

CASE STORY COLLECTION

*Stories of hope, optimism, and resilience
amidst the COVID-19 pandemic*

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Angeline Celestial

Outreach Program Manager, InTouch

The first order of business is to let people know that there are still mental health service providers that can assist even now.

“For those that need us, we are still here”: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services in a Time of COVID

Established in 1980, In Touch Community Services (InTouch for short) is the premier mental health service provider in the Philippines. It is comprised of mental health experts and various volunteers all rallying behind a banner of assistance and service to the people. The organization aims to not only address and offer assistance to those suffering from mental and emotional distress, but also to promote the importance of mental health. In a time of uncertainty, insecurity, and ever-growing dissatisfaction, InTouch's Outreach Program Manager Ms. Angeline Celestial recounts how they strived to alleviate some of the country's collective anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking back, Ms. Celestial observed that InTouch became significantly busier during the pandemic as compared before. The weight and the volume of the work did not blow up all at once and was instead a steady increase. Clients would usually prefer face to face counseling as it has proven to

be the most effective, but due to the pandemic, the organization was forced to adapt to the new normal and upgrade their web counseling services, becoming the direct care service. Ms. Celestial noted that phone counseling had the most notable increase with it almost doubling in instances, going over a thousand a month. That being said, issues remained mostly consistent, with anxiety and depression related cases comprising most of the calls. There was however an increase in suicide calls. The crisis line was very busy and every program within InTouch were operating non-stop.

The importance of mental health cannot be discounted. Measures are needed to be taken in order to ensure increased awareness during the pandemic. InTouch bolstered their awareness raising initiatives as early as March 2020, during the start of the quarantine. Ms. Celestial said that while the organization's website and social media pages were already available, they were



at a loss for the first few weeks. *"The first order of business is to let people know that there are still mental health service providers that can assist even now,"* she said. This led to the Coping During COVID webpage, which was specifically built for viewers who are experiencing high anxiety. As a service to the community, the webpage was designed to cater to different categories such as family, workplace, and community responders to name a few. Ms. Celestial said that *"it really was a concerted effort within the whole of InTouch. Whether they were a volunteer, consultant, or a direct staff, everyone contributed and became a part of the webpage."* InTouch's social media pages became more active from then on, posting various information every day. Everyone did their part in raising awareness, with youth outreach initiatives, and counselors' speaking engagements. The most important goal was

getting the point across: InTouch is here for whoever is in need of its services.

Ms. Celestial expressed great joy in discussing Kamustahan sa Krisis, a Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) endeavor with Philippine Preparedness Partnership (PhilPrep) through the Center for Disaster Preparedness (CDP). *"It was almost serendipitous on how it all started,"* she said. Originating from a learning exchange between InTouch and CDP, the two organizations made plans for a partnership, with the first MHPSS session's participants being the CDP staff. This all transpired just before the news of the COVID-19 pandemic broke. InTouch wanted to provide assistance but had no experience in dealing with communities at the grassroots level which is where CDP comes into play.

To address the impossibility of a face to face session, the Crisis Incident Response (CIR) was used as an inspiration. It was adjusted as one group activity so that it would not be too heavy, but would still yield fruitful results due to the processing phase for feelings and experiences.

Ms. Celestial recounts the first Kamustahan session and said that, *"it might not have been perfect, but it felt like we've been doing this way before all along. The structure is there."* The succeeding sessions kept improving and taking better shape which can be seen from feedbacking sessions. Other than helping people, Ms. Celestial said that one of the main intentions for the initiative is to bolster InTouch's ranks since mental health professionals are few and far in between. Kamustahan sa Gitna ng Krisis proved that you do not have to be a mental health professional to conduct MHPSS and help people. CDP is the proof that through mentorship and weekly sessions you are able to do it properly and confidently. Without prompting from InTouch, CDP was able to conduct sessions in other areas and provinces and with other target groups. *"Looking back, we didn't even think much about the logistics of it all because everything just seemed to fall into place. We all got the hang of it until eventually we can see that our objective is already being achieved,"* said Ms. Celestial. The objective was simple; to give people relief from stress, let them discover their inner strength and resilient attributes, and provide them with self care activities. Those three objectives were always achieved for every session.

The Kamustahan sa Gitna ng Krisis initiative was a testament of true passion for service, without aim for monetary gain. Especially considering the fact that for the first few instances, it really was totally voluntary as Ms. Celestial asked for whoever wanted to help; mostly the counselors since it was very important to learn from professionals. *“I was thankful that every time I asked no one ever declined, everyone was fully ready to serve,”* she said. Eventually, volunteers and previous observers gained the confidence to facilitate. A certain level of trust was achieved and sessions with even just two to three team members were expected to be successful without any problems.

