



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

Submission to the Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

17/08/2021

Dear Committee Members,

On behalf of our congregation, we thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback for the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland. Southside Uniting Church has only recently been formed from the amalgamation of four former congregations in the life of the Uniting Church – but in our short time as a new organisation we have seen the impact and need that social isolation is having on our region.

We applaud the intention of this Inquiry to identify the nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness, and the role, scope and priorities of a state-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness. We recognise that this inquiry has been initiated in response to grass-roots process of community listening and community organising.

Response to Terms of Reference

We would like to share our views, knowledge and recommendations on this issue in accordance with the terms of reference stated in the submission guidelines:

A. 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**
- **the interplay of COVID-19 with this issue**

As part of the community listening campaign into social isolation in the Mt Gravatt area, we are deeply concerned about the scope and reach that social isolation has had across our region. Through our mid-week programmes, we often encounter people who are isolated and little or no contact with people outside of our 60 minute programmes and the travel to and from our churches. Of particular note is the Yeronga Men's Shed, which meets at our Yeronga Worship Centre twice a week. This was a group established by members from the former Yeronga Uniting Church and has welcomed many men from the local area since its launch. While its explicit purpose is for men to have an accessible workshop that they can use, it is more often that we encounter the men chatting over tea and biscuits and connecting on conversation topics. The men have often expressed how disconnected they



feel from their wider families – often children and grandchildren living inter-state and how as some of them are now widowers or divorcees, they have diminishing capacities to look after themselves.

Our congregation is proud to host 3Fs at our Tarragindi Worship Centre, the three Fs stand for 'Fun, Food & Fellowship' and this group recently celebrated their 40th birthday. On occasion, three generations have participated in this group, but in 2021, 3Fs exclusively caters to older members of our community. Participants from local nursing homes and other denominations join our members fortnightly for a morning tea and an entertainer sharing songs and anecdotes of yesteryear – but this group also often hears how social isolation is inhibiting members from getting the most out of life in their twilight years. This group reports in particular the difficulties with transport for older members of our community, and the anxiety and stress that has been brought about as part of the COVID-19 pandemic. For one participant, coming to 3Fs was the only reason they had recently to 'get dressed up', otherwise she would have felt like staying in bed the whole day.

At our Holland Park Worship Centre, one of our faithful members has been hosting an English as a Second Language Class, for migrant mothers of young children. Among this group, we have heard how the language barrier has meant that many of these young mothers are isolated and long for greater community connection. On Wednesday afternoons, they join our congregation members to share a traditional dish and be introduced to new vocabulary to help them get by in our society. In this way, members of the migrant community in our region are also socially isolated, as they struggle to engage in our society where they do not have access to resources or spaces in which to practice their English in culturally safe and appropriate ways. We have also found that at times, they lack awareness of where to get support for themselves, their children or their families – and as such perpetuate a cycle where their only support network is made up of members of their cultural group. As part of our congregation's community listening, we have begun a new endeavour to connect with migrant women in our region in order to develop relationships and address their needs by connecting them with appropriate community supports and organisations.

Another group formed by members of our congregation and serving the community, is the Social Activities Group for Everyone, or colloquially known as SAGE. SAGE has been part of the original listening campaign on social isolation in the Mt Gravatt area and hosted a Qld Community Alliance listening event with persons struggling with social isolation. From this listening, SAGE was able to be part of the launch of the Ways to Wellness programme and we have seen direct benefits in the lives of participants. This group currently hosts between 30 and 40 participants weekly, many of whom are from outside our congregation and are building relationships and connections with other people they would have not otherwise known. SAGE participants are encouraged to participate in activities they would otherwise not be able to participate – and materials for these activities are kindly donated by members of the congregation. In this way, participants are able to learn and engage with exciting activities they would not have otherwise known about and widen their circle of connections and friendship groups. Of note is the Mah-Jong players, a group of mostly Anglo-Saxon women who had never had any exposure to the game but who now faithfully set up their table in the centre of the room and invite anyone interested to participate. This has been a boon in particular for older Chinese and other East Asian visitors to the group, who see a familiar game being played and want to get to know the participants despite a significant language barrier. As part of the Ways to Wellness programme, SAGE and the Mt Gravatt Community Centre have been able to collaborate in bringing socially isolated persons – identified by their medical practitioners, to engage in this and other programmes in the local



area. Receiving support for transport and other helps to break them out of the cycle of social isolation that leads to depression and other chronic conditions that can affect their quality of life.

