

## **How should the OCA respond to human need during the COVID-19 epidemic?**

The COVID-19 epidemic has cut a swathe through our society. A very unequal country has become an even more extremely unequal country in a matter of months, as the lockdown, needed to respond to the incipient rise in COVID-19 infections, has deeply damaged livelihoods, made many small businesses unsustainable and put many people out of work.

The Mail and Guardian reports this weekend that three million jobs have been lost in the lockdown but the impact of the economic meltdown have been disproportionately felt by the poorest in South Africa. Rates of job loss are higher for manual labourers (24%) than for professionals (5%); for those with verbal contracts (22%) compared to those with written contracts (8%); for women (26%) compared to men (11%); for those with matric or less (23%) compared to those with a tertiary education (10%). Only 20% of workers who kept their jobs but lost their incomes received support from the UIF Temporary Employer-Employee Relief Scheme (TERS).

The disruption of income and livelihood activities have had massive consequence in rocketing food insecurity and hunger. Recently, the Johannesburg High Court ruled that the Department of Basic Education cannot any longer delay the resumption of school feeding programmes that are all that stand between starvation and survival for millions of South Africa's children.

In response to these impacts, the OCA, the Obs CAN and ObsID have partnered in providing food relief to homeless and those living in precarious shelter in Observatory since the start of the lockdown. We have done so because we believe that, as our president argues, we have to stand together in extraordinary times to overcome this epidemic. We cannot turn our backs on those in need.

As a result, a very successful food programme has been running in Obs providing meals to 113 people who are homeless or in marginal living circumstances across a number of sites across Observatory.

But this programme has not been without criticism. We have been accused of causing a problem by feeding people – feeding them too much, or too well. Of encouraging people to live on the streets. Of attracting criminals into Observatory because of easy availability of food. There are people who do not want us to run these programmes, or, if we are to run them, we should run them somewhere that no-one will see it happening, rather than on the Observatory Common.

But to these criticisms we say the following as the OCA:

1. The times we are living in are extraordinary and demand extraordinary measures. They also demand compassion over self-interest; concern over coercion; self-reflection rather than stereotyping. Now, more than ever, we need to put aside prejudice and work for a society that is based on mutual respect. That is what makes Observatory special.
2. The problem of homelessness and insecure living is a complex one. It is not a law enforcement problem, it is a social problem. People who live on the streets include people with mental illness, substance dependence and social difficulties. They are not criminals because they live on the street or in precarious accommodation. Viewing homelessness as criminality is neither based on evidence nor compatible with a society based on human rights.
3. Where there is criminal behaviour by people living on the street, that should be dealt with appropriately by law enforcement. But to live on the street is not a crime. To be poor is not a crime. To suffer hunger and want food is not a crime. Just as we know there are neighbours living in nice houses in Observatory who deal in drugs, there will be elements who exploit the vulnerability of homeless populations to pursue criminal behaviours. But that does not mean that homelessness and precarious shelter is criminal.

4. We want to work with all stakeholders to find solutions that protect the most vulnerable whilst minimising disruption. But inequality is disruptive and we are the most unequal society in the world, worse now with COVID-19. So, we have to live with some discomfort if we are going to live a good life – meaning a life that is based on our common humanity.

Our Ward Councillor has stated that he believes that feeding the homeless has created problems for businesses in the area. He has also bemoaned what he perceives as some residents in Observatory helping support legal action to oppose the city's attempts to execute their bylaws regarding the clearing of structures.

We disagree. We think the OCA's actions have ameliorated human suffering and reduced hardship. Cape Town is experiencing a COVID-19 storm and the desperation of people living at the margins has nothing to do with providing food for our vulnerable populations but with the crisis we are living through under COVID-19. And there are absolutely no grounds for claiming that the rights of homeless persons and those under precarious accommodation should be dispensed with when evictions will increase vulnerability to COVID-19. The enforcement of bylaws that criminalise poverty is not what we expect from a caring city.

That is what the OCA believes.

But we want to ask Observatory residents what you think. Should we be stopping the feeding programme? Should we turn our backs on the homeless? Should we stand aside as Law Enforcement officials fine and confiscate property of people who have nothing to pay fines with or to replace their shelters? Should we find ways to continue to support the vulnerable whilst managing disruption?

The OCA will be hosting a public discussion on Wed 12<sup>th</sup> at 5.30pm to 7pm where we will discuss how we should be responding. You can email us at [adminoca@obs.org.za](mailto:adminoca@obs.org.za) with your ideas and/or to RSVP to attend the virtual public meeting.

We want to hear your views on this critical matter.