

## **Life Without Barriers Pandemic Response**

Life Without Barriers (LWB) is a charitable organisation supporting close to 23,000 people nationally, living in over 400 communities across the nation. LWB provides services and support to individuals so they can achieve their goals and maximise their opportunities to participate as fully in society as they choose. Services include Disability and Aged Care, Child, Youth and Family, Mental Health, Refugees and Asylum Seekers, and Homelessness. They partner with the people they support, their families and communities, peak bodies, government, and the private sector.

They employ approximately 8000 people to ensure the delivery of these services.

2020 saw LWB face new challenges in terms of being able to provide its services nationally and protect its staff within the context of a pandemic. Public Health Orders, social distancing, lockdowns, and border closures within a context of differing rules in each state required an agility in planning and execution. The context and some concerns of their staff, clients and community included:

- Fear and anxiety in the community is likely to continue and potentially increase.
- Key community services (e.g. health services, schools, childcare facilities and public transport) will be disrupted, with little notice provided.
- General and broad economic downturn will occur.
- Uncertainty and inconsistency in government responses and media reports, increasing confusion and anxiety.
- Social distancing measures had been recommended by the government / health officials to help mitigate the impacts of the pandemic.
- Supply of PPE and new infection control requirements
- Potential lockdown procedures.
- Need for iterative authoritative information

### **Organisational Risk of the Pandemic**

In addition to the risk of clients and/or employees contracting an infectious disease, becoming very ill or dying, the COVID-19 pandemic presented multiple risks, including:

- Lack of continuity of service delivery to clients and carers.
- Shortages of critical supplies, including medical supplies, equipment, personal protective equipment (e.g. masks and gloves) and essential grocery items.
- The public health system becoming overwhelmed, which may present issues for clients with high and/or complex medical needs.
- Staff shortages – this may be due to illness, preventative quarantine, caring for others, school closures or anxiety – leading to workforce shortages/inability to provide services.
- Financial implications – due to decreased service delivery, increased reliance on agency staff.
- Increased difficulties in meeting regulatory and contractual obligations.

## **The Action and Plan**

Early in February 2020 when the reality and potential impact of the COVID 19 became apparent LWB moved quickly to develop their Pandemic Plan and establish a decision making and governance mechanism. The Chief Executive (CE) was immediately established as National Emergency Management Controller with an Executive Group to make decisions and implement priorities. This group met daily to make decisions, redirect resources, prioritise effort, and respond to a rapidly changing environment. This meant that as changes were imposed, LWB had the agility to respond quickly.

Their Pandemic Plan had two clear goals: continuity of care for the people they support and the safety and wellbeing of their clients, staff, and carers. Within the Pandemic Plan were 9 focus areas with operational plans underneath. This meant everyone in the organisation knew the priority and what they were responsible for. It resulted in management and staff feeling personally engaged in a collective effort. Engagement and communication were critical.

Their centralised emergency management approach created a sense of safety and was a different way of working from the usual. Prior to the pandemic the operational structure was more jurisdictional and operationally decentralised. In the new pandemic environment, this would have been a slow, and probably, impossible way to manage the rapid changes that LWB faced, and to ensure risks were mitigated.

## **Pandemic Plan**

To be noted, the Plan was never intended to be static but to take into consideration the changing nature of the issue. Some adjustments occurred based on the actualisation of the Pandemic and it was not a linear trajectory. LWB are still operating in an adaptation rather than recovery mode.

The management response consisted of 4 phases delivered separately or concurrently dependant on the circumstances

### Phase 1

Where there were isolated cases, the plan required LWB to monitor the spread of the disease, adhere to government advice and prepare for any potential escalated response.

During this phase, LWB clients, employees and stakeholders are largely unaffected by the pandemic. In response, they:

- Established an emergency management team and identify other critical roles that will be involved in the pandemic response.
- Identify essential and non-essential services as well as clients with high/complex medical needs (and their direct support employees).
- Develop local pandemic response plans.

### Phase 2

When there was human to human transmission of the virus, with low to medium spread and/or impact, LWB sought government advice on essential service provision, implemented social distancing and relevant lockdown protocols and reduced non-essential services.

During this phase, LWB clients, employees and stakeholders may have been infected or living with an infected person, and there was an increasing concern for vulnerable people. Employees could be unavailable to support clients or corporate functions.