Recommendations

Southside Uniting Church supports the following recommendations for the Inquiry:

Listening to People in the Know

We recommend the Inquiry Committee engage community leaders of various cultural and ethnic groups, faith leaders of various religious and denominational groups and community support and development groups who are already engaged with this issue. Within the Uniting Church, we know that Wesley Mission Qld, UnitingCare Qld, BlueCare, Lifeline and the Qld Synod are engaging with this concern on various levels and we have been privileged to be but a small part of this. We are also aware of other groups such as the Islamic Council of Qld, Anglicare and PresCare who are also addressing social isolation within their own communities.

The Social Cure

We commend to you the research by University of Queensland's School of Psychology around "Social Cure" should be the central reference point and underpinning of the new Queensland State-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness.

This research is brought together in *"The New Psychology of Health: Unlocking the Social Cure"*

In addition to this book we refer the committee to a summary and further detailed references at: <https://stories.uq.edu.au/research/impact/2020/a-social-cure-for-better-health/>

This research includes social prescribing and "Groups for Health" as evidence-based interventions. It has influenced many aspects of how we address social isolation in our region, including how SAGE and the Mt Gravatt Solidarity Group references people for treating this issue.

Expand Ways to Wellness

The Ways to Wellness program is a world-leading social prescribing network in the Mount Gravatt area of Brisbane. It has been developed through a community organising process led by the Qld Community Alliance in collaboration with University of Queensland, and funded by the Queensland Government.

We submit that social prescribing should be developed as a key pillar of the Queensland State-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness. Ways to Wellness builds upon the experience of social prescribing overseas by more deeply linking health providers, community initiatives, and isolated people.

Further information can be obtained from Mt Gravatt Community Centre which coordinates the project.



Increase base funding for Community Neighbourhood Centres

We submit that Community Neighbourhood Centres be considered as key social infrastructure, which should play a central role in Queensland State-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness.

Effective community neighbourhood centres reduce social isolation right across a local community. They build exactly the type of group relationships proven to strengthen social identity and therefore reduce social isolation. They are the right scale to build these relationships in ways that address local needs and local nuances for local communities.

Despite this, Community Neighbourhood Centres only receive a yearly average of \$134,000 in Neighbourhood Centre funding per centre from the Queensland Government. This has not increased over several decades, effectively amounting to a cut in local services, programs and support to our local communities every year as centres are asked to do more with less.

We recommend that Community Neighbourhood Centres be considered as frontline services, and that their funding be increased accordingly.

Involve cultural community leaders from first nations and multicultural communities in leadership and co-design of relevant initiatives

We submit that there will need to be particular approaches used in first nations communities and multicultural communities. The Queensland Government should engage community leaders in these areas as agents of leadership who co-design effective initiatives. Community leaders and community associations should be funded adequately to do this work.

Creation of a ministerial portfolio for social isolation and loneliness

We encourage the creation of a ministerial portfolio which will help to maintain this issue as a priority issue on the political agenda. This will help strengthen state government action, provide a platform for federal lobbying, and raise media and public awareness.

Community Hearings

We encourage the committee to conduct community hearings hosted by civil society organisations (charities, ethnic associations, faith organisations, unions) that are engaged on the issues of social isolation and loneliness. It is important that the committee hear directly from people who are isolated and lonely, which is difficult in a written format or through centralised hearings.

Sincerely and on behalf of our Community;



Rev. David Fender
Lead Minister



Rev. Esteban Liévano
Minister for Pastoral Care & Outreach

