



August 18, 2021

Dear Secretary,

Re: Neighbourhood Centres and the Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation

Co.As.It. is one of 140 Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCC's) around Queensland responding to loneliness and social isolation in our local communities. Neighbourhood Centres are place-based social infrastructure that foster connection, belonging, participation and inclusion.

Neighbourhood Centres welcome everyone, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, age or social status and by their very nature build connections between individuals and organisations, particularly those who are isolated, vulnerable and disenfranchised.

Our centre offers a wide range of services and activities as outlined in our submission which is attached.

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.

Yours sincerely
Dina Ranieri
CEO

473 Lutwyche Road, Lutwyche Q 4030
PO Box 59, Albion BC Q 4010
Ph 07 3624 6100 Fax 07 3624 6185

mail@coasit.asn.au www.coasit.asn.au ABN 32 068 267 816 ACN 627 389 931



Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

Submission prepared by:

Nella Alba-Calabrese

Co.As.It. Community Services Ltd



473 Lutwyche Road, Lutwyche Q 4030
PO Box 59, Albion BC Q 4010
Ph 07 3624 6100 Fax 07 3624 6185

mail@coasit.asn.au www.coasit.asn.au ABN 32 068 267 816 ACN 627 389 931

Since 1978 and before receiving formal funding as NCC, Co.As.It. has been counteracting isolation and loneliness by addressing the factors that inhibited active and positive participation in community and civic life. Over the past 4 decades we have provided services that have increased confidence, built capacity and actively engaged people in their local area, particularly those identified as marginalized and from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. (CALD)

These services extended to other target groups in the general community, e.g. people living with mental illness, carers, seniors, refugees. Community and individual needs have diverged since 1978 but what has remained constant across all target groups is that people still experience profound isolation, alienation and loneliness and that most are seeking to establish a sense of belonging and a sense of place in the area that they live. For most CALD and refugee community members, institutional services are often seen as threatening, are mistrusted and hence are not accessed. Informal services within a NCC are preferred, are accessible and generate a sense of support commonly received from family and friends. Co.As.It. has been at the grass roots level of service provision by being informal and non-threatening whilst providing practical support and programs that reflect and respond to the diverse needs of the community we serve.

The primary strategy has always been instilling steadfast relationships between participants through group activities. Friendships germinate and flourish under an inclusive environment that nurtures tolerance and acceptance. Services included:

- *English classes*
- *Information dissemination sessions (Centrelink, community services, schooling support, health, language support, legal)*
- *Technology classes*
- *Educational and employment workshops;*
- *Craft groups;*
- *Physical activity programs (yoga- tai chi, exercise,)*
- *Socio/recreational activities (e.g. Latin Dance classes; Zoom-ba Kids; Art classes) as well as translating and creating appropriate resources for isolated people in their own language. (Italian, Spanish, and others)*

Activities have always been aimed at a group level to encourage isolated and lonely CALD community members to meet, establish supportive networks, connect with local activities and with support from staff, become confident in growing their social presence within their local area. Small and large community events, technology classes, physical activity classes, concerts and other activities continue to be organised to foster a sense of belonging and place that naturally evolves into broader interaction for people who have been socially isolated and lonely.

Countless times the organisation has provided referrals, advocacy and emergency care within the community in collaboration with other NCCs, service providers and health practitioners. We have partnered with RTOs and recruitment companies to support, educate and upskill CALD unemployed and employ graduates where possible; through community forums have collated feedback from the target group on their perception and strategies to address identified needs.

As the community continues to age in place the NCC is a vital link to accessing wider social and recreational contact - very important for those who remain living at home especially CALD who may not have language skills to seek engagement more directly. An NCC within proximity to transport is paramount and as many older CALD women never learned to drive, this is a significant factor in their accessing activities that alleviate loneliness and isolation. Ages of participants involved in accessing NCC services are predominantly parents and pre-school families; seniors who are still active, mobile and retired and older frailer members of the community who live alone or whose spouse or partner has moved into residential care.

