medicine Specialist

Peter Gush
General Manager

1. Do the vision, principles and focus areas in the plan resonate with you?

RPH endorses the six guiding principles: 1) People and whānau centred, 2) community-led, 3) uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi, 4) achieve equity, 5) protect human rights and 6) work together.

RPH recommends that Ministry focus on strengthening the area for action to “collectively build the social and economic foundations for psychosocial and economic wellbeing”.

Both during the COVID-19 response and in the period immediately following, agencies have seen a significant increase in demand for “welfare” needs from whānau and communities, including housing, food, and meeting utility payments and other basic needs. This has exacerbated pre-existing social and mental health stressors, and heightens risk for other diseases, such as Rheumatic Fever. Community organisations that provide much-needed support services in the region are also experiencing additional pressures due to significant reductions in funding streams during COVID-19, at a time when demand for their services has increased.

In the Hutt Valley, youth development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have experienced, or are projecting, funding reductions due to the pandemic. Many funding sources, such as fees for service, have not been provided to organisations during lockdown, or in the case of gaming trusts, have lost revenue and are not distributing grants. While some community agencies may not be working directly in the mental health area, the services they provide for young people are essential for wellbeing, especially for vulnerable young people who may have lacked access to services during lockdown. This is likely to be the situation across the spectrum of community organisations.

RPH recommends that the Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Recovery plan:

- Takes into account the reductions in funding to key community organisations and the impact this will have on community wellbeing and resilience; and
- Works with Ministry of Social Development to identify how funding and supports can be provided to community organisations to ensure continuity of service provision during this crucial time.

As this plan notes, unemployment is associated with worse physical and mental health. It is important that meaningful action is taken to support communities, whānau and individuals who are experiencing financial stress and other material hardships. An important first step is to clearly articulate the role of health agencies in identifying families in need, and in describing the resources available through MSD and others, so

that community-facing health agencies are aware of where they can refer families for assistance.

RPH recommends that the Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Recovery plan:

- Further identifies roles and responsibilities for health sector organisations in identifying social needs of individuals, whānau and communities; and
- Clearly outlines referral pathways and resources so that health agencies are equipped to support priority populations with their social needs.

It is important to consider the role of social cohesion and social capital in building community resilience in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this plan builds on the *He Ara Oranga* report and identifies a number of ways in which acute mental health needs of individuals can be supported, there is a need for consideration of how the community as a whole is able to process this unusual and highly stressful experience, including how to rebuild community linkages. This can include consideration of how communities engage in cultural practices, such as coming together on marae or in sacred spaces, how they safely re-engage in community arts, cultural, sporting and other leisure activities, and how communities use spaces and places to share and understand their collective experience. In the wake of the Christchurch Earthquake, the organisation Healthy Christchurch implemented a range of activities targeted at promoting wellbeing and community resilience. These included the “*All Right?*” Campaign and the *Wellbeing Game*, both of which are targeted at broadening the reach of mental health programs into the wider community and supporting those who are affected by stress and trauma, but who may not require intensive mental health interventions¹.

RPH recommends that the Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Recovery plan:

- Consider how the experiences of the community can be acknowledged and recorded for the future, and
- That further supports for the community to collectively cope with stress and trauma be developed and implemented.

Physical and mental health are closely interlinked and when physical health concerns have not been addressed this can contribute to increased mental distress. For some, Covid-19 and the lockdown meant that tests, procedures and treatments were postponed, delayed or not carried out which has exacerbated mental stresses.

In recognition of the interrelated nature of physical and mental health, RPH recommends:

¹ More information is available from Healthy Christchurch at:
<https://www.healthychristchurch.org.nz/priority-areas/wellbeing-and-community-resilience>

- The plan acknowledge the importance of expediting delayed tests, procedures and treatments.

2. In what ways does your organisation see itself contributing to the focus areas in the plan?

From 2015 the RPH Healthy Communities Team have led one day Nurturing Mind and Body Wellbeing seminars for ECC staff focusing on how staff can support their own wellbeing. These seminars were developed from concerns around staff sickness and stress levels and staff not finding the time to look after themselves. The day uses the Mental Health Foundations Five Ways to Wellbeing as the foundation for the workshops content. The seminars provide knowledge, tools, and resources to support staff to make informed decisions about their self-care, and in turn help them to be positive role models for the tamariki in their care. From February 2020, the team have adapted this format into a new free seminar for ECC staff. This seminar has focussed on increasing access for staff from centres in higher deprivation areas; those with high numbers of Māori or Pacific tamariki; or centres on a Ministry of Education provisional licence, or Category 1 licence. As a result of the impact COVID has had on staff and tamariki in the early childhood education sector the regional Ministry of Education Senior Advisors have requested an ongoing focus on staff wellbeing. Another seminar is being provided in September 2020.

The RPH Healthy Communities Team routinely work with the staff of Early Childhood Centres (ECCs) to support the health, safety and well-being of tamariki attending ECCs. The team provides expert advice on the health and safety aspects of buildings, policies and procedures, and supports the professional development of ECC staff. As a result of COVID, RPH developed an online wellbeing hub for early childhood teachers.² This hub will be updated with new resource and information regularly. RPH will continue to deliver Nurturing Mind and Body Wellbeing Seminars to ECC staff.

