

18 August 2021

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

Attention: The Commissioner, Social Isolation and Loneliness Inquiry, Queensland

Re: Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland (the Society) would like to thank the Community Support and Services Committee for the opportunity to provide comment on the inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland. As a community-based organisation providing assistance across the state, our people have unique insight into the issues impacting Queenslanders including those of access and equity, community participation and disadvantage. The Society welcomes the inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland and would be keen to participate in any government-led initiatives that can improve the physical and mental health outcomes of impacted individuals and families.

The Society's mission is to "provide a hand-up" to people in need, and does this from small groups of volunteer community-based members, and committed employees that are usually funded by government programs. There are more than 150 'centres of charity' in Queensland where donated clothes and furniture are re-sold to the public. These 'Vinnies shops' are mainly staffed by volunteers, including people looking to re-skill, or meet Centrelink payment criteria or Court imposed Community Service orders. In many locations, the Vinnies shops become a community meeting place and a reference point for referral to other services.

The Society provides numerous services and programs across Queensland that have direct positive outcomes for people:

- The Society is a volunteer driven organisation with ~3,000 members and ~5,500 volunteer members in Queensland, located across the State. Our experience indicates that people who actively volunteer are unlikely to be socially isolated or lonely. This appears to be backed by research (Flood, 2005).
- The Society provides food and emergency financial support to people requesting assistance through its member-based organisation. The Society is one of the only emergency relief providers in Australia to visit people in their homes to discuss their needs and offer assistance. This approach overcomes isolation and accessibility issues. On average, visits take 20 to 30 minutes and a high proportion of people that are visited have previously been visited on multiple occasions forming independent trusted relationships.
- The Society provides Housing and housing support through 'Vinnies Housing' which is a registered Community Housing Provider. The Society works from the premise that stable housing is the foundation for the improvement in people's personal situation. Our experience suggests that safe and stable accommodation can help people connect into community networks, providing access to work, study or sport or other community groups.
- The Society is the largest provider of homelessness services in Queensland. We provide a number of Homelessness Support Programs to a range of people, including young people, families, single men and women, experiencing or at risk of homelessness to access long term housing and support to maintain tenancies.
- The Society is active in disaster assistance, with more than \$15 million distributed to people impacted by drought, bush fire and floods since 2018. It has been through our local-based members that the Society has been able to assist people, many in rural and remote areas of Queensland, who have been



impacted by recent disasters. Often our local members have visited people on multiple occasions to offer assistance – these people being isolated from other community services.

The SVDP can point to a number of programs that focus on social inclusion and building community participation, including:

- **Youth and children.** The Society funds programs such as Buddies Days, SENSE Mentoring, Soccer Stars, The Ozanam Leadership Program which are adventure-based learning programs providing support, encouragement, leadership training and positive role models to children and young adults. The Society works with disadvantaged families and kids, including the 'Buddies Days' and SENSE program where a Society accredited young volunteers are partnered with school-aged young people as mentors. These programs occur across the State, with the major programs being in Brisbane, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Rockhampton and Toowoomba regions. The Society also provides an opportunity for younger, community-minded members to meet and volunteer with under-30s membership groups organised in many towns, schools and universities.
- **Refugee and migrant support.** The Society funds programs in Southeast Queensland and Townsville to assist refugee and migrant families to take up the educational, vocational and social opportunities that exist in Australian society. The 'Volunteer Refugee Tutoring and Community Support' (VoRTCS) program co-ordinates volunteer teams to visit refugee families in their homes to provide community support and enhance English language skills. There are currently 82 families receiving support through this program in Southeast Queensland. In Townsville, the Vinnies Refugee Assistance Program (VRAP) has been assisting migrants and refugees engage with Australian society, including learning to drive programs to help isolated people connect with community.
- **Education and skilling for work.** The Clemente program provides people who have experienced disadvantage and are wanting to re-engage in education with access to tertiary level education through a partnership between the Society and the Australian Catholic University (ACU). The benefits of the Clemente Program include increased self-esteem, improved social connections, and an opportunity to build workforce skills through higher education. The Society also partners with government on skilling people for work programs.
- **Vinnies Community Voices** is a community choir comprising people at risk of long-term welfare dependence to develop informal social connections and professional networks that could assist them to find employment. The Logan City based program formerly funded by a government grant has provided positive social and employment outcomes for participants. Feedback from the participants indicates the program has been a success. *"Asher, a refugee, joined Vinnies Community Voices choir to connect with his peers, but came away with so much more. The program helped Asher get his life on track by paying the deposit on his TAFE fees, funding a new laptop for study, and driving lessons."* ([Annual Report, 2019-20](#)).
- **Aged care and in-home support.** Ozcare, St Vincent de Paul Queensland's aged care services business, offers a wide range of services to support elderly people. In our [2018-19 Annual Report](#) is the story of Margaret, an elderly resident who moved from New Zealand to the Gold Coast after her husband died, to be closer to her daughter. The story describes how attending the *Day Respite Centre* at Burleigh Heads helped Margaret make new friends and participate in social activities.
- **Research partnerships.** The Society and the University of Queensland are looking for trends in the Society's client emergency assistance database. Several trends have emerged including: the more time spent by volunteers with people requesting assistance, the better their outcomes and the address change is a predictor for the need for assistance.

