

New Year Message by David Thomas

For this feature I thought I would give a personal view of the challenges we at Safe Communities Portugal have faced in dealing with this crisis over the last year and how we have dealt with these.

No one can ever prepare for a situation such as Covid-19, but at Safe Communities we have over the last three years or so established our building blocks through qualifying and becoming the only Civil Protection Voluntary Organisation under Portuguese law serving the international community in Portugal. This is much more than just a title, but instead developing an organisation, recognised officially by government, which helps communities in areas such as rural fires, crime prevention, cybercrime and more recently Covid-19.



How we serve you

Our Facebook page is in many ways the “shop window” of our organisation and when you enter you see the full array of services we offer, which are displayed on our website. When we started monitoring Covid-19 on 26th January 2020, we needed extra space so we enlarged our site creating a section for Covid-19, which has expanded considerably over the last 10 months.

Customer services is vital and so is effective communication during a crisis. Although we use radio, (thanks to KissFm), newsletters, written and on-line media and magazines in getting key messages across, our main communication tool has been through Facebook during this crisis. Responding to questions and comments, quickly where possible, with the correct answers has been perhaps the greatest challenge we have had to face.

Keeping positive

Often we receive enquiries, from people who are worried and sometimes fearful of what lays ahead. This is a natural reaction when facing the unknown and it is therefore important to try and allay those fears whenever possible. This is why negativity in a crisis is never helpful, as is the spreading disinformation, which we have encountered from time to time. Working on facts not supposition and hearsay is important so people are kept properly informed.

As a pro-active measure to encourage positivity and at the same time put a smile on people’s faces we created “SCoop”, the Pug dog, who supplements the delivery of information and advice in a less formal style. We also created a “Positive Messages” page on our website which contains comments from you that have appeared on our Facebook and other sources. Please take a look at these from time to time and it will help lift your spirits during the darker days.

Questions and answers

In many ways we are the “first line” (similar to a call centre) for many, in obtaining the answers and clarification required. We receive enquires in many forms of media, particularly through our Facebook page.

In trying to help so many people, as we have tried to do over a period of nearly year, is to say the least demanding. Faced with many new laws sometimes amounting to 30 or so pages in Portuguese, can be daunting and has presented considerable challenges in deciphering what is

important, so the foreign community and tourists are kept informed. A few incorrect words can send everyone in the wrong direction very quickly! Also naturally people require and deserve answers to questions, and although we may not have these at all at hand at the time, we are able to liaise closely with, government, the police, tourism and civil protection, Embassies and other authorities to try and ascertain these where we can. In this respect I send special thanks to the British Embassy Consular team whom we liaise with virtually on a daily basis and our contact points with the GNR and PSP.

The Portuguese Government

We work on the basis and belief that the Portuguese government has done an amazing job in dealing with what was at the beginning a “faceless and unknown” enemy. It is important that we have trust in government to make the right decisions, at the right time based on the scientific evidence available. Personally I feel that this has been amply demonstrated from the President and Prime Minister downwards with timely and effective laws and initiatives, in the absence of which many more lives would have been lost. We have a fantastic national health service (SNS) in Portugal, well led by the Director and Health Minister, and our gratitude goes to all the nurses and doctors and health workers, and others who are certainly the front line in dealing with this pandemic.

Laws are off course meaningless without compliance, and I feel we are privileged to live in a country where the population have generally followed the rules closely throughout the pandemic often with great hardship to themselves and families. I believe that the actions of the population is one of the reasons why Portugal has suffered less than certain other countries in Europe.

Turning the corner

We have now turned a new corner in the fight against Covid-19 with the implementation of the Vaccine program which started on 27th December. The Government has a well prepared Vaccination plan, supported by a dedicated page on the DGS website, and even a simulator where people can ascertain approximately when they will be vaccinated. There is clearly a well-defined structure in terms of priorities, supply, logistics and distribution of the vaccine and now we just have to wait our turn. Of course we are all dependent on the supply by the manufacturers with Portugal having on order 22 million doses.

So with that positive note I would like to thank you for all your support and to wish you on behalf our team at Safe Communities, a Very Happy New Year – Stay Safe everyone.