It is without a doubt that InTouch’s pool of mental health experts provided the backbone for the technical aspect of the MHPSS sessions, with CDP learning much from their mentorship. InTouch, however, gained a lot of learnings from the partnership as well. The counselors would always take away a new lesson from every session and were always thankful for the fruitful conversations throughout. Having been more accustomed to office and private settings, InTouch was able to learn a great deal on how to deal with community members.

Counselors were able to employ the various approaches used throughout the sessions for their respective community outreach initiatives. Even now, InTouch still aligns programs for new innovations and techniques learned from the sessions every week. Ms. Celestial then went on to say that the most striking part for most of the counselors was the partnership itself. Each organization could not have done it without the other, and together, everything seemed like it simply fell into place.

Kamustahan sa Gitna ng Krisis has now gone a long way for both InTouch and CDP and has been conducted all throughout the country. At the heart of this endeavor is the MHPSS manual and its potential in bringing about a more widespread appreciation and promotion of mental health. Furthermore, the manual is designed to be used for a Training of Trainers (ToT) setup and can be used as a guide for others. *“It is a resource material that the community can utilize and we can proudly say that we built it from scratch. All the learnings and knowledge throughout the sessions are within the document,”* she said. Ms. Celestial suggested that there can be an evidence-based checking with the session recipients to concretize the manual as a truly effective initiative for the frontliners

during the pandemic. It is now not only in the minds of a few, there is now something future aspiring practitioners can hold on to.

At the start of every MHPSS session, InTouch asks everyone to share their ideal super-power if they are able to have one. Ms. Celestial, without fail, always says that she

wanted the power to multiply. She wanted to have the ability to increase her number in order to do more work and help a larger number of people. Little did she know that through Kamustahan sa Gitna ng Krisis, her wish is already coming true and was slowly being realized.



Dr. Liza Perdon-Chan

ENT, Ospital ng Makati

If you have come to the point where you are saying that you will be able to get through whatever happens and that you are determined to come out on top, then it's only a matter of time till you succeed.

Strength, Conviction, and Self Sacrifice: Resilient Attributes During the Pandemic

As one of the main battlefields in the pandemic, hospitals have been subject to the most grueling work hours, misplaced scrutiny, and in the case of the Philippines, a significant lack of support and funding. Despite all these difficulties, it is also one of the greatest study or test of the human willpower, sense of duty, and self-sacrifice, made even more prominent by COVID-19. Being in the thick of the fight, Dr. Liza Perdon-Chan, an ENT resident in *Ospital ng Makati* shares life under COVID-19 in an already difficult service industry.

Graduating from St. Lukes College of Medicine, Dr. Perdon-Chan became the first doctor in her family. Her dream is to pursue a medical mission in the future, and to do that, she must first finish her residency. She was able to become a resident in *Ospital ng Makati* and is currently on her second year of residency. A supposed four (4) year training, her remaining two (2) years may be put on hold due to a highly likely extension brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aside from the training duration, work schedules have been changed to accommodate proper personnel shifting in respect to preventing overexposure and ample time for testing in between. Nowadays, acceptance of these many changes is improving among the doctors, Dr. Perdon-Chan said.

One of the biggest worries Dr. Perdon-Chan has is possibly bringing COVID-19 back home to loved ones, as she has rotations in COVID-19 units and wards. She has limited her visits to her parents and sibling, only ever daring to go out after receiving a negative result for her regular swab tests. She is living with her husband, a fellow medical practitioner, who provides immense support and care. The change in schedule allowed her a bit more time at home. *"I am very thankful and count everyday my family is safe and healthy as a blessing. No matter how hard, as long as my family is okay, I'll be okay,"* said Dr. Perdon-Chan.

Dr. Perdon-Chan recounted one event as one of the most difficult. A patient was referred to her for emergency tracheostomy due to it being a possible COVID-19 positive case. At the time, the swab result was still undergoing processing, but after the operation the patient did turn out to be positive. All present personnel were advised to undergo quarantine and swab tests right after. It turned out that Dr. Perdon-Chan's results came out positive. She was thankful that she was the only one infected. Her first instinct was to think of her husband since he was the one who was most exposed to her. Thankfully, her husband did not contract the disease. Furthermore, she did not develop any debilitating symptoms. *"It was the shock of my life; a mix of shock and disappointment. I kept thinking, where did I go wrong, what did I do, what more could I have done?,"* said Dr. Perdon-Chan. Aside from the health problems, another challenge for her was how to help her team when she is physically away. She continued doing telemedicine, reporting, and seeing patients virtually, saying, *"It helped me take my mind off things and made me feel that I'm not useless."*

The time that Dr. Perdon-Chan was away was one of the biggest blows to the department, with only two (2) active residents left out of nine (9). With her down time, she was able to try a lot of different things. She took to trying out cooking different recipes, and even tried her hand on gardening. Most importantly, she gained strength from a higher power, saying, *"I tried to seek the Lord again, to step back and reflect. I asked if this is still what I wanted to do, if I was still on the right path. Eventually time*

strengthened my conviction.” She then stressed the importance of taking care of one’s mental health during these times. It is half, if not most of the battle; “if you have come to the point where you are saying that you will be able to get through whatever happens and that you are determined to come out on top, then it’s only a matter of time till you succeed.”