RPH recognises that mental health and wellbeing, particularly for children and young people is an essential component of public health. In an attempt to better recognise this in public health practice RPH is currently developing a trauma-informed care approach to be utilised by our public health nurses when they work in schools, with children, and with young people, and includes increasing the number of public health nurses trained in HEEADSSS assessments³.

² This is available at: <http://www.rph.org.nz/public-health-topics/early-childhood-centres/staff-wellbeing-and-professional-development/>

³ HEEADSSS is an acronym for a comprehensive psychosocial assessment tool identifying risk and protective factors. It stands for Home, Education, Eating, Activities, Drugs and Alcohol, Suicide and Depression, Sexuality and Safety.

RPH will consider how to intertwine a trauma-informed approach with screening assessments for adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Recent research has suggested that more than half of New Zealand children in the *Growing Up In New Zealand* study, have experienced at least one ACE. There is a compounding negative effect showing that as children experience additional ACEs, they are less likely to be school ready, as indicated by the ability to count from 1-10.⁴

In addition, RPH is also looking to undertake a project with Wairarapa DHB looking at screening whānau engaged in maternal and paediatric services for ACEs. These events remain a largely unaddressed public health issue, and are a major threat to health and well-being across the life course. Numerous studies demonstrate adverse associations of ACEs with subsequent negative impacts on health and life opportunities that reverberate across generations.

3. What do you think are the critical factors to ensure success of this plan?

RPH recommends that the Ministry extends its focus in the plan to place greater importance on cultural wellbeing, primarily for Māori but also for other groups.

There is a high risk that as the pandemic draws to, what appears to be, the end in Aotearoa, Māori will be worse off. Worse off in health and wellbeing with delays in care, worse off in income and employment support with Māori unemployment estimated to be much higher than the national average, and worse off in social connection and cultural practices with the limits on gatherings and tangihana. Dr. Regan Potangaroa and Maire Kipa have both carried out valuable work in cultural wellbeing and recovery drawing on learnings from the strength and resilience of Māori communities in the Christchurch earthquakes recovery⁵. Maire Kipa, a team leader with South Island Whanau Ora Navigation, describes cultural wellbeing as being underpinned for Māori by whānau and whenua. The impacts of COVID-19 and the lockdown had significant impacts on whānau – breaking down wider whānau to nuclear family groupings and putting a hold on all whānau gatherings for tangihana. The impacts of this on cultural wellbeing cannot be underestimated. While the Christchurch earthquakes impacted whānau's connection to the whenua in the sense that housing was red zoned and people were not always able to return to their homes, COVID-19 has had a direct impact on whānau's ability to connect. Dr. Regan Potangaroa talks about the breakdown and damage that has occurred to social connection due to COVID-19 and the level 4 lockdown. While New Zealand may have acted as a 'team of 5 million', these actions came at a cost to many,

⁴ Walsh MC, Joyce S, Maloney T, Vaithianathan R. Adverse childhood experiences and school readiness outcomes: results from the Growing Up in New Zealand study. *The New Zealand Medical Journal* (Online). 2019 Apr 12;132(1493):15-24.

⁵More information is available at: <http://www.communityresearch.org.nz/maori-recovery-challenges-and-opportunities-perspectives-for-covid-19/>

with Māori being disproportionately effected. Estimates suggest that the rise in unemployment will hit Māori and Pacific whanau the hardest.

RPH commends the way in which the plan looks to support and empower community-led response and recovery.

RPH recommends that the Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Recovery plan:

- Highlight the importance of cultural wellbeing and the need to support Māori to continue their cultural practices, including how these can be safely maintained in an outbreak or pandemic response;
- Include a targeted focus on increasing Māori economic wellbeing; and
- Place greater value on Māori collective and historic knowledge, experiences and resiliency.

With regards to the collection and monitoring of information and data, RPH recommends that the Ministry:

- Prioritise the collection of ethnicity data to understand the trends and impacts on Māori; and
- Include Māori in the gathering and analysing of ethnicity data as well as ensure that this data is accessible for Māori health and community service providers to inform their work.

With regards to workforce capacity and capability, RPH recommends that the Ministry:

- Invest in and develop Māori and Pacific health workforce with necessary skills, training and resources needed to respond to the increased needs of these groups.

4. What positive examples of actions to support mental and social wellbeing are you aware of?

5. Do you think there is anything missing from the plan?

The Psychosocial and Mental Health Recovery plan provides a basis for initial thinking. It is essential that the implementation of this plan be tied to outcome measures of wellbeing that look to ensure that mental health and wellbeing among individuals and the community is not worse off, directly or indirectly, from COVID-19 and the lockdown period.

Psychosocial and mental wellbeing and recovery is not a nice to have, but rather is an essential component for recovery and, as such, requires accountability measurements.

RPH recommends that the Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Recovery plan:

- Include clear and measurable actions for the health sector with related outcome measures; and
- Include measures that capture equitable mental health outcomes for Māori with a focus on cultural wellbeing.