LWB:

- Activated their pandemic response plan
- Closely monitored the impact within LWB
- Scaled down or deployed virtual methods for some non-essential services
- Remained aware of, and adhere to, notification requirements of all relevant federal, state and territory statutory authorities
- Communicated regularly with Clients, Carers, Staff, Stakeholders, Executive and Board.

### Phase 3

Where there was widespread human to human transmission of the virus, with high impact in the community LWB followed government advice on essential service provision, enacted full lockdown protocols where required, and ensured essential services continued to operate.

LWB clients, employees and stakeholders were significantly affected and all non-essential service delivery will cease. LWB acted by:

- Engaging government support for vulnerable clients
- Maintaining pandemic response plans
- Implementing scenario planning and rapid, tactical business adaptation to actively manage emerging risks and ensure business continuity
- Provided regular internal reporting about the impact within Life Without Barriers, including the number of infected people or casualties, the number of lockdowns and clients/employees in isolation, resources needed, risks and any mitigating actions
- Communicated regularly with Clients, Carers, Staff, Stakeholders, Executive and Board.

### Phase 4

Once health officials confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic was under control, LWB shifted focus on relief, recovery and resuming operations. Noting, in practice this phase continues to iterate with the current focus on vaccination.

### **The Actions**

The Pandemic required a different way of working and adjustment was rapid and innovative. At a practical level delivering what was needed early and efficiently to look after people and keep them as safe as possible - from PPE supplies, to psychological supports, and service adaptations, engendered trust in the organisation by staff, clients, carers, and families.

A COVID Response Call Centre was established so that LWB could support staff, monitor, and track individual cases and manage positive cases. This provided them the ability to report and monitor risk.

They paused non-essential work in order to prioritise the COVID response in a manner as to provide a shield around front line staff and clients. Working from home was implemented immediately, except for those front-line staff who had to continue with face to face support. Some services were pared back to only essential services and others supported using technology.

They also developed a living digital intranet library and call centre support to ensure that their staff had access to the latest and best information across all focus areas. They were both highly successful outcomes of the organisational response.

Besides information, staff were also upskilled in terms of undertaking mandatory infection control and PPE training which has had the unintended consequence of reducing illness generally as well as increasing protections against COVID19.

LWB initiated the following health and safety measures:

#### Health Advice, Wellbeing and Support

Encouraging employees to:

- Call the nurse-led Coronavirus Health Information Hotline if they are unwell.
- Notify a dedicated internal team if they have any concerns or questions about the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Contact the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to access free mental health support if needed.
- A range of targeted wellbeing and support initiatives for staff, carers, clients.

#### Infection Control

- Provide advice to employees to stay home if they are sick or have been in contact with someone who is suspected to have, or has, the COVID-19 virus.
- Provide personal protective equipment (e.g. gloves, masks) to employees when required.
- Regularly clean and disinfect high touch surfaces and working surfaces.
- Open windows where possible.
- Educate and inform staff and clients about good hygiene practices.
- Postpone all non-essential visits to our supported independent living / residential care homes.

#### Social Distancing and Quarantine

- Avoid handshakes and physical contact.
- Where possible, maintaining 1.5 metres away from other people in a shared environment.
- Hold meetings via video/phone conference, rather than face to face.
- Follow self-isolation / quarantine controls recommended by government / health officials.

#### Communication

- Focus on regular communication using a variety of methods – COVID Alerts, letters to families, specific resources, intranet library, briefing sessions, SMS, video.

## **The outcome**

The CE lead the centralised overt approach and it meant that everyone was clear about the two organisational priorities: continuity of care for the people they support and the safety and wellbeing of their clients, staff, and carers. A significantly high level of engagement from the top down and across the business resulted in key success factors, as was the clarity of purpose articulated in the Pandemic Plan. This resulted in the rapid implementation of support, technology and information flow which were critical to creating a trusted environment.

There was a constant and multi-faceted communication with consistent messaging and authoritative information provided to staff and clients alike. This level of transparency and information resulted in a high level of trust. The proof was that that the organisation had almost no staff refusing to work even when they faced positive cases in the organisation among staff and clients.

They did not lose sight of staff wellbeing at any stage and this was evident a range of initiatives including in policies that granted additional support leave to staff including casuals.

The willingness of every level and portfolio within LWB to step in, up or sideways was evident, particularly during the second wave in Victoria that unfolded in June 2020 which saw Victorians living in lockdown conditions for months. Resources and gestures of support were coordinated for staff, clients, carers, and families. The gestures of regular phone calls for support from managers and executives, gift baskets and other such tokens were appreciated by employees.

