



This project is co-funded by the European Union

Statement of Solidarity and Support to the Frontliners and the Local Government Authorities in Bagong Silang Barangay 176 on the Protection of the Communities and the Children at Risks Against the COVID-19 Pandemic

**by Balay Rehabilitation Center
the Children's Legal Rights and Development Center (CLRDC) and DIGNITY**

As we enter a period of extended enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), we acknowledge the efforts of the frontline workers and the authorities who lead them in supporting the communities endure the hardships brought about by the lockdown intended to contain the COVID 19 pandemic.

As your partners in child protection and violence prevention, we are aware of the challenges that public servants and the volunteers have to grapple with in keeping residents safe from the virus, and in making sure that their everyday subsistence and health needs are met. The spread of the contagion caught everyone by surprise. The harsh but necessary decision for everyone to observe the ECQ has, sadly, drove us into a situation that we are all unprepared for. Since its declaration, the lockdown has impacted most of those who are living in the socio-economic margins, families with single parents, those living with fractured families, the elderly, and persons with disability. Hardest also are the children, especially those who are at risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation and discrimination such as those living in the streets, the homeless, and those staying in household in abusive and violent relationships.

We have observed how local authorities are trying to surmount a situation where food packs are not enough, health services are overwhelmed, and where the need to maintain order and protect everyone is simply staggering. In our little way, we tried to help out by disseminating factual information from the social welfare officers in the barangay so that neighbourhoods would be guided on how to access support from the barangay and the local government. We also provided psychological and psychoeducation for some distressed community partners through social media platforms. Through another project, Balay cooperated with a faith-based organization to deliver food packs to some partners or linked them to civic groups who can deliver practical support as our modest contribution. Balay, also intend to mount an online session on psychological support ('pahungaw') and psychoeducation to alleviate the distress of frontline workers and promote their self-care.

In this trying times, we are one with the local authorities in taking steps so that those most vulnerable would be protected and that the principle of 'best interest of the child' and 'no one left behind' would continue to guide us in our cooperation. We offer the following

points for attention that together - the local authorities, their civil society partners, and community leaders - can duly consider:

1. The providers of community safety and basic social and health services should take into account the needs of children as their nutritional, hygienic, and emotional needs are distinct from adult, especially the younger children and those with special developmental needs. Children and young people who have no households to provide food and protection are most in need. The Barangay Council for the Protection of Children can take the lead in collecting information on children affected by the lockdown, including the homeless and those living in the street, identifying their unmet needs, and making representations to governing authorities and civic and faith based groups in meeting their needs. CSO partners can assist by helping collect information from the ground through their network of local contacts. This action is in line with the Nutrition Cluster Advisory No 01 series 2020: Nutrition Cluster Guidelines on LGU Nutrition Actions Relative to COVID-19.
2. Sustain the mechanism to monitor and promptly respond to violence and deprivation against children in household settings or in other locations where they can be easy targets of predatory adults. This includes threats or actual situations of sexual abuse, online sexual exploitation, and physical and psychological abuse. Public information, such as through the social media platform, can be disseminated so that the children and young people will also be made aware of their vulnerabilities and their rights, and when and how to seek help when in trouble. The barangay tanod and the purok leaders can be reminded to not only watch out for offenders of quarantine regulations, but also to observe around their neighbourhoods any threats or actual acts of violence or abuse against children. CSO partners can assist in monitoring and reporting. They can also help in public information and even open a 'helpline in coordination with the BCPC.
3. Remind enforcers and significant adults to avoid the use of punitive actions on children and young people who are remiss in complying with the quarantine regulations. Applying excessive, cruel, and inappropriate measures contravenes the principle and practice of positive discipline on children. They are also not consistent with the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act, the Anti Torture Act and analogous ordinances and official guidelines from the PNP and the JJWC. Errant children are not criminals. Maltreatment is not an effective way of educating offenders. Demonstrating compassion, providing factual information, and treating children as persons rather than detaining them, is better. It is an appropriate response for the homeless children and young people, those who are living on the streets, and those without a caring and protective household. With hardly any access to sanitary and hygiene facilities, they are at greater risk of exposure to exploitation and abuse as well as to the risk of contracting the virus. A directory of institutions and facilities where these vulnerable children can be referred to can be helpful. The BCPC, together with its CSO partners, could come up with a referral mechanism that could tap into the facilities and services of DSWD, faith-based organizations, charitable institutions, learning centers and NGOs who might have the resources to help out.
4. Information on how children suspected of having contracted COVID 19 can access health care service is helpful. The Barangay Health Emergency Teams can take the lead in disseminating factual information on signs and symptoms of the contagion, and providing practical guidance when and how to seek medical attention, and the services

that the local authorities can actually provide, such as transport support and linking with medical facilities. Children living on the streets must not be left behind in health monitoring and virus screening. Doing so reduces not only the risk to them, but to others whom they may have been in contact with. CSOs can assist in public information and linking community members – and at risk children - to the BHERT.

5. Seeking guidance from the Department of Education, those running Alternative Learning System Program – including the NGO-managed centers - can continue getting in touch with their learners, keep track of their emotional situations, offer emotional support, and know their practical need for referrals. When practicable, learning instructions may still be provided online (i.e. face book) alternative topics such as health information, accessing support, peer-to-peer supportive conversations, or other creative activities (e.g. writing songs, rap verses, art work, stories, or essays on how to survive the crisis, or keeping daily routine, and forward looking thinking) can be offered to the learners. The Committee on Education can consider coordinating with education authorities to find out how students can be encouraged to spend their time productively. CSO partners can be tapped to assist in promoting the alternative learning programs in localities where they have presence.

We wish to express our heartfelt prayers and sympathies to those who lost their lives, and our deepest gratitude to the courageous frontliners (Barangay officials, personnel, volunteers, medical and essential workers) who are in this fight against COVID 19. Once the restrictions imposed by the ECQ are lifted, we intend to hopefully resume our planned activities in Barangay 176, within the framework of the project 'Following the Child: Integrated protection of children along their pathway through the juvenile justice and welfare system'. Clearly, we see the importance of psychosocial support for children during the post quarantine when the air is clearer and there is no more risks. In the meantime, we remain at your disposal to discuss possibilities for supporting the implementation of the above recommended measures to protect children at risk in Barangay 176 Bagong Silang.

References:

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