



Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

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Introduction

St David's Neighbourhood Centre has been a part of the Coopers Plains community for over 33 years. We offer a place of welcome, services, programs, activities, events, and support to people of all ages and backgrounds. Like other neighbourhood centres we play a key role in reducing social isolation for our community. It is a safe and welcoming place for our diverse community to connect, develop friendships and be supported.

Social Isolation in the Coopers Plains Area

Traditionally St David's Neighbourhood Centre has not collected data on social isolation, however, data is collected as part of neighbourhood centre reporting to Department of Communities on social connectedness. Each reporting quarter we identify at least 150 individuals who describe an improved feeling of social connection. This does not accurately measure our overall impact but does suggest people felt disconnected prior to engaging with us.

Statements from individuals also identify people feel lonely and socially isolated prior to engaging with us:

- Someone living rough in the area who connects in twice a week for support, meals etc. stated *'It is so lonely over the weekend, nothing is open and there is no one to talk to'*.
- A client attending our aged care services stated, *'I felt so lonely before coming to Harmony Club, all my friends have moved or passed away'*.

We hear comments like these each week. We also know that many regular customers come to the organisation's Thrift Shop for the social connection it brings. One customer stated recently *'I come in for the company, I have anxiety and depression, sometimes the volunteer makes me a cuppa. I love the op shop, I have even told my psychologist it is what I do to get some social interaction'*.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has further compounded the sense of isolation many in our community feel. The extended lock down last year and recent short lockdowns disrupt opportunities for connections,

people to see their friends, attend their regular activities and get the support they need. While the staff at the centre attempt to contact those, who are most at risk of being lonely, many people do not actually recognise they feel or are experiencing loneliness at the time.

Our approach to Loneliness and Isolation

St David's Neighbourhood Centre provides services, programs, activities and events and welcomes our diverse community. Our social groups, play group, aged care programs and volunteering opportunities offer a safe place to connect, form friendships and reduce feelings of isolation. It is the co-location of these in one place that is unique to us.

One example of this is when someone who was new to the area came to inquire about a volunteering opportunity for herself so she could make some friends. During initial conversations it was identified she was the carer for her husband and had an interest in knitting. Due to the different activities available she is now volunteering at our Thrift Shop, attends the knitting group and her husband is connected in with our aged care program. They have both been able to form friendships, have expressed they have a purpose to their week and be supported to be a part of their new community. Through the centre, they have also connected in with other local services and her husband now also attends a local Men's Shed.

Each month we host a free community breakfast BBQ. Members of our local community come especially to meet up with others in a safe and welcoming space. For those who experience mental health issues, homelessness, or are isolated for many other reasons, it is an opportunity to connect and feel a part of a community.

Like other neighbourhood centres we could provide countless examples of how we address loneliness and isolation. At St David's Neighbourhood Centre, it is a part of the core of why we do what we do.

St David's Neighbourhood Centre

St David's Neighbourhood Centre each month welcomes at least 225 individuals to our social groups, aged care programs, play group and to volunteer along with countless customers to our Thrift Shop. Each week we give away 40 – 50 meals as part of our free meal program. We also host at least 3 students each term and groups hire out spaces to conduct training, run workshops, exercise activities and to meet. We host events which are well supported by our community, our last one in May welcomed 550 visitors. The organisation is a long standing and valued part of our local community.

For many individuals who engage in all that is on offer they express feelings of improved wellbeing, they have a sense of purpose, appreciate the opportunity to give back to the community, enjoy learning new skills and for some, they have gained employment due to the confidence they have felt. A student with Autism expressed during her placement '*I have found my tribe*'. A new volunteer from a CALD background was also connected into a painting group and with someone who spoke their language stated, '*I have found my people*'. This is achieved by allowing people the space and time to be themselves and being a non-judgemental and soft entry point of contact.

During Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) survey in 2020, our centre identified it connected with 100 community members each week producing over \$195,072 in social connection

value. This is a social return on investment of \$5.50 for every dollar the Queensland Government funded, and further resourcing can only increase our impact on social isolation in our local community.

Neighbourhood Centres, Loneliness and Social Isolation

Neighbourhood Centres offer a placed based solution to addressing loneliness and social isolation in our communities. Our connections with our community and soft entry point of contact along with the ability to welcome everyone regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, age, or social status positions us to build connections between individuals and organisations and in particular those who are isolated, vulnerable and disenfranchised. We have a history of being authentic in our approach and recognising an action can be small but have a big impact on someone's life. Each Friday we offer free meals to the community, one recipient of our meals commented recently *'The welcome I receive since coming to the centre has made me feel more confident, accepted'*.

Neighbourhood Centres are under resourced. On average each neighbourhood centre receives \$134,00 per year in Queensland Government funding. We provide so many opportunities for our communities and play a central role in reducing loneliness and social isolation around the state. Imagine what can be achieved with adequate resourcing - Neighbourhood Centres would have the knowledge to respond with even more solutions unique to their local community and will provide further long-term benefits. Increases in wellbeing and self-esteem enable people to feel better about themselves, find a purpose, form friendships and connections and for some even find meaningful employment.

Conclusion

St David's Neighbourhood Centre welcomes the Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation. It is an issue that has long be recognised and been a concern for us. It affects the wellbeing of many and is only compounded by the current COVID-19 Pandemic. Our purpose is to support, connect and empower our communities and we are well placed to be an integral partner in the solutions. We support QFCA's recommendations to this inquiry to position Neighbourhood Centres as the key community-based vehicle for addressing social isolation and loneliness.