Dr. Perdon-Chan said that the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) session they attended with Philippine Preparedness Partnership (PhilPrep) was very helpful. While everyone in the team was decided to keep on trucking, no one was saying anything. They were able to open up about what everyone was going through. Everyone was determined to continue the fight. *“I think it was different for us since we can see COVID-19 from afar while it creeps closer and closer. Your acquaintance becomes infected, next comes your colleague, and then you yourself gets it.*

It is so real to us; it’s beyond what you see in the television. That is why the MHPSS was so important. The opportunity to hear from others enriches your own story.” She said that since they understand each other better, the team is now able to communicate more freely and that they have strengthened their teamwork and team spirit.

Dr. Perdon-Chan said that just because you have a weakness does not mean you cannot overcome them. She recounts her own ADHD condition which was aggravated by the current pandemic situation. It is okay to cry and take a step back, as long as you are patient with yourself and your conviction to move forward never wavers. She expresses her hope of a more accessible and normalized view on MHPSS, saying *“I am very happy that there are these kinds of endeavors and programs to help people like us who don’t exactly realize that we need help. It turns out that we realized after the session that it was exactly what we needed.”*



Ramon Cayube

MDRRMO Training Division Chief, Pasig City

Being a leader, you can't be unsure when making decisions and deciding without thinking about the welfare of other people.

The Pillar of Calm and Stability - A Sound Mind for Sound Leadership

For years, Pasig City has been at the forefront of good local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) action. Its partnership with Center for Disaster Preparedness (CDP) has been long and fruitful, from the early days of the passing of the DRRM law, Republic Act 10121, to Pasig's winning three Gawad Kalasag awards, the country's premier award for outstanding contribution to DRRM and humanitarian response and action. In their fervor, they were able to transform from one of the more vulnerable localities in the metropolitan area, into one bearing the standards of urban disaster resilience. Sadly, even a stalwart advocate and practitioner of DRRM can be caught off guard in the face of the pandemic that is COVID-19.

The Pasig DRRM Office (PDRRMO) is manned by highly capable individuals; among their ranks is Mr. Ramon Carlos Cayube, the PDRRMO Training Division Chief. He first worked as a nurse for the local government unit (LGU). He was then hired as a training officer for the city response unit before

eventually becoming the training division chief in September 2019. Upon recounting the start of the pandemic, he was overwhelmed by the additional responsibilities. Aside from the pre-programmed initiatives for the year, they were compelled to draft additional plans to establish and undergo to address the pandemic; *"we did not know how to handle the situation, the needs of the city rose while our actions were limited at the time,"* said Mr. Cayube. In time, Pasig city seemed to catch their stride and were slowly able to take more effective measures. However, as a hands-on leader, he had a front row seat to the growing frustrations in the office. Anxiety increased and he was soon faced with a different challenge in handling and facilitating personnel.

As a previous health worker, Mr. Cayube was no stranger to the importance of a sound mind along with a sound body. He has been trained to provide psychosocial support services before and felt the need to employ this strategy within his personnel.

In cooperation with the Philippine Preparedness Partnership (PhilPrep) through CDP, Adventist Community Service (ACS), and InTouch, PDRRMO organized a series of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Service (MHPSS) sessions for Pasig frontliners. He opens every session with an introduction about MHPSS since most are not aware of the practice. He then tries to catch up with the participants in order to gain insight on their day to day lives and how they are coping with the current situation. The sessions proved to be very effective.

Upon getting feedback, personnel expressed that it was as if a weight has been lifted after being able to talk about their COVID-19 experience and processing it in a safe and welcoming environment. They said that they now have renewed zeal in performing their duties and waking up to go to work does not seem as hard as before. Mr. Cayube expressed great satisfaction in the efficacy of the process and initiative in allowing the frontliners of Pasig City become more effective public servants, all while ensuring their mental health and safety.

