

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Information for members

13 MARCH 2020



AASW

Australian Association
of Social Workers

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

This document provides information and guidelines for social workers working with clients in relation to the spread and impacts of COVID-19. For the the latest advice, information and resources, go to www.health.gov.au.

Social work and Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Everyday social workers are working directly with clients across a wide range of health and social supports and services. They play a vital role, especially in times of emergencies and issues related to public health. We recognise the impact that the recent developments with COVID-19 have had on our members and the general community. Social workers, like many health professionals, are concerned about the impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on their well-being, the people to whom they provide services, their families, and others in the community. For social workers this affects us at a professional and personal level.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness caused by a new virus. Symptoms range from a mild cough to pneumonia. Some people recover easily, others may get very sick very quickly. There is evidence that it spreads from person to person. Good hygiene can prevent infection.

The AASW is following Department of Health guidelines and we have been closely following the developments. The AASW has been providing regular updates through the e-Bulletin in relation to government guidelines and recommendations for health staff. The AASW has been working on multiple fronts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and ensure access to services, such as advocacy for the expansion of telehealth.

Social workers are in a unique position to promote disease prevention efforts (including disseminating accurate information from trusted sources), and to help address anxiety and other concerns that are arising as a result of this public health crisis.

This document provides resources to support social workers in this role. As the situation continues to rapidly evolve, the AASW will continue to monitor developments and work to support social workers and the people we work with.

Visit the [AASW's dedicated page](#) for all the latest information, including AASW actions and advocacy. In our role as the peak representative body for Australian social workers we will continue to advocate for the social work profession and clients, with a focus on social justice and human rights.

Find Reliable Information About COVID-19

It is important to access current, accurate and up to date information. The Department of Health at a federal level provides the most up to date information and has a wide range of fact sheet and resources, including:

- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) information for health care and residential care workers](#)
 - This document is an information sheet for health care and residential care workers about coronavirus (COVID-19).
- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) resources](#)
 - [Translated resources](#)
 - [Find the facts](#)
 - [For health professionals, including pathology providers and healthcare managers](#)
 - [Home isolation and care](#)
 - [For travellers who have been in mainland China, Iran, Republic of Korea and Italy](#)
 - [For international travellers](#)
 - [For parents of school aged children](#)
 - [For aged care residents and families](#)
 - [For childcare, schools and higher education](#)
 - [For employers](#)
 - [For travel, transport and hotel industries](#)
 - [Posters](#)

To stay up to date locally and internationally you can access the following:

- For national updates - [**Australian Government's Department of Health - News**](#)
- For international updates - the [**World Health Organisation \(WHO\)- coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)**](#)

Supporting Clients

Reducing Anxiety

There is widespread concern and anxiety about COVID-19, which is common in the case of epidemics and pandemics. There are still uncertainties about this disease which also fuels anxiety and panic. Current or anticipated disruptions in day-to-day life, such as quarantine of loved ones, travel plan cancellations or school closures, also fuels these feelings.

Many people are experiencing mood problems, sleep issues, phobia and spikes in symptoms for pre-existing mental health conditions. Social workers are uniquely positioned to help address the psychosocial dimensions of health crises. They can help clients find constructive ways to manage their anxiety, especially if these worries are adversely impacting work performance, relationships, and daily routines.

In addition, social workers can help parents and guardians communicate with their children about COVID-19 and allay anxiety they may have regarding the disease and its impacts.

This guide from UNICEF provides a valuable resource to working with children and families: [How to talk to your child about coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)

Preparing for Quarantine or Containment Controls

As COVID-19 is being monitored globally and across Australia, public health guidance is rapidly changing. Social workers can help individuals and families be proactive in preparing for potential quarantine or other measures if COVID-19 is identified in their area.

