



AUSTRALIAN
WAR WIDOWS
QUEENSLAND

T: 1800 061 945

T: 07 3846 7706

E: support@warwidowsqld.org.au

W: warwidowsqld.org.au

A: Level 4, 183 Wickham Tce, Spring Hill,
QLD, 4000

P.O. Box 13604, George Street Post Shop,
Brisbane, QLD, 4003

Australian War Widows Queensland Submission to the Community Support and Services Committee Inquiry Into Social Isolation

5 August 2021

Background

On 27 May 2021, the Queensland Legislative Assembly agreed to a motion that the Community Support and Services Committee inquire into:

1. the nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland, including but not limited to:
 - a. identification of and consultation with vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups at significant risk across the life course
 - b. the interplay of COVID-19 with this issue
2. the causes and drivers of social isolation and loneliness, including those unique to Queensland
3. the protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness
4. the benefits of addressing social isolation and loneliness, examples of successful initiatives undertaken nationally and internationally and how to measure social isolation and loneliness in Queensland to determine if implemented strategies are effective
5. how current investment by the Queensland Government, other levels of government, the non-government, corporate and other sectors may be leveraged to prevent, mitigate and address the drivers and impacts of social isolation and loneliness across Queensland, including:
 - a. services and programs such as health and mental health, transport, housing, education, employment and training, sport and recreation, community services and facilities, digital inclusion, volunteering, the arts and culture, community development, and planning for accessible, inclusive and connected communities
 - b. targeted support to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and those most at risk
6. the role, scope and priorities of a state-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness, considering interactions with existing Queensland and national strategies.

Context

The Australian War Widows Guild was established after World War II by Mrs Jessie Vasey to advocate on behalf of war widows and to provide a network of clubs designed to assist war widows to remain socially connected and self-sufficient. We continue this objective to the present day and our work is still highly relevant given that our war widows are mostly elderly women living alone.

We do not confine our support to only those women who are in receipt of a War Widows pension, but rather the widows(ers) of anyone who has served.

**AUSTRALIAN
WAR WIDOWS
QUEENSLAND**

T: 1800 061 945

T: 07 3846 7706

E: support@warwidowsqld.org.auW: warwidowsqld.org.auA: Level 4, 183 Wickham Tce, Spring Hill,
QLD, 4000P.O. Box 13604, George Street Post Shop,
Brisbane, QLD, 4003

Most of our World War I widows have passed and the majority of World War II widows are over 90 years old with many living in residential aged care. The Vietnam era widows are a growing cohort as their husbands, aged between 70-90 now, are passing away. Any reference to the 'ageing population' in Australia will show that the cohort of Australians aged over 85 has grown and continues to grow as a percentage of the population in Australia. Furthermore, with the life expectancy of women being higher than that of men, a larger percentage of the ageing population are women. Sadly, however, we find that the folk in the government workforce who set policy and design support programs seem to lack any real understanding of the lived experience of the elderly.

Causes of Social Isolation

Social isolation is a state of complete or near-complete lack of contact between an individual and society.

War widows are in the same situation as other single women, particularly those aged 80 or over.

The women in this age group were born of an era where systemic discrimination caused them to be often under-educated, excluded from the workforce, and unlikely to have their own independent means of transport. They progressively lack confidence in social settings as they age and feel unsafe and vulnerable. They are also unlikely to have adapted to electronic means of communication or any other e-commerce tools.

Our elderly widows are vulnerable to an increasing prevalence of elder abuse and fraudsters preying on them. Government provides dedicated police resources to schools and juveniles and it may be apt to consider providing similar 'specialist' resourcing for the elderly/isolated of the community.

Living environments

The government's desire to help people maintain independence and support the 'ageing in place' philosophy may be having an unintended consequence of contributing to social isolation. Living alone at this age is not always safe – both from a physical and mental health perspective.

