



Wednesday, 11 August 2021

**Parliamentary Submission
Loneliness and Social Isolation**

The Neighbourhood Hub has been providing social connection opportunities to the local Mackay community for the past 30 years. The Hub is accessible for all members of our community, including culturally diverse members, children, youth, and families. Our goal is to build resilience and capacity in our local Mackay community so the community can support and empower each other.

For this reason, we have a vested interest in ensuring that the Government takes a closer look at what can be done to address social isolation and loneliness. Our hope is that our Government acknowledges the important role Neighbourhood Centre's like ours play in addressing this issue and how with increased Government support we can play an even greater role.

It goes without saying that COVID-19 has exacerbated the issue of loneliness and social isolation. The impacts of COVID-19 which commenced in 2020 are far reaching and largely unexplored at a regional level. This impact can best be understood by hearing the stories of the individual community members' experiences such as older people, families with children and individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Our following submission provides:

- Highlights from a recent research project undertaken by The Neighbourhood Hub on the impact of COVID on our vulnerable population groups
- An overview of our own Centre's programs, services and how we support our community externally
- Anecdotal feedback provided directly from our program participants, and
- What we need to continue being part of the solution to the problem of Loneliness and Social Isolation

Research Project on COVID impact

Acknowledging the significant impact COVID has had on our vulnerable community groups, The Neighbourhood Hub undertook a research study to determine the common issues being experienced by community members during the pandemic. This research informs our work and ensures we continue to play a meaningful role in relieving some of the identified negative experiences.



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While COVID impacted the entire population, our project focused on the experiences of the most vulnerable two groups - mothers and migrant woman.

Feeling **"Scared, Anxious, Fearful & Worried"** were common emotions expressed by the research participants and the specific impacts identified by research participants included:

- Impacts of isolation and loneliness, particularly for families separated due to lockdowns between countries/states/workplaces and for older family members
- Mental health impacts, such as depression, anxiety, being very emotional, in pain, crying, lack of sleep
- Physical health, including family members who contracted the virus, and physical impacts of being confined to homes
- Impacts for children, such as lack of socialisation and impacts of home schooling
- Inconsistency in application of rules for different visa types
- Financial insecurity due to job loss or ineligibility for government payments
- Job loss or reduced hours and concerns about contracting COVID-19 through work contacts
- Racism experienced by Chinese/Asian families
- Trauma related to the illness and deaths of family members overseas, and inability to support them
- Positive and negative impacts of using telehealth and video-conferencing platforms.

Future Supports identified by the participants that could potentially address above impacts:

- Address mental and physical health in families
- Maintain improved health and hygiene standards
- Increase options for community connections, particularly for older people
- Ensure financial recovery, including maintaining JobKeeper
- Ensure holders of different visas are treated equally, including with the vaccination rollout
- Prepare for the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the words of one participant

"It seems Covid shone a light on the cracks that were already there and now we realise we need more support in families and in the community to cope with life".



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Centre Overview

Social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone. However, among the well-known risk factors include age (with other conditions) and culture. For this reason, we prioritize having programs consistently available to those who fall into these demographics. We also acknowledge that transportation can be a risk factor and to address this we provide transportation for those who need to connect to our Centres.

On a weekly basis, more than 100 people access our Centres. The reasons for their visits include accessing opportunities that:

- improve confidence and wellbeing
- develop a new interest or activity
- improve health
- provide essential services
- help community
- improve independence
- improve job skills.

However, what consistently runs parallel to the above reasons is the opportunity to socially connect and engage.

Our Programs and Services

The Neighbourhood Hub currently delivers the following free programs every day of the week with Program Coordinators designing their activities to build and maintain social connections, and to expand connections beyond The Neighbourhood Hub.

- Three (3) playgroups, one specifically delivered for our multicultural community
- English Conversational Classes
- World Café – Culture sharing group/network
- Big Sister Project – one-on-one mentoring and support for migrant women
- Seniors Friendship Group – social engagement club for seniors of Mackay
- Multicultural Women's Club – social group for culturally and linguistically diverse women to connect, support each other, build confidence, and learn new skills



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- Know Your Neighbour – self-appointed Neighbourhood Champions host neighbourhood catch-ups with a focus on preparing for a natural disaster
- Volunteer Hub - Access to volunteering is known to reduce social isolation and loneliness. We strive to have a robust volunteering program, with participants ranging from school leavers to over 60. In the past financial year, we had over 15 volunteers contributing a total of over 70 hours each week.

