



## EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IN DIFFICULT TIMES

Kindly Note: As the pandemic has intensified throughout the country and in Gauteng - and residents have been isolated to their rooms for their protection - many of the endeavours described below have had to be modified. When you read this Report please bear in mind that programmes that were previously social, with appropriate physical distancing, have had to be curtailed and replaced with individualised efforts.

-----

The **Chevrah Kadisha** has the responsibility of looking after elderly and vulnerable members of the Jewish community often beyond, and certainly within, our residential homes. An important part of this is providing quality physical, medical and emotional support to the 1,000 residents in its various facilities.

Since the onset of Covid-19, vigilant protection has been provided in the form of early lockdown, strict access and infection control measures, and intensive staff training. Residents have been prevented from physically interacting with their families and friends. The severity of the pandemic and the dangers it poses to this demographic has necessarily changed the way in which they are cared for.

This means that in addition to providing physical and medical protection, the Chev has also had to be mindful of the psycho-social threat to the wellbeing of residents now that their environment has changed so drastically. Added to the fact that communication with residents - and between residents and their carers - has been impeded by face masks that challenge their hearing and their ability to recognise people, the Chev has had to be innovative and creative in finding ways to keep them active, entertained and emotionally healthy.

When Coronavirus is suspected or confirmed, the challenges of trying to isolate residents suffering with dementia, intellectual disability or mental illness are complex. They don't necessarily understand what is happening or why they have to be confined to their rooms and refrain from touching each other. This can result in resistance and behavioural challenges.

**It is in this domain of isolation across the Chev's residential facilities that the Chev's Programming and Social Services departments have joined forces and stepped up to enrich the lives of residents in dozens of ways every day.**



These professional teams are constantly checking-in and engaging with residents to let them know that although the world looks different, they are not alone and that the Chev is here to support them.

Social workers are available for discussions and chats during the day, specifically reaching out to those who are struggling emotionally. Beautifully illustrated and user-friendly **Social Care packages** have been delivered to residents in their rooms over the past few weeks which focus on Mindfulness and Meditation - deep-breathing exercises and teachings on relaxation, gratitude and positive thinking.

A dedicated line has been set up so that residents can make contact with social workers should they need to talk to someone. A suggestion box was also installed in a central location in order that residents could unobtrusively alert staff as to which of their friends might need extra attention.

The Programming team ensures that there are opportunities for exercise, cognitive stimulation and recreation throughout the day, every day. There are small seated-movement classes outdoors, respecting physical distancing, and walks in the sunshine around the beautiful gardens.

The array of activities on offer is imaginative and varied and residents are constantly provided with books, puzzles and crafts, like potting plants and painting pots, amidst many other ideas. In fact new ones are on offer every morning. A noticeboard outside the dining room features relevant information about upcoming Jewish festivals and positive messages of encouragement. The Activity Table alongside the notice board offers a weekly newsletter.

Children in the community, family members and generous friends and volunteers, are always delivering surprise delights for the residents – delicious treats and gifts. Some community families have gone to the trouble of staging outdoor balcony concerts for the residents who watch from their windows and sing along to the music.

As lockdown began the need was identified to offer to shop for residents and to bring them items of personal preference that they usually purchased themselves, such as chocolates, biscuits, yoghurt, toiletries and cleaning products. Shopping lists were drawn up and distributed and the service has been widely used and appreciated. A machine was installed to enable residents to purchase airtime and another to make it possible for them to draw cash when they need to.

To compensate for being unable to see their families the teams set up an e-visiting system on Skype and WhatsApp. Staff take cell phones to residents and facilitate calls to their various family members. Assistance is offered to help residents who wish to email their families and when family members want to make a resident's birthday, or other occasions, special, the teams are on standby to assist with arranging loving messages and celebratory cakes.

Support groups are run intermittently for staff when they feel overwhelmed and when restriction levels allow for them. When staff return to work after having recovered from Covid-19, social workers provide support for their re-integration without stigmatisation.

On the Chev's Corona website, social workers are writing and posting topical psychosocial articles to keep the community updated and to promote mental health, effective parenting,

Ubuntu and strategies for coping with the lockdown – all topics focused on offering hope and optimism during these difficult days.

Social Services manage the 24/7 community Helpline for crisis intervention and containment, combating loneliness and depression during lockdown and sustaining mental health.

In Selwyn Segal the Programming team continually offer the residents activities throughout the day including picnics on the property, exercise, arts and crafts and baking. Residents are kept in their residential groups and encouraged to wash their hands and maintain physical distancing.

Recently Programming and Social Services worked together to launch the Rainbow Project, a theme that spans the globe and inspires hope and positivity. Residents and staff were all given rainbow biscuits to launch our rainbow theme and our notice boards are filled with positive messages and pictures of rainbows. There are printed rainbow placemats for the dining room. Their days are filled with rainbow-themed activities symbolic of encouragement.

In conclusion, all the Chev teams cooperate in seeking ways to provide happiness and meaning at this uncertain time. The Chev is making every effort, and engaging its wide range of professionals and their expertise, to ensure that when this pandemic is over – and it will at some point be – our residents emerge whole and healthy, not only physically, but emotionally and psychologically too.

This is the challenge we face and while it is a careful balancing act, the feedback we get from residents is more than encouraging – it is hopeful.