Consider:

- If schools are closed, how can families plan for the care of their children?
- If travel is restricted, are there relatives and neighbours who will need assistance?
- Have families stocked up on food, household supplies, and necessary medications in the event that people are asked to remain at home?
- Do families have the resources and capital (financial and social) to get through an extended period of isolation?
- How may the virus impact existing issues, for example mental health, family violence, disability, drug and alcohol, housing.

Government website will provide up to date information on emergency payments that your clients may be able to access.

Preparing Your Practice

For social workers in private or smaller practices, consider these action items if you have a private practice:

- **Cleaning and Hygiene:** Follow [Department of Health](#) guidelines on cleaning and hygiene protocols for your workplace.
- **Communication:** Let your clients know through multiple channels that you are aware of COVID-19 and measures you are implementing to keep your office as safe as possible (e.g. cleaning, arrangement of furniture, cancellation policy flexibility to reduce exposures from ill or potentially ill clients).
- **Management:** Identify someone who can run the key business operations in the event of a disruption to your operations such that you will need support.
- **Telehealth:** Some clients (or you) may prefer to provide services via telehealth for a period of time. If you do not currently provide services in this manner, visit the [AASW's telehealth page](#)

for guidance and further information about the Medicare Rebate.

How can we help prevent the spread of coronavirus?

Practising good hand and sneeze/cough hygiene is the best defence against most viruses.

You should:

- wash your hands frequently with soap and water, before and after eating, and after going to the toilet
- cover your cough and sneeze, dispose of tissues, and use alcohol-based hand sanitiser
- and if unwell, avoid contact with others (stay more than 1.5 meters from people).

How can we educate the broader community?

As social workers, we need to be ambassadors of rational, fact-based approaches to the epidemic. Take time to review information from the Department of Health and the World Health Organization on how the coronavirus is spread, symptoms of the disease, and know the steps people can take to lessen their chances of contracting coronavirus.

Self-care

As social workers, we understand the ongoing need to take care of ourselves and each other as we approach our work. This may include:

- Reflective self-care; keeping healthy and well-rested.
- Staying actively connected with colleagues and support systems.
- Creating more opportunities for discussion and support among ourselves.
- Continuing our variety of engagements in social action and social justice work.

Ethics and Practice Standards Consultation Service (Members only)

The Ethics and Practice Standards Consultation Service is a free service for members and relevant others (such as employers of AASW members) to consider, discuss and process ethical dilemmas and ethical practice issues.

Our ethics and practice standards staff can provide both verbal and written information in relation to ethics and practice issues and assist in linking ethical and best practice decision making to the Code of Ethics, Practice Standards and broader ethical and practice theories.

The ethics consultation service can be contacted by email ethicsconsult@asw.asn.au.

Alternatively, you can phone 03 9320 1044. The voice message is checked regularly and a member of the team will respond as soon as practicable.

Please note that the service is experiencing a significant volume of calls and emails and we thank you for your patience.

Information and resources can also be accessed on the AASW website [here](#).

What else can you do in your own practice setting?

As social workers, we are guided by the core values of service to community, social justice and the dignity and worth of every person. We practice with integrity and competence. Social work professionals must be an active participant in the community response to emerging public health crises.

We can:

- Actively participate in public and private health care policy and planning bodies to ensure that clients receive necessary and appropriate care with the guarantee of confidentiality and patient rights protections.
- Learn from history and take lessons from the fears and misinformation of previous pandemics and public health events to better understand and confront the stigma and discrimination of persons perceived as being more at risk for transmitting coronavirus, such as people of Asian descent.
- Implement programs to educate colleagues and allied providers on the facts about COVID-19.
- Know community resources and share information with clients and colleagues.
- Across fields of practice, the coronavirus epidemic will call upon social workers to utilize the bio-psycho-social approach as we apply our training and skills to engage, support, and advocate for our clients, patients, and the larger communities in which we work and live.

Member queries

For any queries you can contact the AASW on (03) 9320 1000 or email social.policy@aasw.asn.au.

This resource was based and adapted from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Coronavirus Guide

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