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13 August 2021

Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House
George Street Brisbane Qld 4000

By email: CSSC@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Submission on the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland

Richmond Fellowship Queensland provides the following submission on the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland, being undertaken by the Community Support and Services Committee. The submission responds to each of the key areas of inquiry.

1. *The nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland, including but not limited to identification of and consultation with vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups at significant risk across the life course; and the interplay of COVID-19 with this issue.*

   We reference issues of social isolation in North Queensland from a community service provider perspective. The following groups have been identified as being impacted by social isolation where protective factors are minimal or non-existent:
   - People with a mental illness resulting in social phobia, anxiety.
   - Single parents, male and female isolated from family with low income and poor public transport options.
   - Aged persons living alone having experienced the loss of their partner.
   - Young people, particularly those impacted by family dysfunction, domestic violence.
   - Defence veterans who suffer with PTSD or AOD problems because of their service.
   - People living in remote and very remote locations without access to community and social interaction, including being on the wrong side of the digital divide.

   Impacts include loss of income, alienation from friends and social groups, deteriorating health, reduction in feelings of self-worth, inability to contribute meaningfully to community and society.

   COVID has had a lesser impact in North Queensland. Apart from the national lockdown in 2020 COVID restrictions in North Queensland have been limited.

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2. *Causes and drivers of social isolation and loneliness, including those unique to Queensland.*

   Causes of social isolation can be illness, loss of employment, ageing, exclusion from community, bereavement and incapacitation.

   Drivers include increasingly disconnected society and community due to consumerism, unregulated social media, individual focus on personal gain rather than community responsibility. There are exceptions including strongly cohesive first nation and migrant families and their related social structures that mitigate against social isolation.

3. *Protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness.*

   Protective factors to mitigate social isolation and loneliness include having friends and relations nearby, membership of community and sporting groups, employment, education, social connections, and good health. Access to natural supports as well as intentional government funded programs to reduce social isolation and loneliness are also beneficial.

4. *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.*

   ABS data collection via the Census could be used in the future to further quantify numbers of people living in social isolation.

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.

Many social and community services programs funded by the Queensland and Federal Governments are aimed at addressing the health and wellbeing needs of vulnerable people. In the course of service delivery agency staff encounter people who are either living in social isolation themselves or who know someone – a neighbour, an acquaintance for example, who is socially isolated. This can provide a pathway to engagement if funding rules allow it. Neighbourhood or community centres play a key role in reducing social isolation. Generally speaking, they are well connected into their communities – particularly in regional and rural areas and often have good intelligence about people's life situations, including social isolation.

Effective responses to isolation include outreach to individuals through programs already being delivered. Agencies such as Meals on Wheels are great at this work. Another example is Queensland's Seniors Legal Support Service (Dept Communities) which regularly comes into contact with aged people living alone.

In Townsville an organisation that works with ageing defence force veterans, the Townsville Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Ex Service Association reaches out to vulnerable people living on their own by hand delivering a monthly newsletter providing a point of direct engagement with people living alone. The Townsville veteran's community operates a program called Check Your Mates which

encourages veterans to reach out to their mates to engage socially or just have a chat. The International Clubhouse model of psychosocial support provides for members to keep in touch with other members who might not have attended their Clubhouse, again, checking in on them to see how they are. Men's Sheds are another effective model for engaging men (and women) in effectively reducing social isolation.

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.*

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that 1 in 10 (9.5%, or around 1.8 million based on 2016 population) Australians aged 15 and over report lacking social support (Relationships Australia 2018). The role of a state-wide strategy would be to fund agencies to work alongside existing community services to incorporate strategies to reduce social isolation. This should be built into funding agreements, not bolted on afterwards. It would involve delivering outputs that ensure every agency has a role in seeking out, contacting and referring people in social isolation to a range of natural and funded supports.

Due to the spread of people living in social isolation across geographic and societal domains the scope of any strategy must be far reaching. An example is how the Qld Mental Health Commission operates its strategies to improve mental health and wellbeing through making it a government priority to address these issues through government departments as well as across the broader mental health and Alcohol and Other Drugs sectors themselves.

Priority should be given to addressing needs based on existing data, with new data collection part of the overall strategy. Groups targeted should be single parents, ageing people, rural and remote residents through bringing existing organisations, such as neighbourhood centres, into key roles in outreach programs.

Finally, a marketing campaign raising awareness of the level and impacts of social isolation and loneliness should be implemented nationally. Such a campaign would urge Australians to reach out to neighbours, family members and others to engage in community-based relationships.

Should you require further information, please contact Ms Rachel Colombi, Chief of Staff, Richmond Fellowship Queensland on ███████████████████ or █████████████ .

Yours sincerely

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Chief Executive