The children of our widows have often moved large distances from their home to enter the workforce or get married and even the best-intentioned offspring find they are too busy working and unlikely to be available regularly to visit an ageing parent. With both adults in a family working, the younger generation are time poor and the most support they can offer their mother is a phone call.

We are aware that Red Cross did have a program where they rang people living alone. War Widows Queensland has employed a person to ring all of our widows on a regular basis to check on their welfare and needs. We encourage Government to fund or subsidise organisations to perform this service.



AUSTRALIAN
WAR WIDOWS
QUEENSLAND

T: 1800 061 945
T: 07 3846 7706

E: support@warwidowsqld.org.au
W: warwidowsqld.org.au

A: Level 4, 183 Wickham Tce, Spring Hill,
QLD, 4000
P.O. Box 13604, George Street Post Shop,
Brisbane, QLD, 4003

We also encourage the government to invest in a campaign to remind families of their duty to care for their elders and the effect of social isolation. To ignore elderly parents' needs for emotional and social support is a form of elder abuse.

It is our experience that communal living provides an environment where individuals still have their independence, but friendships can be developed and maintained and even the very shy are able to have someone in their community keep an eye out for them. This does not need to be a regulated environment like a residential aged care facility nor does it need to look like the current retirement village model. It just needs to be independent living units with green areas and some communal gathering spaces.

We also find that communal living with people of similar experiences such as the war widows is most important as there is a shared understanding of the lived experience they have had. As far back as 1945 the War Widows Guild identified housing as an important issue, both as a material necessity and as a way of fostering community co-operation.

We encourage governments to adjust their property development policies to facilitate more affordable communal living development similar to that described in the above paragraphs. These developments should not be exclusively for aged people but for all generations.

Electronic Communications

We would like to remind the government that the modern tendency towards electronic communications is one of the biggest contributors to social isolation for our elderly war widows.

It is highly unlikely that anyone, other than those people who work in government or for large corporations, has the capacity to stay abreast of the rapidly changing technological environments that government seems to rely on to engage with stakeholders.

People on limited incomes can barely afford an outdated mobile phone, let alone learn to operate some of the systems that are currently in use by public and private sector organisations.

The rush towards mobile technology and electronic communications media has the effect of excluding many elderly or disadvantaged people from communicating with family, friends and service providers and undermines their confidence which further contributes to social isolation.

We applaud the initiatives in Brisbane City (and possibly other local governments) whereby the library provides training for people on the use of technology. However, we still need to accommodate the needs of those unable or unwilling to adapt.

Australian War Widows Queensland has previously received funding through the "Be Connected program" which we used to educate many of our widows in phone technology. We encourage the continuance of such programs. We can all do more in helping isolated elderly people to be more



AUSTRALIAN
WAR WIDOWS
QUEENSLAND

T: 1800 061 945
T: 07 3846 7706

E: support@warwidowsqld.org.au
W: warwidowsqld.org.au

A: Level 4, 183 Wickham Tce, Spring Hill,
QLD, 4000
P.O. Box 13604, George Street Post Shop,
Brisbane, QLD, 4003

connected to the outside world. There is considerable scope for organisations such as ours to improve the communications capability of our sector if there were more program funds available.

AWWQ recommend that government ensure that elderly people have appropriate communications channels such as:

- Hard copy mail
- A nominated and trusted person to receive all communications (Centrelink and myagedcare have something like this)
- An aged care case manager to support the independence of the elderly by assisting in explaining and arranging to the elderly and their family what services and care are available to keep them feeling secure and happy.

Lack of Mobility

If you can't get out of your home, you very quickly become socially isolated.

Many of our widows either never had a driver's licence or have handed it in due to failing health. They do not feel safe on buses and trains or are unable to cope physically with accessing public transport. The eligibility criteria for subsidised taxi fares is unreasonably onerous, the paperwork to apply is complicated, and the time delay for approval is lengthy. Many have had their requests unreasonably knocked back and therefore do not reapply and many simply don't bother because it is too hard. Making the current process and eligibility onerous is irresponsible and cruel – besides increasing social isolation, it increases the risk of falls on public transport that at their age can be fatal or result in fatal consequences.