As a leader working 14-hour operations everyday from Monday to Saturday, Mr. Cayube is in no shortage of concerns of his own. He needs to maintain composure especially in times of difficulty, in order to serve as a strong pillar/anchor for his team. Within the PDRRMO, they have a core group amongst officers wherein they provide each other support. He recounted a time where a division chief was having significant difficulties and mental health issues. Thankfully, as a trained psychosocial

first aider, he was able to provide help and assistance to his colleague. Mr. Cayube said that he draws great strength in prayer. He also has an effective support system in the form of his parents, with which he is able to open up and talk to, whenever and wherever he wants.

In recounting the changes in his life due to the pandemic, Mr. Cayube said that he became a stronger leader and is now more efficient in terms of decision making, saying that *“being a leader, you can’t be unsure when making decisions and deciding without thinking about the welfare of other people.”* He said that he became more attached with people. As a newly appointed chief back in September 2019, he was relatively unknown. Nowadays, he can see and feel the support of people around him and their appreciation of his efforts. He now even gets texts saying thanks and those genuinely asking how he is, much to his delight.

Attributing to the success of the MHPSS sessions for the local government frontliners,

Mr. Cayube expressed his thoughts on cascading it down to the community level. He recognizes that community members really need to have access to mental health services especially in these times. *“The people’s anxiety rises at an all time high in these times due to how difficult life is today. Some people might seem unappreciative of the LGU’s efforts, but you can’t really blame them since they might have personal problems on top of the dire situation that everyone is in right now,”* said Mr. Cayube. He said that they have to adjust to the situation and should not just follow certain guidelines and protocols blindly. *“We still need to continue our MHPSS intervention. There are still a lot of people undergoing tremendous stress at the moment. Our work regarding this matter is still not done,”* said Mr. Cayube, as he mused on how to gain a wider reach for the MHPSS initiative.

As of the time of the correspondence, Pasig City’s active cases went down from 2000 to 300, and are looking to flatten the curve soon.



Angge Ancheta

MSWD Supervisor, Pasig City

Even in the face of storms or trials, you cannot make reasons not to respond when you know that you have it in you the skills, the capacity, the ability. I am social worker by heart.

Purpose Realized: “I am a social worker by heart.”

Throughout the years, social workers have proven their deep commitment for social justice and human rights as they work side-by-side with the affected people. With the COVID-19 pandemic, they have been fighting along with the health professionals in the daily battle of pandemic response. Despite the new demands and ever-growing expectations from people, social workers continue to play their integral role of supporting and providing as much continuity of service as possible.

Among the many social workers in the Philippines is Milette “Angge” Ancheta, the Supervisor of the Municipal Social Welfare Department (MSWD) of Pasig City. Working in the MSWD for twelve (12) years, Ms. Ancheta has gained a vast experience from working in different disasters. Having gone through the Philippine’s most impactful typhoons like Ondoy, Habagat, and Yolanda, she shared how the disaster that the world is in now, the COVID-19 pandemic, is the greatest by far and a disaster like no other.

“COVID is different from my past experiences. It is worse than anything I have ever experienced,” she said during the Kamustahan sa Gitna ng Krisis, a Mental Health and Psychosocial Services Session (MHPSS) led by the Philippine Preparedness Partnership (PhilPrep) through the Center for Disaster Preparedness, Adventist Community Service (ACS), and InTouch Philippines in partnership with the Pasig Disaster Risk and Management Office (PDRMO).

As she continued to work in the frontline, Ms. Ancheta has suffered from extreme exhaustion. *“COVID is more demanding than other disasters because you can’t see it,”* she said. According to her, her ‘bio-psychosocial’ aspect—a term she coins for her biological, psychological, and social life—has been affected. Work had become so demanding for her that she often needed to sacrifice sleep over work. Ms. Ancheta also did not have the chance to work from the comfort of her home which caused her the everyday struggle of fighting her anxiety of passing the

virus to her family members. With the heightened stress that she felt added with the news that some of her friends died due to the virus, Ms. Ancheta was on the verge of giving up. However, with all the negative things that occupied her mind, she immediately switches her thoughts to positive ones. She tells herself, *“Angge, a lot of people lost their jobs, but look at you, you still have a job. Some lost their family members, but you still have a complete family.”* Looking at the brighter side of things made her realize how much the LORD has blessed her and how good He still is in her life. *“God is the number one reason why I can still hold on to His promises and His purpose for me even when I am at my worst state,”* she said.

