

## MAHI AROHA

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### Aroha ki te tangata, he tāngata

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#### Abstract

The Covid-19 lockdown over March to May 2020 meant households became their own “bubbles”, with residents physically interacting only with those in their household and staying close to home. Māori leaders recognised the potential of the lockdown to exacerbate whānau vulnerability due to confinement, financial hardship and, depending on their household, issues of crowding or isolation. Steps were quickly taken to support households with care packages, health care and social connectivity. This paper describes these initiatives as mahi aroha and argues that housing is a foundation from which Māori go out into the world and add meaning and quality to the lives of others. If the mahi aroha of Māori during a lockdown or other crisis is to be sustained into the future, then access to quality, affordable housing must be ensured for Māori essential workers.

#### **Mahi aroha: Covid-19 and Māori essential work**

On 21 March 2020 the New Zealand Government introduced a country-wide, four-level alert system in response to steadily rising numbers of Covid-19 cases linked to people recently returned to the country from overseas. The government set the alert level to 2 to reflect the risk of community transmission of the disease and asked those with compromised immune systems and those over 70 years of age to stay at home. The alert level was raised to 3 on 23 March 2020 and schools were closed that same day. The government also announced that the country would move to alert level 4 from 11:59pm, 25 March 2020. The progression from the introduction of an alert system to alert level 4 therefore happened quickly, with efforts made to socialise the alert system and our need as a country to take swift action in the days leading up to the level 4 lockdown.

At alert level 4 most businesses and educational facilities closed and everyone except those deemed to be “essential workers” (e.g., health practitioners

and supermarket workers) were confined to their homes and required to be in physical contact only with those in their household “bubble”. People could leave their house to exercise and go to the supermarket in their local area, as long as they practised two-metre physical distancing. When the country then went back to alert level 3 at 11:59pm, 27 April, the restrictions of level 4 eased slightly. For example, people could extend their bubble to include close whānau or caregivers but were discouraged from allowing social visitors into their home. The alert level 3 and 4 lockdowns, with many whānau confined to anything from small, single-person bubbles through to large, multigenerational bubbles, challenged many people’s health as well as their social, cultural and financial well-being. The lockdowns were a literal quadruple bottom-line threat for whānau, even while being seen as necessary to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

It was not until the country entered alert level 2 at 11:59pm on 13 May 2020 that most people could head physically back to work (if they still

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had a job) or school, and most businesses began to reopen if they could implement the one-metre physical distancing requirement (New Zealand Government, 2020). We moved to the lowest lockdown level, level 1, at 11:59pm, 8 June 2020, and physical distancing and social gathering restrictions were lifted, although the country's border remained closed. While there is uncertainty about how long level 1 will last, with a Covid-19 vaccine seen by many as a key determinant of this, the country retains an alert system and preparedness to increase the alert level again if warranted by any future community clusters of Covid-19. It is therefore important to learn from what happened for Māori during the level 4 lockdown, in particular, so that we can celebrate the ways in which people looked after one another and also help ensure our capacity to do so again, should the need arise because of Covid-19 or some other crisis or disaster.

Iwi, hapū and Māori organisations quickly recognised the vulnerability of many whānau under alert level 4, and hastily (re)configured services and essential workers to deliver food parcels, hygiene packs and other resources to people's doorsteps. Those confined to their homes took to their phones and email to check in with their clients and their relations, especially those who were older or immunocompromised, and many also broadcast karakia, messages of encouragement and hope, and exercise, cooking, educational and general survival tips to whānau (via Facebook and other social media platforms). Facebook was also a way to see how whānau were doing and to send them personalised messages along with offers of help and support. As Barlow (1991) writes, "A person who has aroha for another expresses genuine concern towards them and acts with their welfare in mind. . . . It is the act of love that adds quality and meaning to life" (p. 8). The mahi aroha—essential work undertaken out of a love for the people—of paid and unpaid Māori workers undoubtedly helped many whānau get through the challenges they faced during and after the lockdown.