We also offer other ongoing services which include one-on-one support to help people overcome barriers, these include

- Emergency Relief
- Migrant Settlement
- Family Support Program
- Good Beginnings Home Based Family support
- Financial Wellbeing
- Financial Counselling

In addition to our own internal programs, we play an important role in the wider community by:

1. Providing a community accessible venue which currently has 11 regular weekly bookings for community groups, including up to 125 participants as part of those bookings.
2. Working with other stakeholders to ensure the people who access our Centres are connected with other relevant groups and services in the local Mackay region. For example, we have a well-established referral system in place with the Mackay Women's Centre who are committed to enhancing the lives of women in the Mackay and surrounding region. The organisation continually looks for opportunities to strengthen relationships with other services, agencies and networks to ensure there is an understanding and awareness of how community members can connect with The Neighbourhood Hub.
3. Holding public events throughout the calendar year to encourage social participation and connection. COVID-19 has reduced the number of large-scale events we have delivered in previous years. However, in March 2021 we delivered our annual Harmony Day celebration where 720 people attended. In May, we held two OPEN Houses at both Centres which provided an opportunity for the local community to drop in and see



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the Centres. In July 2021, we resumed our Friday BBQs and pie day and continue to look for new opportunities to expand our food donations.

4. Demonstrating a high level of innovation, adaptability, and creativity during the QLD lockdown to ensure the local Mackay community could connect with both Centres, to ensure social connections were still available to support our most vulnerable.
- Activities such as World Café and English Conversation Classes moved to the Zoom platform and engagement remained for the period of the lock down. For the month of April 2020 (during the lockdown) 43 individuals participated in the virtual World Café and 25 individuals participated in the virtual English Conversation Circle classes.
 - For our Family Support Programs, the program continued to receive new referrals (a total of 5 for the month of April 2020) despite being in lockdown.
 - For the quarter April to June 2020 1,012 individuals accessed support from the Centre through phone, email, and face to face.

Community Feedback

Numbers and Statistics tell only part of the story. The words of our participants and community further explain why it is so important that the Government continue to shine a spotlight on Social Isolation and Loneliness and helps to reinforce why community organisations like ours are vital in overcoming this challenge.

"I had been struggling for many months after separating from my husband who had been abusive, but I had only an international (drivers) license and everything was too hard, and I was depressed. Through the support of the Neighbourhood Hub, I worked out how to get my Australian license, and am now attending their social groups connecting with other ladies and I am so much happier."

"Being a first-time mum, I felt very isolated. The childbirth experience was traumatic, there were health challenges, and we were stuck at home. And I find social interaction is so important for me and my son. Before



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joining the playgroup at TNH I was worrying a lot about not being able to connect with others and had that guilt that my son didn't have any interaction with other kids. Coming to TNH really helped both my son and I. He started to interact with children, and I could socialise with other moms and get the support that I needed. We now attend playgroups on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I am glad to see my child's confidence grow and see him now playing with others. It is definitely a needed support for mom's like me."

"Being a migrant (from Vietnam) and having my first son was challenging, we had no friends and no support. But the playgroup was very helpful, I made new friends with other moms and my son could play with other children. Now my son is six and he went to school, and I'm here with my second child. I attend when I can. I think the neighbourhood centre helps many families to connect with others."

Statistics

During 2020, we had fifty (50) volunteers engage with our organisation despite navigating border restrictions and Centre closures as a result of the global pandemic. Demand for our services continues to grow with up to 182 individuals accessing our organisation during a week. That means that we generated \$451,170 of social value and includes \$111,774 in volunteer contributions.

What we need

As demonstrated above, The Neighbourhood Hub provides a lifeline to many vulnerable members of the community, it provides a place of safety, connection, and support and in order to remain a reliable source for our community we need reliable funding. We feel we could further address the social and isolation challenges by having a support person available for those who drop-in to our centre every day.

While some individuals have specific needs which we can refer to internal and/or external programs, many who present are in crisis or are just lonely and need someone to listen and to provide support immediately. Having a staff member to be available to listen, support and capture these stories would be invaluable and play an important role in addressing the issue of social isolation and loneliness in our community.



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To continue to meet demand from the local community who access our centre we require additional funding to cover 2.5 workers per week plus overheads. Final budget figures together with statistics on number of people who access the Centre, volunteer numbers can be provided where needed.

The Neighbourhood Hub is one example of how collectively community and neighbourhood centres are supporting people who experience loneliness and isolation. Being a member of the Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA), our peak body, we benefit from their advocacy, leadership, and support.

Should you require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Kind regards

Vicky Bowden

President

Management Committee

George Street Neighbourhood Centre Association Inc. trading as The Neighbourhood Hub



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