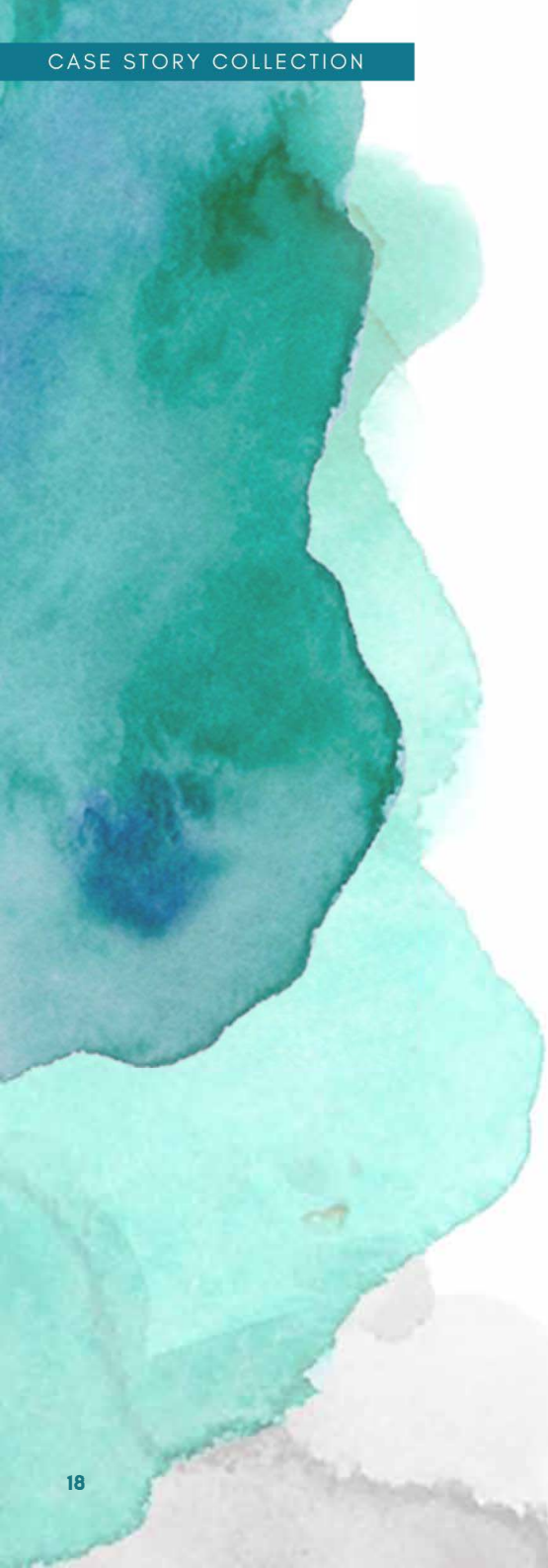
Ms. Ancheta’s optimism is quite remarkable. When asked how she got her positive perspective in life, she revealed that it was built from her experiences. She shared, *“I was the only one supporting myself when I was studying. Going through all those hardships has caused this optimism in me to stay and become a part of who I really am.”*

From the many reasons to give up, there were also many reasons for Ms. Ancheta to push through: the unwavering support from

her, family, the daily prayers her son does for her and the encouraging conversations shared with colleagues and the Solo Parent Group that she is handling. She also added that the PSS session she attended served as an avenue for their ventilation. As social workers, she said that they are used to asking others about how they are feeling and the current situations that they are in, but this time, they were the ones assessed. She said, *“It felt nice. It felt nice to have all our efforts acknowledged during the session.”* When she asked her colleagues with how they felt after the activity, they said that they were also grateful for the session because it eased their heavy loads.

Ms. Ancheta expressed the need to conduct more PSS sessions especially for all the front liners and even extend it to their family members. With the constant worrying for their loved ones, she said that it would be nice to have them feel relieved and at ease also.

For Ms. Ancheta, social work can be portrayed by two hands—one hand to help yourself and the other one to help other people. She shared how significant it is and of great importance to take care of oneself when taking care of other people to be truly effective to them.



When Ms. Ancheta graduated with her degree on Bachelor of Science in Social Work, she said that she did not like the course at all. However, throughout the years of her working with the people and for the people, she has fallen in love with social work. She also made it an advocacy for people to see the beauty of social work, which is why despite the hardships that she faced, she said that she did not give up knowing that there are a lot of people who are in need of her help. According to her, *"Even in the face of storms or trials, you cannot make reasons not to respond when you know that you have it in you the skills, the capacity, the ability. I am social worker by heart."*



Cyrus Ballega

MDRRMO Staff, Pasig City

I am happy with my work. If you are not happy with what you are doing, then you will constantly feel that your work is toxic. But the more people I help, the more satisfying my work becomes and all the more I am encouraged to go on.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Through the Lens of a Person with Disability

Vulnerable and mostly overlooked—these are the words which ultimately describe persons with disabilities (PWDs) in times of crisis. As the world faces a global pandemic, the negative societal effects COVID-19 has brought continue to impact the lives of every individual, even more profoundly through the lens of persons with disabilities.

