

COVID-19 presented numerous challenges for organisations across New Zealand, prompting a need for adaptable and mitigated responses. Corrections placed their organisational values at the heart of their Covid-19 response, ensuring both the safety of staff and also the people in prison.

While it was a difficult time for all parties, an approach centered on safety, wellbeing and honesty has earned Corrections a nomination in this year's Health category at the Safeguard awards.

"We needed to take a humanizing and healing approach as an organization, to look after our own staff, which then flows on to the men and women in our care," says Vivian Whelan, Prison Director for Rimutaka Prison, as well as Prison Director for Wellington District Prisons.

Whelan notes the uncertainty many people in prison felt during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as no visitors were allowed on sites.

"It was very important that our men and women remained really connected to their whānau on the outside," says Whelan, "we did as much as we could so that our men and women could remain connected to the outside community."

Keeping people in prison up to date with what was happening in the community became a key priority for Corrections.

Staff also provided better access to phones and other audio-visual links, so that individuals could check in with their friends and whānau.

Whelan believes that it was the right thing to do, protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of staff and people in prison.

A Corrections Officer credits the communication from senior management as a significant part of the response's success.

"There were so many new processes that had to be put into place, and they kept us up to date with those changes, as those changes came."

The officer explained that new processes were introduced to prevent the virus entering prisons.

"All of us were placed in difficult times initially, but we were able to protect staff using PPE.

"New people that were being received on site were having to do a 14-day isolation period, like MIQ facilities.

"We had to introduce thermal imaging for them as well as our own staff to make sure temperatures were at a healthy level."

The health, safety and wellbeing measures included in the organisation's COVID-19 response ensured that there were no cases of COVID-19 in any of New Zealand's prisons.