We need to ensure that this capacity for mahi aroha is retained, grown and strengthened so that responsiveness to the needs of vulnerable whānau is possible when crisis strikes again, as well as on an ongoing, day-to-day basis. It is argued here that a key pillar of Māori capacity for mahi aroha is affordable housing, so that people have the security of a home base. Whether this is within their tribal rohe or they are guests on another iwi's whenua, a secure and affordable home is akin to

a tūrangawaewae in that it provides people with a base from which they can reach out and help and support others. If they are too consumed with the financial or health burdens of the housing they occupy then instead of being able to reach out to others, they may find themselves "locked in"—possibly wanting to but unable to manaaki others. In providing an overview of mahi aroha during the Covid-19 lockdown, this paper aims to spark conversations about the value of those who perform this essential work and ask whether we are doing enough to look after them, including by providing a tūrangawaewae by way of their housing. This is not intended to take away from the need many whānau have for housing, but rather to argue that the more whānau who have affordable housing and a place to call home then the more capacity Māori will have for mahi aroha.

### **Mahi aroha**

Mahi aroha was the driving motivation among those who were drafted—as redeployed workers and unpaid community workers—as essential workers within Māori communities during the Covid-19 lockdown. This section canvasses examples of Māori-driven initiatives (rather than attempting to fully report on all activity).

Early in the pandemic a National Māori Pandemic Group—*Te Rōpū Whakakaupapa Urutā*—was established by Māori health experts as a coordinated source of information for whānau Māori and the government. This group has provided information and advice about the risk posed to Māori by Covid-19 and steps the government and others can take to mitigate this risk and meet their Treaty of Waitangi obligations, as well as information about Covid-19 and the lockdown for whānau and Māori organisations (Te Rōpū Whakakaupapa Urutā, 2020).

*Iwi Rūnanga and Trust Boards* have been active during the lockdown. For example, the Maniapoto Mobile Unit has been on the road providing immunisations, particularly for kaumātua (Maniapoto Māori Trust Board, 2020). Te Tohu o Te Ora o Ngāti Awa chartered flights to deliver supplies to tribal members in lockdown on Motiti Island in the Bay of Plenty ("Ngāti Awa Fly Vital Supplies", 2020). In West Auckland, Te Whānau o Waipareira (2020) reported that it reorganised in order to provide support to whānau. Iwi have also been leaders in coordinated community responses. For example, the Tihei Mauri Ora Emergency Response Centre is a pandemic coordination unit within the rohe of Ngāti Kahungunu, led by Ngāti Kahungunu Iwi Inc. and the Hawke's Bay District

Health Board in partnership with Taiwhenua, post-settlement groups, Māori health providers, government agencies, non-governmental organisations and private organisations. Food and care packages were being delivered to “Whānau Pounamu”—those who needed to be cared for and cherished (Wairoa District Council, 2020).

*Iwi-run checkpoints* received a lot of press during the lockdown, as iwi sought to contain the entry and spread of coronavirus within their communities by setting up checkpoints to prevent outsiders travelling into their rohe. These checkpoints were staffed by volunteers and often operated with cooperation, and at times with the presence, of the police (Hurihanganui, 2020).

*Whānau Ora* services and organisations were deemed essential services during Covid-19 level 4, meaning that Whānau Ora and Māori health providers could deploy resources to support whānau (Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, 2020). An extra \$15 million of Te Puni Kōkiri funding for Whānau Ora commissioning agencies was announced in mid-April, so that they could work with wholesale suppliers to provide kai packs and winter packs for whānau (Te Ohu Kaimoana, 2020). The Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency announced early in the lockdown that it would be redeploying Whānau Ora funding and resources to support those most at risk from Covid-19, especially kaumātua (Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, 2020). In Te Waipounamu, Whānau Ora navigators delivered over 20,000 packages, and supported 800 whānau with kai and 600 with paying their power bills (“Te Waipounamu Whānau”, 2020).