Cyrus Ballega, a person with an orthopedic disability called Kyphosis or hunchback, is a government employee under the Operations Department of Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office of Pasig City where ambulance requests and answering the hotline numbers happens. Aside from being a full-time government employee, Mr. Ballega is also the convener and founder of the Federation of Persons with Disability in Pasig called Abot-Kamay ng mga May Kapansanang Pasigueno (AKAP). The federation started as a government initiative and was spearheaded by Mr. Ballega who acted as its first President back in 2011. Since its establishment, AKAP has been fighting for the rights of the PWD sector through series of

activities and programs carried out in chapters present in all the 30 barangays of Pasig. Now, Mr. Ballega is the Vice-President of the federation and the President for the Brgy. Manggahan Chapter. To date, there are almost 10,000 PWDs in their record. However, there are still more who are not registered in the database.

Mr. Ballega was among the second batch of participants for the Mental Health and Psychosocial Services (MHPSS) series in Pasig, organized by the Philippine Preparedness Partnership through the Center for Disaster Preparedness. He shared how the pandemic and the consequent lockdown brought diverse challenges to PWDs from accessing essential supplies, getting medical treatment, to exercising physical distancing and much more. Immuno-compromised and those that have chronic conditions are also at greater risk of contracting the virus. Mr. Ballega added, *“PWDs must not go out. Even I should not go out because I have an asthma, but since it is a part of my duty, I have to.”* He continued to share that what he

does is strengthen his immune system and his mental health.

When asked about his concerns this pandemic, Mr. Ballega shared that he is mostly concerned about his and his family's health as he is expected to report to the office daily. Hence, in order to prevent himself from getting infected, Mr. Ballega follows all the safety procedures. Since March and up to now, the Pasig DRRMO has been working 24/7. He continued to share that due to the extreme demand for help from their office, they can no longer accommodate all the requests. He said, *"In our work, we are not superheroes. We get tired and get sick. Every day is also a battle for me since going outside may harm me."*

Mr. Ballega also worries for the people in their federation as problems being raised to him by the members pile up. Common problems raised by the sector during the pandemic are food, employment, and medication. He expressed, *"There are a lot of times when I want to help them all out, but I can only do so much."* Mr. Ballega took the initiative to send requests to national agencies like the Department of Social Welfare and Development of the National Capital Region (DSWD-NCR) to provide relief goods for their sector. However, only 300 food packs were given, and it was specifically for children with disabilities.

The limited aid that the federation receives pushes Mr. Ballega to tap other organizations like the private sector and the non-government organizations.

Not knowing when the pandemic will come to an end, he realized that their federation must not just depend on the government and on the people who are helping them. According to him, *"The relief packs can only do so much. The sponsors, the NGOs, they cannot help everyone."* Currently, Mr. Ballega is coordinating with the DSWD-NCR for livelihood programs to aid the members in their finances.

Mr. Ballega expressed his gratitude for the PSS session that him and his colleagues went through as it was of great help to them. During the start of the pandemic, he shared that they were all scared. At that time, there were a lot of people who have cough and colds. He thought, *"Is this a game of Who Will Survive?"* From all the worries and anxious thoughts, Mr. Ballega said that the PSS session was an encouragement to them as they were able to feel relief from sharing what they went through. The resilient attributes that they did know they possessed were also explained by the facilitators and Mr. Ballega remembered how his faith got him through the difficult situations.

He expressed his gratitude that not only were they able to express their concerns, but also received tips on taking care of themselves which will surely help them as they continue to work for the people of Pasig.

Mr. Ballega was able to use his learnings from the PSS whenever he talks to the members of his federation. He said, *"I always ask how they are doing. Some cry because they do not have food to eat, they do not have a job, some need medications, some need to go to the hospital. I just encourage them to go on despite of what they are going through."*

He added, *"I am happy with my work. If you are not happy with what you are doing, then you will constantly feel that your work is toxic. But the more people I help, the more satisfying my work becomes and all the more I am encouraged to go on."* The work Mr. Ballega does to help the people with disability shows that he does not place 'DIS' in his ability. *"In fact, I can request to do my work from home, but I did not do it. If others can, I can do it as well. I can join the fight against the pandemic,"* he said.



Hope Capicencio

OpCen Manager, QCDDRRMO

You cannot have a sound mind if you are unable to take care of your mental health. You have to be strong for your team.

