



empowering people

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Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

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Introduction

The East Creek Community Centre has been operating as an incorporated neighbourhood centre for 33 years since March 1988. East Creek Community Centre (ECCC) was established as a Queensland Government initiative in response to a need for a safe, judgment-free environment where people who have become socially isolated could express themselves, find a purpose, and be a part of a community. They constructed a modest Neighbourhood Centre in Hume Street called East Creek Neighbourhood Centre to reduce the negative effects of social isolation, promote inclusivity, and the benefits of engaging in civic/communal life. During this time it has offered many community driven activities and support such as Stroke and Brain Injury Support Group, Blanket for the Homeless Group, Artability group for intellectually disabled people as well as a variety of groups and activities that welcome everyone in the community to join, volunteer, find support, meaning, learning opportunities and make friends.

Social Isolation in Toowoomba

According to 2017 Loneliness Report one in four people are lonely, and these people are more likely to be depressed or anxious about social contact than the rest of the population. In Toowoomba this is no different, many people struggle with loneliness. At East Creek Community Centre we have many of the people who come through our doors, and say they find it difficult to make friends in the community. People on low incomes and seniors can easily become isolated and we see this in our participants. We also get a sizeable proportion of people who have retired or been made redundant that are looking for ways to connect, save money, and add meaning to their lives. Health/disability issues too can impact on people and make it difficult to make quality social connections in the community. Being lonely can impact upon a person's mental health, with higher levels of social interaction anxiety, less social interaction, and poorer quality of life (Loneliness Study 2017). As a result of Covid, the centre has experienced an influx of the elderly community members seeking companionship. ECCC identified several participants in the community that felt their health and wellbeing deteriorated as a result of their inability to attend their usual centre and volunteering activities.

Our approach to Loneliness and Isolation

East Creek Community Centre offers something to everyone in the community, in particular people with disabilities and the elderly. With the help of volunteers and paid professionals, the centre provides a variety of activities and programs that serve the most disadvantaged, geared at reducing the devastating consequences of loneliness and social isolation. We have a variety of programs at the centre, from free food with Ozharvest, several craft groups, artability group, walking group, community literacy program, gardening, blanket making group, computer lessons, stroke and brain injury support group as well as offering general support and advice on a wide range of things including other services in the area. We have many lonely and socially isolated people come into the centre and these people often join an activity group or volunteer. From feedback, this has made it an easier way, with less pressure, to meet new people, develop a social network and find a meaningful activity to do. We have had several people say;

- *“That without the centre to attend they would just stay home all the time.”*

- *“Volunteering at the centre, gives them a reason to get out of the house.”*
- *“I feel like I am a part of the community now I come along to East Creek.”*

During the 2020 Covid shutdown, several members reported feeling that their mental health and wellbeing had deteriorated due to inability to attend their usual activities and volunteering duties. At the centre we organised regular phone calls and used the centre bus to drop off food parcels to our most vulnerable. We also used Care Army volunteers to help with drop offs and cook food for community members. These were greatly appreciated, and several members said they looked forward to our visits all week. We also did online activities, with some zoom meetings, and we also did a series of small cooking segments on social media filmed at the centre.

In particular our Stroke and Brain Injury support group report what a difference the activity has made to them. The group provides social support and activities designed to improve stroke survivors' general recovery. The group has been running at ECCC for nine years, and all of the group are long term regular attendees. One of the members wasn't going out at all until their medical practitioner suggested they attend the group. This member is now at the centre several times a week and helps out their neighbours in need with free food from Ozharvest. Another member suffering from a catastrophic stroke, managed to improve on their health to the point where they were able to get their drivers licence back. Quite an achievement, from someone that at one point was unable to talk, or do the most basic tasks. During Covid our Stroke and Brain Injury Support Coordinator, Nancy Hardwick, kept in contact with members, calling on a weekly basis to check on their well-being. Nancy is an excellent example of how much older people in the community give back to the community and how important this demographic is to our overall well-being. This also emphasizes the significance of ensuring that everyone in the community is safe.

East Creek Community Centre

East Creek Community Centre (ECCC) has gone through many changes (incorporation, permanent relocation to our Kitchener Street location, broadening of services with the addition of the Older Persons Action Program, and so on), and now offers services to meet the ever-changing needs of everyone in the community. The OPAP's mission is to assist seniors in developing their confidence, self-esteem, and independence through social and personal development activities. Connecting elderly persons who are

vulnerable to local services and social support networks. Raising awareness of elder needs and challenges while bridging the social divide for people who are socially isolated. East Creek also offers its participants the opportunity to engage in communal activities such as cuppa and cards, crochet, blanket making, art classes, support groups, and monthly/weekend activities. There is a wide variety of opportunities to volunteer at the centre; through tutoring in the community literacy program (CLP) and IT lessons, in the garden, catering for morning teas and lunches, group coordination and individual support. The ECCC's long-running Tax Help program can help those who struggle to manage the complexity of their annual tax returns including IT support and computer lessons.

The IT department has been overworked as a result of Covid. The demand for assistance has risen considerably as more people of the community have had to rely on technology and online services to stay in touch. In addition to this we offer help with online and paper and form filling. With the recent Census we had several community organisations and individuals contact us looking for assistance to complete this. We helped several people submit their Census online, and find out where paper forms were available. Without this local knowledge based service, there would have been many people in the community who would have been unable to fulfil their requirements.

Neighbourhood Centres, Loneliness and Social Isolation

People of all ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, religions, ages, and social statuses are welcome at community centres, which by their very nature connect people and organisations, particularly those who are isolated, vulnerable, or disadvantaged. In a localized manner, community and neighbourhood centres respond to a variety of issues and opportunities. They are versatile and responsive, with the flexibility to change priorities and resources in responding to emerging challenges. They work in ways that involve local people in local solutions, and as a result, they play a key role in community capacity building. COVID19's consequences have resulted in an increase in mental health issues among community members, as well as the eviction of numerous families. The most effective social infrastructure to be used to lessen social isolation in Queensland communities is centres and their linked stakeholders. In response to reducing loneliness and social isolation in Queensland, the Queensland Government must properly resource centres as the critical pieces of social infrastructure that they are and can be in reducing loneliness and social isolation.

Conclusion

East Creek Community Centre agrees with the QFCA's recommendations to the Inquiry, which includes positioning Community Centres as a crucial community-based tool for advocacy. These local, welcoming, neighbourhood organisations, which provide important connections, healthy relationships, and a feeling of belonging for all Queenslanders. In considering how to reduce loneliness and social isolation in Queensland, the Queensland Government needs to adequately resource Neighbourhood Centres as the key pieces of social infrastructure they are.

Our centre supports the Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) submission to this inquiry. QFCA is the peak body of Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland and recommend:

- **Increase Neighbourhood Centre Investment** to a minimum of 2.5 workers plus overheads per centre to ensure adequate resourcing of place-based pro-connection responses
- **Strength Based Awareness Campaign emphasising the key role of NCC's**, creating increased awareness of centres as hubs of connection for social isolated individuals
- **Enhance Neighbourhood Centre Digital and Physical Infrastructure** to connect isolated individuals in communities using hybrid online and in-person methods
- **Resource QFCA to deliver additional NCC sector support** including implementing a NCC Reporting Framework which measures social isolation and loneliness.

Additional resourcing by the Queensland Government can further enhance the Neighbourhood Centre sector's capacity to invest in community-led, place-based solutions to the problem of loneliness and social isolation in our state.