*Māori health and social service providers* also responded by staying in touch with clients via phone and social media to check that they were well and asking if they needed any additional support or help. An additional \$30 million was made available so that health providers could provide a telehealth service alongside financial assistance to whānau to ensure their health needs (e.g., prescriptions) were being met. The funding also ensured the continuity of in-home care for kaumātua (Te Ohu Kaimoana, 2020). Māori and iwi health organisations have also been pivotal to the achievement of equity for Māori for flu vaccinations for over-65-year-olds in many regions (Dewes, 2020). Māori education providers also stepped up with online content for whānau, so that learning could continue during the lockdown.

There have also been many, many *whānau* who have been sharing online with the wider community to encourage and uplift people. *Te Ao Māori*

*News* has profiled many of the ways that people have done this. For example, Connie and Tony Hassan in Kaitia have been sharing waiata and karakia online through the lockdown, to contribute to “collective strengthening” (Perich, 2020, p. 1). Kirsten Holtz from Whangarei launched Mumma’s Kitchen on Facebook and Instagram during lockdown to show people that “healthy kai made easy” was within their grasp as well as to provide other useful household tips and advice (e.g., composting) (Nathan, 2020).

Many *Māori businesses* also offered support and resources to whānau during lockdown. Takitimu Fisheries, for example, supplied fish for whānau.

### **Discussion and recommendations**

The Covid-19 lockdown demonstrated the capacity Māori throughout Aotearoa have for mahi aroha. Māori moved swiftly to fill gaps in the government’s responsiveness and to ensure that whānau were remembered and cared for. Māori health experts inserted Te Tiriti o Waitangi into national pandemic narratives, iwi and hapū and Māori organisations and businesses moved to protect constituents and to deliver resources and hope to those in need, and whānau exercised their social media skills to connect across the country and around the world. In 2007 the Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector’s *Mahi Aroha* report concluded that collective identity and the responsibility that comes with relationships is central to mahi aroha, and essential to the survival and vitality of Māori (Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector, 2007). The mahi aroha canvassed by this report, however, was nowhere near the breadth of mahi aroha seen during the Covid-19 lockdown. It is therefore recommended that the Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector commit to collating the full extent of mahi aroha during 2020, as an update to its 2007 report.

Secondly, the time Māori are able to devote to service within their communities has steadily declined from the late 1990s. More hours of paid work and more people living in a house are consequences of the increasing costs of housing for many whānau, with the result that many people may have less time or energy to offer to those outside their immediate household. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those who were most able to provide mahi aroha during the Covid-19 lockdown were those whose housing was secure, as they either owned their own home or were in secure rental tenancies. Similarly, whānau in precarious housing or without homes were among those most affected by the lockdown. As housing costs continue to

rise, the concern is that Māori capacity for mahi aroha will be undermined by housing insecurity. It is therefore recommended that the housing security of the Māori essential workers during the Covid-19 lockdown be examined, to ensure that the housing foundations of mahi aroha are well understood and subsequently strengthened.

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### Glossary

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Aotearoa             | New Zealand   |
| aroha                | love, compassion  |
| hapū                 | subtribe  |
| iwi                  | tribe   |
| kai                  | food  |
| kaimahi              | worker  |
| karakia              | prayer  |
| kaumātua             | elders  |
| mahi                 | work, activity  |
| manaaki              | care for, hospitality   |
| rohe                 | area, region  |
| Te Tiriti o Waitangi | the Treaty of Waitangi  |
| Te Waipounamu        | Māori name for the South Island   |
| tūrangawaewae        | place where one has the right to stand, place where one has rights of residence and belonging through kinship and whakapapa |
| waiata               | songs   |
| whakapapa            | genealogy, lineage, descent   |
| whānau               | extended family, family group   |
| whenua               | land  |

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