Excellence Amidst Adversity: Advancing One's Self and Others During the Pandemic

The difficulties in the current pandemic reality can be felt all throughout the world, but more so in developing countries like the Philippines. With the steady rise of COVID-19 cases amidst the reeling economy, the people in the Philippines are struggling just to stay afloat. For frontliners, the pandemic poses a similar, albeit a bit targeted challenge: how to survive in COVID-19 ridden Philippines all while doing your best to ensure that the general population has the best chance of surviving the pandemic as well. The sharing of Ms. Marie Hope G. Capicencio, Quezon City Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office's (QCDRMO) Operations Center Manager, captures her experience during the pandemic and how she strived to not only simply survive, but to better herself and the people around her.

Ms. Capicencio, a 28 year old registered nurse, started working in the operation center last June 2020, but has worked for Quezon City since 2014 as a responder.

Later on, she became the Deputy for the Operations and Warning Section for 2 years before being transferred to the Research and Planning Section, where she became its Deputy for 2 years. She is now the QCRRMO's Operations Center Manager, with 47 people under her. She has strong loyalty and dedication towards Quezon City, saying that it is where she grew to become who she is now.

During the onset of the pandemic, she was in the Research and Planning. Her intention to transfer to the Operations and Warning and be one of the deputies there since the workload there was more lenient. Ms. Capicencio sought to facilitate the transfer after taking Masters in Crisis and Disaster Risk Management at the Philippine Public Safety College that time. She finished her masters with full scholarship and was one of the top 5 graduates last August 2020. She is currently having her Doctorate in Business Administration in Disaster Risk Management at the Philippine School of Business

Administration, with partial scholarship.

Ms. Capicencio was taken aback by the pandemic. With 2020 starting with the Taal eruption, the Quezon City government was still trying to address the aftermath when the pandemic hit. Workers on the frontline have no idea how to approach the incident. *"It's very hard, especially if you are part of the management—you are in charge of who to transport/deploy, deciding which areas to decontaminate. You have to study all of these based on the Research and Planning's findings."* she said. Another challenge was simultaneously working and studying. During the start of the pandemic, she was accomplishing her thesis along with her regular work with the QCRRMO. Ms. Capicencio recalls: *"There was a time when we were having a class and there was a typhoon, I also need to pay attention to my work since I needed to decide how to transport the COVID patients away from the flood-prone areas."* Coming from the Operations and Warning, she had to catch up and try to figure out the workflow in the Operations Center. Ms. Capicencio's transfer to the OpCen came as a bit of a shock to her. She just came from a 14-day quarantine period after getting swabbed for the COVID test. Two days after she returned to the

office, an official order came informing her of her transfer to the Operations Center. She was taken aback but nonetheless trusted the judgment of their Head that she would be able to handle it efficiently.

"You cannot depend on anyone except yourself which is why you have to empower yourself. You have to cope with the changes and everything." she said when asked about her realizations during the pandemic. The difficulty comes with fulfilment after the realization that one can do it, graduating from her Masters with honours even when she doubted herself. She said, *"I can get through anything and everything; I just have to put my mind and time to it"*. That being said, Ms. Capicencio was thankful for all the things that kept her going. There were times when she wanted to give up badly, but she prayed instead. Internal support from her work was helpful as well. Good comments from her superiors saying that the Operations Center improved, as well as the general gratitude from the staff helped her gain more joy from her work despite the difficulties.

She was even personally congratulated by Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte. *"It's a great factor when you work in an organization that you validate and affirm*

your staff when they are doing a good job,” she said. Ms. Capicencio also has great pride for her staff. After training them in Incident Command System, Operations Center Training, and Damage Assessment and Needs Analysis, they are now well functioning in terms of how they are supposed to. Ms. Capicencio’s passion extends not only for her job, but also in helping the people around her grow and develop. Having worked as a staff for a long time she told herself, *“When it’s my turn, I will not do the things that I did not like receiving from my bosses,”* stating that her prior designations as second in command became her training ground due to shouldering the responsibilities whenever those under her makes mistakes.

As a leader balancing work and studies, Ms. Capicencio places great emphasis on her mental health and of those around her.

“From my perspective, you cannot have a sound mind if you are unable to take care of

your mental health. You have to be strong for your team,” she said. To facilitate this, she aimed to have a good working environment, conducting internal assessments with the team, as well as playing games and going to trips with colleagues, saying *“you have to build a healthy environment despite how toxic your work may be.”*

They were very happy after undergoing the Kamustahan sa Krisis Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Service (MHPSS) sessions and wanted to open it to more people, saying that *“it was like going to the beach without going to the beach.”* The MHPSS sessions were initially only for the 3 batches from the Operations Center. However, Ms. Capicencio wanted all of her staff to experience how refreshing the session was and requested CDP to conduct more sessions to cater to all of them, saying *“I will give them all the trainings and all the activities that are in favor of their well-being for as long as I can.”*



Ace Silvestre

LDRRM Assistant, QCDRRMO

The pandemic is not the end of the world. We can get through this and this will all be over.

