

Safe Communities - Communication during a Crisis

How Safe Communities Portugal has prepared for and is coping with this sort of crisis

We are clearly going through extremely challenging times as far as Covid-19 is concerned, with the highest number of daily deaths and new cases being recorded during the last week, with forecasts of higher to come.

When I first heard the news emerging from China and the WHO in January of the outbreak of the new coronavirus, it rang alarm bells taking me back to the situation in Hong Kong in 2002 with the outbreak of SARS. As a senior police officer I was inevitably involved in dealing with this outbreak which went on to kill around 300 people in such a condensed place. We learned many lessons from this experience.

As such, Safe Communities decided in our official capacity as a voluntary civil protection organisation to monitor developments closely; in fact I believe we were first organisation in Portugal to do this certainly within the foreign community. One aspect from the outset I was concerned about, was false news and misleading information. We forewarned the community about this at the time before the first new coronavirus case was confirmed in Portugal. This was an emerging problem then, but is a larger problem now; not just here but globally

How we prepared

Although of course we never know when the next crisis may occur, Safe Communities Portugal (SCP) had been preparing extremely diligently for such an event and that it may have to provide a supporting role, ever since the major catastrophic fires and ensuing emergency, just 3 years ago.

We have therefore increased the size and breadth of our capability considerably, decision-making, technology and the agility of the Association. We have also built a team of volunteers that is capable of meeting a large-scale crisis just like the one we face now. We trained to become a statutory civil protection volunteer organization, the only non-Portuguese association to achieve this status, as well as undertaking many crisis management and emergency exercises with the Portuguese government authorities.

Our work

Our aim during this pandemic is to help government in its efforts to provide informed official information and advice to the population during the Covid 19 outbreak, in order to help the community stay safe.

Specifically we provide such information in English and other languages for non-Portuguese speakers and visitors. We try to clarify to the population where we are able government information and advice, liaise with government and Embassies; counter misinformation and make proposals to Government where we consider a need to do so.

From the beginning of March to November according to Facebook Insight SCP's total reach was over 7 million (an average of 28,500 per day, the highest being 103,000 for a single post. Enquiries totalled around 70,000 i.e. 279 per day of which we estimate 70 % were answered. We also received 2000 messages over this period as well as 1300 emails.

Thousands of enquiries have been received from people from all over the world, who follow the Facebook and website asking all sorts of questions concerning visits to Portugal including:: Travel advice, Cross border issues, laws and rules in place and tourism and related matters

During Covid-19 Safe Communities became a household name, not just here in Portugal, but overseas as well.

We pride ourselves in being a trusted source of facts especially for our expats in an emergency situation, only deal in facts and the reporting of official information.

This was best summed up “Vicky from Monmouthshire” on the Safe Communities FB page who said *“This page is fabulous. One of the reasons I am moving to Portugal is because of the information here.” “Truly, it has made such a difference, sitting in the UK, unable to get to Portugal, and now, we head off to start our new lives in mid- August”.*

Our volunteers

Our work is only possible because we have a loyal team of volunteers who work without pay 24/7 when required. These include Elise Slotte, (website) Jenny Byers, Clare Keats and Eliana Taveras (Translations); Lilia Martins (Legal); Jennie Kelly (Newsletter/website); Louise Birch (overseas report) Daniel Fernandes and our colleague in the Azores (morning reports) on a daily basis as well as others. I thank you all.