They received a lot of positive feedback from staff through various mechanisms including emails to CE, pulse surveys, direct feedback to COVID Response Unit etc. For example:

### **Communications to Families**

“I met with the Family and Supporters Group yesterday and they overwhelmingly agreed that the increase in communication we are sending is positive and the more we send the better.

Thanks for the support from you and your team in ramping up the comms. It is really making a big difference for staff, clients and families.”

### **Staff Gift Voucher in VIC Lockdown**

“I wanted to let you know that your kind gesture touched my heart and brought me to tears. I have worked in Disability now for 27 years and never have I felt such warmth and care from an employer, since transferring over to LWB I have found all the corporate people to be kind, friendly, and good at their job. This is very rare, and you need to be commended for it LWB really does feel like a family.

Many thanks again for your gift”

### **Feedback from VIC after lockdown**

“I just want to pass on our sincere thanks from the East Management and House Teams. The feedback I have received in regard to LWB’s swift action and response to Covid-19 has been outstanding.

Personally I feel the fact that staff continued to come to work each day knowing that their lives, their families lives and the lives of the residents for whom they care were at risk is exceptional and

I myself have not heard one word from staff that did not compliment the efforts made by the Covid Response and LWB Management Team.

Residents Care Packages, Gifts and Vouchers were well received, and staff felt a sense of worthiness and appreciation.

It is my belief the efforts made by LWB contributed to the high level of professionalism and resilience shown by staff and House Supervisors and contributed to lessening the impact to residents during this difficult period.”

### **Feedback from WA after first outbreak**

“...My experience of the CRU team (which has been limited up to this week!) has been incredibly positive. From my initial contact with xx on Sunday and all the way through, I couldn't speak highly enough of you all. I am sure there have been some really challenging times for everyone at the height of the pandemic and the Vic second wave, however you should be incredibly proud of the responsiveness and support of your team”

### **How did they fare**

COVID 19 provided a burning platform to adapt, change and prioritise in a way not seen for over 100 years. For LWB, as a large charitable organisation providing essential services, a clear plan with distilled goals was vital. Communicating about this plan daily was critical to alleviate anxiety and ensure the 9 focus areas of the Pandemic Plan were understood and communicated to everyone. Leadership including regular engagement from CE vital – both internally and externally. There was Board level oversight of key decisions. This meant a centralised executive authority to make decisions, support and implement. Good governance framework and record keeping which was essential for the critical success factor

Rapid decision making and a daily iterative process meant effective implementation of necessary changes. The organisation capitalised on this new speedy mechanism to implement changes without compromising transparent and effective communication with their staff. This also allowed adjustments to how services were provided and resulted in the organisation being able to avoid any staff cutbacks and keep their people employed.

The organisation continues utilising the rapid response mechanism which it did from day one to enable an ongoing ability to prioritise resources and mobilise implementation of initiatives.

The organisation experienced all staff willing to jump in and help front line staff. Technology was an essential tool in implementing the changes and ICT solutions were pushed out at a pace unseen before to ensure that that staff were able to work remotely and clients to continue to be supported. The right people were brought together quickly to solve the complex problems of changing our work practices. This was a whole of organisation approach rather than departmental piecemeal actions

The financial cost to do this was significant but the decision was made at the outset that cost was not guiding the decision making. Whilst this may appear counterintuitive for any organisation, it provided the impetus for staff to work together to achieve a common goal and put LWB on the path to have a sustained recovery as they come out of the pandemic.

In reviewing their pandemic response in 2020, key organisational strengths have emerged:

- Stronger Leadership internally and externally
- Better and transparent communication mechanisms
- Ability to scenario plan, adapt and change at pace
- Quick decision making
- A united LWB community
- Increased confidence in our organisational ability to manage a crisis at scale
- Rapid investment in the physical and psychological safety of everyone
- High level of employee trust of management
- Technical capability increased and solutions are now delivered rapidly
- Flexible working arrangements. The implementation of working remotely has proved to be a benefit to many staff in the work/life balance and will inform future ways of working
- Increased engagement and influence with government, Health, and other sectors

While the trajectory of COVID management continues to emerge including vaccination and its implementation within LWB - the leadership, responsiveness, adaptability, and capability developed to date remains embedded in the way they work now and into the future. There is demonstrated trust and confidence built throughout this Pandemic response that provides an even stronger foundation for adaptability to unexpected changes, and LWB's future as they begin their new Strategy for the next 5 years.

The organisational values remain current, and highly visible over the past 16 months.