A Passion to Serve People, A Heart to Save Lives

Quezon City is known as the biggest and most populated city in Metro Manila. From the first month of the pandemic in the Philippines, the city has been topping the list with its high number of positive cases for COVID-19 in the province. The increasing number of positive cases, high levels of unemployment, and limited access to food faced by residents, are issues that the Quezon City government has been striving to address until now.

Among its committed workers is Chester Ace Silvestre, a 29-year-old registered nurse, who works in the Quezon City Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (QCDRRMO) as the Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (LDRRM) Assistant assigned in the Research and Planning Section. From being a registered nurse, Mr. Silvestre studied a vocational course on Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) to pursue his dream of being a responder.

With his background in EMT, Mr. Silvestre was able to work as an ambulance responder in Quezon City for 4 years. A few years after the establishment of the QCRRMO, he was one of the employees and was then given a plantilla position for DRRM. Now, he has been working as the LDRRM Assistant for nearly 3 years.

Life in the pandemic was hard for Mr. Silvestre, he shared during the Kamustahan sa Gitna ng Krisis, a Mental Health and Psychosocial Service Session (MHPSS) organized by the Philippine Preparedness Partnership (PhilPrep) through the Center for Disaster Preparedness (CDP). Working from his home, the daily meetings Mr. Silvestre attends to which were used to be done face to face, were now conducted via zoom. However, the work from home setup did not last long as Mr. Silvestre was requested to report to the office due to the shortage of staff in the Operations. Every day was a struggle in the office due to the influx of patients infected by the COVID-19 virus.

"It was extremely hard for me. Hearing from my colleagues that they have an average of 100 patients to transfer in 24 hours," he said. Not only was it physically draining for him and his workmates, but also emotionally and mentally exhausting. There were barangays who were supposed to be working along with them, but they are the ones causing problems. "We have a Memorandum of Agreement that every barangay should cater the patients from their area, but they are transferring it to us. Even doctors who turned COVID positive give us headaches because they demand to be quarantined in facilities where healthy people are staying. Some asks if there is a WIFI," he shared.

According to Mr. Silvestre, taking care of one's mental health must be a top priority, especially this time where news reports of people committing suicide due to depression are frequently heard. Aside from that, the risk of getting infected by the COVID-19 virus must also be considered. Mr. Silvestre continued to share that the world seemingly came to a stop, but the work in the QCRRMO did not. He said, *"We still must go to work. And it does not end there. You need think how to get to the office. We did not know what to do. We are not used to having jeepneys and other means of transportation. Although I was not one of the many people who lost their job, when I think about it, how much more difficult it is for them."*

Despite the hardships Mr. Silvestre felt, he was thankful for the support given by the QC government through the provision of free lodging, food, rapid testing, swabbing, and facilities for their employees. Transitioning to the new normal has been challenging, but thankfully he has now adjusted, saying that work has become in the transition period.

When the series of MHPSS sessions conducted in Pasig City culminated, the Quezon City government became the next recipient of the endeavor and Mr. Silvestre was one of the participants from its first batch. During the session, he recalled the time when he was still working as a responder and said, *"It was not all just about doing first aid for wounds. Some lose their lives. There were multiple times when I cannot get over it even after our duty. We did not know how to properly handle our feelings after a response. So, when I heard that there will be a MHPSS session for us, I was happy, and it was really timely because work in the pandemic is very toxic."*

The MHPSS session was of help to Mr. Silvestre. He said, *"Sometimes, you just need someone to talk to in order to release what you have been carrying inside for so long."* Aside from being a participant, Mr. Silvestre was also tasked to coordinate for the succeeding sessions. According to him, he did not have a hard time coordinating for the sessions in the QCDDRRMO. *"It is for my colleagues after all",* he said.

He added, *"If there is one among us that are under-performing, we are all affected. That is why the PSS session is a great boost for all of us."* Mr. Silvestre added that he always gets a positive feedback from his colleagues. Aside from the freebies, what they appreciated more was the conversation during the session.

Before working for QC, Mr. Silvestre was once a volunteer responder in San Mateo. When asked what his most difficult experience as a responder was, he said, *"There was a time when we responded to a child who had an accident. He was still breathing, but he did not make it to the*

hospital. I took his phone to contact his parents. His Mother was texting him without even knowing that his child has died." It was heartbreaking for him knowing that he also has a mother. From then on, he decided that what he wants to do in life is save lives. Although Mr. Silvestre is not at the forefront of response anymore, he does his best of taking care of the people around him. He said, *"The pandemic is not the end of the world. We can get through this and this will all be over."*

