

Emergency food parcels for 200 South Americans

Stranded on Waiheke and locked out of government wage subsidies, many of the island's South American community have relied on food parcels to see them through.

Recognising the dire situation early on, Amelia Lawley at Waiheke Budgeting Services Trust tapped into emergency relief funds for help and, since lockdown began, has provided food parcels to more than 200 South Americans.

"Word spread really quickly once I got it out there. It started with basically a lot of people being stranded here on tourist visas who were visiting friends on work visas; so it was half tourists, half workers," she told *Gulf News*. "Most people who had a work visa were given no notice, they were just told there were no more jobs."

The situation was compounded because flights to Argentina were stopped two weeks before they were scheduled to, leaving tourists stranded and many migrants suddenly out of work, in



Amelia Lawley has been organising food parcels for South Americans stranded on Waiheke due to the Covid-19 lockdown.

lockdown, and unable to return home. Affectionately nicknamed Little Buenos Aires, Waiheke's South American community mostly consists of Argentinians;



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How can we get home?

Engineer Javier Segura Canil and his doctor wife Emilia came to visit mates on Waiheke during summer, but were left stranded when their flight home was cancelled.

The couple have been well looked after by friends, but are anxious to return to Argentina. Emilia is pregnant, and delivering a baby in New Zealand is not covered by their medical insurance.

Javier told *Gulf News* how grateful they were to receive an emergency food parcel on the island, but admits he is frustrated by the lack of communication or assistance from his home country, in particular to organise a repatriation flight. "We came to New Zealand on vacation on 24 February and after 25 amazing days we were supposed to be flying back home on a direct flight to Buenos Aires on 22 March, but then Air New Zealand rescheduled the flight for 24 March via Sydney, Santiago de Chile and Buenos Aires. At that time we didn't think it was a big deal, only two more days, a different route and that's it, but then a few hours later they cancelled our flight and didn't give us any approximate date

to go back to Argentina," he said.

"At this point we started to get nervous because my wife was 11 weeks pregnant and we were hoping to do the 12 weeks scan back in Argentina."

Then New Zealand and Argentina went into full lockdown and they had the scan despite not being covered by insurance.

"Lucky for us, we have some very good friends here in New Zealand, so we didn't have to look for accommodation as many other Argentinians had to do."

Because Argentina has cancelled all commercial international flights until September, the only way the couple can get back home is via a repatriation flight. "Our embassy still hasn't scheduled a single repatriation flight for almost 200 Argentinians that are stuck in New Zealand since the lockdown started almost 60 days ago," he said.

"We asked them for help and information about possible dates for a repatriation flight, but they just kept repeating that they are doing everything they can. So far, no solution at all. We found out via WhatsApp that the city council was helping people by giving food parcels,

Amelia says lockdown has put many of them in untenable situations and left them vulnerable.

"It's a very similar situation to Queenstown, people were laid off with no notice and no help. When they were able to leave the island as we shifted levels, they left ASAP. A lot of them for fruit-picking jobs."

Many tourists remain on Waiheke and there is limited assistance for them. Amelia believes the government should be doing more to help those from abroad who have fallen through the cracks.

"There has been a bit of buck-passing and it's a little bit disappointing. Particularly for those with working visas. They pay taxes, they have been doing crappy jobs that other people don't want to do and they get negative press. They deserve a lot more respect and help."

Having personally delivered emergency food boxes around the island,

Amelia was impressed by the tight-knit South American community and how they look out for each other.

"When I delivered the food box I could see they were concerned, but more than anything they were very, very grateful; they were blown away," she said.

"A lot of people are staying with friends or in short-term accommodation, they are being looked after really nicely by the people they are staying with. They are relying on each other and they are very supportive of each other. They share everything and there's real collegiality and community spirit."

Amelia says she will continue to seek funding with the Civil Defence Emergency Fund to support those in need.

"We will continue to try and help them until they can go home. That's how we are operating at the moment," said Amelia.

"This is not their fault, they aren't being offered any other assistance, that's

what that money is for."

Amelia was assisted early on by Esteban Fideluna of the Auckland Latin American Community (ALAC), who talked with people on the phone in their language after reaching out via social media.

"We talked to Amelia and we agreed it was important to find out who these people are and what their problems are. They all have different issues. We raised the alarm very early in the picture," he said.

"Amelia with the food bank there has been the most useful, I don't think they expected so many South Americans to turn up."

Esteban says he has been in weekly contact with government officials and has been campaigning on behalf of the Latino community.

"No one has been left on the street. They have managed with the help of Amelia. The good thing about the South American youth is that they come together, they are not individualistic. I know with the group on Waiheke, they have been very supportive of each other."

• Liza Hamilton

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Amelia Lawley



Javier and Emilia Segura Canil pictured here with good friends Amy Cunningham and Steven McClory (left) from Waiheke. Emilia and Amy have stayed in contact since they met during a school exchange programme in their teens.

so we called them and, unlike our embassy, they sent us food and essential goods right away, almost no questions asked. Thank you so much for this NZ! "Last week we had the 20 weeks scan in Auckland, and we are very happy things are going well, but now we are worried about the costs of delivering a baby in NZ with only a tourist visa, so we still hope to be able to get back home before the due date."

• Liza Hamilton

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