We suggest that all people over a certain age or suffering mobility or medical issues should be entitled to subsidised taxi travel.

Mobility is a major issue for our widows in rural communities where there are not even any taxi services. Government might consider funding a 'community' vehicle through a not for profit in the area.

Australian War Widows Queensland have now acquired a minibus in Brisbane through a generous donation we received just this year. It would be wonderful if we were able to provide the same service to our widows anywhere in the state.

Access to services and social activities

While State and Federal governments provide a myriad of services for people, it is often difficult to know what is on offer and how to access them. Even well-intentioned educated family members are at a loss to understand 'the system' particularly various entitlements to health services.



AUSTRALIAN
WAR WIDOWS
QUEENSLAND

T: 1800 061 945
T: 07 3846 7706

E: support@warwidowsqld.org.au
W: warwidowsqld.org.au

A: Level 4, 183 Wickham Tce, Spring Hill,
QLD, 4000
P.O. Box 13604, George Street Post Shop,
Brisbane, QLD, 4003

A form of case worker /advocate is not only helpful but necessary to support the elderly person and their family to access services to maintain their independence.

Australian War Widows Queensland have a welfare support manager and a member services officer who actively engage with our members and assist them in explaining and arranging in-home support services and benefits available through DVA and *myagedcare* to meet our members' unique situations.

We recommend such a service be funded, possibly within GP practices, to assist the elderly to understand and arrange what services are available to meet their unique care needs and financial situations as they age. This service could also be an information source for community activities.

Visitors

While we know that *myagedcare*, through CHSP funded services and the home care packages, offer social support which can include companion care, most elderly women have little trust in strangers so are less likely to take up such entitlements. Likewise, those of us who have had loved ones in nursing homes know all too well that there are many residents who are not visited by family.

Residential aged care staff are in such short supply that they cannot afford to spend quality time with residents. The staff should be in regular contact with residents' families to encourage a better partnership in the care of their family member and to create a greater expectation of family involvement. We also recommend some form of subsidy to assist more volunteers to visit residents in care so they are not socially isolated.

In bygone years, the local clergy often visited socially isolated and infirm people in their homes. They would quickly activate parish and community support to provide a 'wrap around' to people in need. This does not exist today to the extent it once did.

We also understand that when people go to hospital now, unless they or their families let the Parish office or an organisations such as War Widows know, which often doesn't happen, elderly patients can sometimes be in hospital for days or weeks without a visitor. We understand that the Health Department stopped lay people visiting specific religions unless they were qualified Hospital Chaplains. So fellow parishioners are precluded from volunteering their support to people. You don't need to be chaplains to say hello, "is there anything I can do for you?"

There is a great need to make sure that people in the end stages of life are not left to die on their own. There is an urgent need to make becoming a volunteer easier, both for the volunteer and the organisation. We are unable to get insurance cover for volunteers over a certain age, and insurance cover is expensive when available. It is also important to fund transport for volunteers to get around and visit the lonely and isolated.



**AUSTRALIAN
WAR WIDOWS
QUEENSLAND**

T: 1800 061 945
T: 07 3846 7706

E: support@warwidowsqld.org.au
W: warwidowsqld.org.au

A: Level 4, 183 Wickham Tce, Spring Hill,
QLD, 4000
P.O. Box 13604, George Street Post Shop,
Brisbane, QLD, 4003

Currently there is a lot of funding going to the Mental Health area and while this is commendable the generation of the majority of women who are war widows draw assistance from “networks” rather than from grief professionals.

Further Information

Australian War Widows Queensland are happy to expand upon any of the comments made in this submission. For further information please contact us.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Jenny Gregory

State President

Australian War Widows Queensland

Email: [REDACTED]

Mobile: [REDACTED]