

## **Staff at the heart of Monte Cecilia's pandemic support for tenants**

"We're not interested in just their rent, we're interested in their health and wellbeing."

That's Bernie Smith, Chief Executive of Auckland's Monte Cecilia Housing Trust, talking about what's driving staff to continue working during a pandemic. It's about maintaining a service that absolutely matters to the 300 whānau, including more than 800 children, living in the Trust's 70 transitional homes and 230 community rentals dotted throughout the region.

Half of the Trust's staff are working from home and the other half from the office, well-spaced out and observing health and safety protocols. Their 'new normal' involves keeping in touch with tenants by phone twice a week to check that they're all right, if there's been any change in their financial circumstances, and to make sure they are still able to put food on the table.

If tenants are considered vulnerable because of their age, health or for other reasons, or if they are not able to get to a supermarket to buy what their family needs, then Monte Cecilia's staff work with them to arrange home deliveries or to connect them with foodbanks able to help out. They're also being given a hand by regular truckloads of fruit and veg from the national food rescue charity KiwiHarvest (<https://kiwiharvest.org.nz>).

"The response from tenants has been phenomenal," says Bernie Smith. "People have been really taken aback by the effort being put into their wellbeing."

Trust staff are also going into bat for any tenants or staff whose partners have lost their jobs as a result of the lockdown, contacting their employers to make sure they know about the Government's wage subsidy. Monte Cecilia has also stopped pursuing any rent arrears or collecting debt resulting from wilful damage to its properties, for the duration of the pandemic.

"We'll pick this up at the right time but it's not the thing to focus on now. We're dealing with some of the most vulnerable members of society, and these whānau need our support."

The key to all of this support, says Bernie Smith, is the staff of Monte Cecilia.

"We can only do this because of the people who work at Monte Cecilia and the level of care they're bringing to the work.

"In return, as a housing provider it's important that we walk the talk and make sure our staff feel appreciated."

Staff working in the Trust's office have been encouraged to have online Zoom meetings with colleagues regularly. These are not based on the teams they work in but, rather, are an informal chance to talk to others about how things are going for them, express their frustrations and anxiety, and work through any issues. A virtual tea room, in other words.

Bernie Smith says he also brought forward the annual pay review and gave staff a pay rise just before the lockdown took effect.

"When people feel cared about, that flows through into their work with tenants."

<http://montececilia.org.nz>