The following feedback on social isolation and loneliness issues has been provided by employees and members:

- Affordable transport was seen as an impediment to people attending social activities. A central Queensland youth member highlighted the need to maintain a vehicle as there were a lack of public transport options. A Brisbane bayside member further highlighted the issue of access to transport options, 'The cost of and access to transportation is a significant contributor to the ability to interact. Aged and disadvantaged persons cannot get to the community locations or activities that... the rest of us are accustomed to'. The Brisbane bayside member noted the availability of the Queensland



government's 'Taxi Subsidy Scheme and Lift Payment' benefit, but also noted the high criteria for people to access the benefit.

- The fear of catching COVID-19 has resulted in a reluctance for people to attend activities. A youth worker reported that they had difficulty in getting young people and volunteers to attend organised events. However, the youth member also reported that they have had some success with video conferencing (e.g. using Zoom, TEAMS).
- Mental health education was discussed and the importance of counsellors and psychologists, especially in schools. A rural member noted that there was a perception that counsellors and psychologists were only for people suffering from mental health issues. She also noted that increased awareness by parents could help identify the warning signs of mental health issues in children that may be caused by social isolation or loneliness.

Recommendation

The St Vincent de Paul Society of Queensland recommends that:

1. The Queensland Government develop a collaborative framework aimed at alleviating loneliness and social isolation across the state. In the same way as Disaster Management Plans have been developed for regional communities, a community-based 'Social Isolation and Loneliness Management Plan', that identifies the resources available to meet the needs of a local community, could be developed to identify the organisations offering services. Existing and new partners could include the Mental Health Commissioner, Local Government Authorities, service providers, sporting and other community groups.
2. Continued long-term investment into safe, sustainable and affordable housing is a commitment of all levels of government recognising that stable housing is fundamental to people's ability to build relationships, enter the workforce or study and to participate in community activities.
3. There are opportunities to improve access to transport for disadvantaged groups and in rural and regional areas. The affordability of transport to access events is seen as a factor limiting participation in social events.
4. An education and advertising campaign to inform people of the mental health warning signs, especially in children is recommended. For example, during COVID a general reluctance for people to attend social events was noted, and is likely to lead to increasing levels of social isolation and loneliness and associated mental health issues, in the short to medium term.
5. The funding by Government of more community engagement programs such as those noted above and funded by the Society in targeted areas such as, Youth & Children, Refugee and Migrant Support, etc to better help community groups and government to focus resources in areas and groups where social isolation and loneliness are a factor.

We thank the Community Support and Services Committee for inviting comment and hope that they will consider these suggestions in their report recommendations to the Legislative Assembly. For any questions or clarification on points made in this submission please contact:

Jackie Youngblutt, General Manager – Programs

[Redacted]
[Redacted].

Yours Sincerely,

[Redacted]

Matt Nunan

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Chair, Social Justice Committee, St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland

Social Isolation and Loneliness definitions and research

For the purposes of this response, we note that a review of international and national evidence-based literature suggests that the terms social isolation and loneliness are often used interchangeably, however they are identified as distinct concepts (Grenade & Boldy, 2008; Commissioner for Senior Victorians, op. cit., 2016). As quoted in Shapiro (2016), Goodman, Adams & Swift (2015) social isolation is defined as "... the objective absence of social contacts and social connectedness ...". In contrast, loneliness is defined as "... a subjective negative experience caused by a perceived inadequacy of social relationships ...," hence the notion of feeling lonely in a crowd.

It is suggested that up to one in four Australians are currently experiencing loneliness (APS, 2018), and whilst loneliness does not discriminate, people with higher incomes appear to be less lonely than those with less income, suggesting there is a correlation that as income decreases the risk of social isolation and loneliness increases (Friends for Good, 2019). This is of particular concern as we continue to live with COVID-19 and as people's livelihood are affected by ongoing disruption. Additionally, loneliness and social isolation have a negative impact on health and well-being with research suggesting that people affected by social isolation have higher mortality rates, increased risk of cognitive decline, coronary artery disease, Alzheimer's and diabetes. (Dossey, 2020).

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