

17 August 2020



Dear residents, families and staff,

Re: Helping Hand's preparedness for a COVID-19 outbreak in residential care

There has been extensive media in the past few weeks around Covid-19 and the Aged Care sector, particularly in residential care homes. There has been a Senate enquiry into the COVID-19 outbreaks across Victoria, three days of Covid-19 sector response hearings at the Royal Commission into Aged Care Safety & Quality and a raft of new changes for aged care homes introduced by SA Health. Not all of it has been positive about Aged Care and has painted a picture that the sector is unprepared for Covid-19.

I want to take this opportunity to assure you that prior to all of this recent media attention, the team at Helping Hand had been working extremely diligently behind the scenes to prepare for the increasing threat of Covid-19 in our communities. We have been developing plans to mitigate the risk of infections and then to manage an outbreak at one (or more) of our care homes, in a worst-case scenario.

There are many lessons learned from the experiences of aged care homes from interstate and overseas and we have been closely monitoring those and implementing changes as appropriate. This letter is to provide some insights and assurances as to the steps we have taken. It also explains what you can expect if there was an outbreak at any one of our homes.

1. OUR PLANNING

Hospital transfer protocols established by SA Health

Residential homes are not hospitals and cannot deliver the same level of intensive specialist medical treatment. That is why, in South Australia, SA Health has established protocols requiring any resident who tests positive for COVID-19 to be immediately transferred by ambulance to the COVID-19 unit at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. This relates to residents in metropolitan and regional areas. If more than two residents test positive, it will be automatically assumed that any other residents with COVID-19-like symptoms are also positive and they too will be transferred to Royal Adelaide Hospital.

This measure alone can have a significant impact on containing the spread within the home, as well as providing expert and specialised medical care for infected residents.

Helping Hand has been meeting weekly with SA Health as part of a small Aged Care working group since the pandemic began. This has allowed us to gain insights and provide feedback for the best interests of residents and staff in Helping Hand residential care homes.

Simulation events

Helping Hand has a well-established Covid-19 Risk Management Plan and a Crisis Management Plan which we regularly review and update as new information becomes available. We have also seen how these plans work in action by holding real time simulation tests at each of our residential care homes.

We were selected to conduct a live simulation with the SA Health and the State Command Centre which was valuable for all parties. Simulations provide staff an opportunity to test different scenarios and response times, establish lines of communication and identify responsibilities and roles. I have personally participated in these exercises and I am confident that our staff are as prepared as they can be. We will continue to do these regularly.

Communications

In event of an outbreak, Helping Hand is committed to keeping you fully informed on the status of the outbreak. I assure you that we will be transparent and timely in our communications. There will be text messages, email correspondence and as appropriate, webinars. An information hotline will be established.

Our ability to contact you as quickly as possible relies on having your current contact details. Email and mobile phone are our preferred way to reach you. Please contact site administration at the earliest opportunity so we can confirm your mobile phone, email, and postal address.

Contact Tracing & Screening

All aged care homes are required to keep detailed records of all visitors to the site to assist with contact tracing in the event of an outbreak. Many of you would have already experienced our comprehensive screening protocols. These will continue and we thank you for your cooperation with this important part of our infection control protocol.

Screening of staff has been further enhanced to include tracking of all other workplaces that they may attend.

Workforce

In the event of an outbreak, many of the care home's staff may be required to self-isolate at very short notice. To prepare for such a situation we have been developing a "surge workforce" strategy that includes:

- Identifying staff from other Helping Hand sites and services that can support the site where the outbreak occurs
- Building and training a large pool of casual workers for back-filling roles
- Rostering changes to ensure staff working across multiple Helping sites, are now assigned to a single home
- Engaging with the Universities to access well trained final year nursing students
- Relying on the Commonwealth Department of Health who can provide workforce support
- Working with other Uniting Church agencies to share workforce

Importantly, Helping Hand has generous policies in place to ensure staff are not financially disadvantaged if they are self-isolating following a Covid-19 test, or if they are sick. We have emphasised this from the beginning of the pandemic.

You may have heard that personal care workers have been restricted to working at a single residential care home. We will ensure this SA Health Direction is introduced to Helping Hand by the due date of the 27th August.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

During the early stages of the pandemic, we trained over 500 staff in Coronavirus and infection control. Refresher training is occurring, which includes the proper use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

We have ensured a supply of PPE at each site in the event of an outbreak and have a central supply. SA Health and the Commonwealth have stockpiles of PPE that will be made available as needed.

Under new SA Health Directions announced recently, we will be introducing further PPE precautions to help keep residents safe. These will include the use of face masks when providing care to residents where a 1.5m distance cannot be applied. So from the 27th August you will see many of our staff wearing face masks. While this may feel confronting at first, it is precautionary only and does not mean there has been an outbreak.

We are considering our policies around the requirement for families, friends and volunteers to wear masks and will keep you advised.

2. WHAT TO EXPECT IF THERE IS A COVID-19 OUTBREAK

In the event of an outbreak, you have our commitment and assurance that we will continue to provide ongoing clinical care, personal support and service delivery for all residents.

We have developed a comprehensive “First 24 hours outbreak plan” based on guidance from national and state health authorities. In summary, this is what you can expect:

- the organisation’s Crisis Management Plan will be activated.
- residents, staff, families and volunteers will be notified immediately that there has been an outbreak
- visitor restrictions will be introduced as part of a site “lockdown”, except for end of life and special circumstances, which will be managed on a case by case basis
- essential GP and allied health visits will continue, with appropriate screening or, this may occur via telehealth
- any resident who tests positive for COVID-19 will be transferred to the COVID-19 unit at the Royal Adelaide Hospital and their nominated representative will be notified immediately
- if more than two residents test positive, all other residents with COVID-19 symptoms will be transferred to the COVID-19 unit at the Royal Adelaide Hospital
- SA Health will support the site with contact tracing and Covid-19 testing
 - any staff member who tests positive will go into immediate self-isolation at their own home
 - residents and staff who have had close contact with someone who has tested positive will also be tested and required to self-isolate, pending results
 - staff cannot return to the site until they have been cleared for COVID-19
 - staff displaying any symptoms are not permitted to come to work, they are requested to undertake testing and self-isolate until test results are known
- an information hotline will be set up for families and staffed by appropriately skilled Helping Hand personnel
- the home will remain in lockdown until advised by SA Health.

While the site remains in lockdown, staff will continue to focus on providing daily personal support and clinical care for residents. This will include the close monitoring for potential COVID-19 symptoms.

They will also offer emotional reassurance and care to residents and will also support keeping in touch through telephone, video calls and window visits where appropriate.

3. SUMMARY

Our preparedness plans have been developed through collaboration and extensive consideration of domestic and global experience and we continue to work with SA Health and other key partners as part of a State-wide response to COVID-19 and aged care.

This is a volatile and uncertain time and while we cannot predict or control the impact of COVID-19, we have and will continue to be as best prepared as we possibly can to ensure the safety and support for those in our care.

Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact your site manager.

We thank you for your ongoing support and understanding.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Stewart', written in a cursive style.

Chris Stewart
Chief Executive Officer