Loneliness and isolation in our area

When we first began responding to community needs of isolation, loneliness and displacement, the target groups were culturally and linguistically diverse members of the community - especially women. Displacement, lack of language skills and other financial disadvantage had backwashes such as depression, relationship problems, conflict with family, inability to access services and wide disengagement from community life. The same issues we identified then continue to surface for new CALD migrants and refugees today. Many refugees have had to survive in countries where government directives were often feared because of castigatory consequences, hence this target group often feels disempowered and fearful to seek support.

One community member Jorge was an older refugee, he arrived in Australia with his wife a few years ago and they only trusted their parish priest who did not speak their language. Jorge had been tortured in their home country resulting in his loss of hearing, vision and mobility. He and his wife were isolated, deeply lonely despite support from the local parish priest and volunteers. Due to linguistic difficulties and lack of knowledge of services available to them they were on their own and struggling to perform tasks of daily living. Both were depressed and Jorge was in constant pain and apathetic. Additionally, they were feeling a profound sense of loss, were alienated from the wider community and had lost the motivation to pursue help.

After becoming involved with Co.As.It. our Arabic worker was finally able to communicate with them and they were able to express their suffering in their own language. It was a pivotal moment as they had not been able to communicate adequately within their local area of New Farm. The couple was encouraged to attend social outings and we facilitated their accessing of home care services, social activity groups, assistive technology and allied health which has markedly improved Jorge's mobility and attitude. Jorge has formed strong friendships with others at the social groups and greatly enjoys the friendships he has established. He now says that his" life has turned around and I have something to live for."

Of particular concern is the identification of increased isolation and loneliness in older members of CALD communities as they age as compared to the wider community. The CALD group disengages earlier from society as they age and they participate less in physical activity, visiting friends and attending recreational pursuits. The lack of social stimulation, healthy physical activity and poor community participation has shown higher incidences of cognitive decline across older people, especially CALD.

Causative factors that impact social isolation and loneliness both for CALD and the general community are ill health, death of a partner, friends dying or entering aged care facilities, family and relatives moving away and not in close proximity to provide practical support accessing services or physical social contact; inability to grasp technology and use it effectively to increase social interaction on a wider scale; loss of mobility; decline in cognitive function; loss of English skills; lack of knowledge or interest in participating in community activities; feeling unsafe using public transport.

Consultation with older CALD people in our technology classes, socio-recreational activities, social outing groups and physical activity programs also indicates that costs including transport play a significant role in their being able to access activities to alleviate isolation and loneliness. All prefer to be able to attend activities close to home and would prefer free or low cost initiatives, reducing the significant negative impacts which money worries have on health and wellbeing. The NCC is a vital resource for this target group. We have identified that the younger they are when they engage with the NCC, the longer the older CALD participant remains connected and engaged within the local community. This is because they successfully transitioned into wider social connectivity without the limitations and deficits brought on by ageing. It is imperative that to address issues of loneliness and isolation in older people now we must begin engagement in their later adult years and continue to provide support and services as they age.

*Since the emergence of Covid-19 and the lock down restrictions, this social isolation and loneliness has increased dramatically for attendees of our social outings, technology classes, physical activity classes and those who live at home alone. Volunteer visits by our 65 volunteers during non-lockdown periods bridge the isolation and social detachment felt by older people in the community and with physical visiting not possible, 'telephone visiting' has become the new norm during lockdown. These calls are highly anticipated and are often the only human contact the person may have all week. It is quite common for many older people to greet the caller with **"Oh I've been waiting for you to call me."***

This loneliness has been felt more profoundly by older CALD people who live alone, have medical conditions limiting their independence, lack English language skills and have little family or outside social support. In these instances, our staff as well as the volunteers have assumed responsibility for carrying out regular telephone calls and doing wellbeing checks and generally making older isolated members of our community feel that there is someone looking out for them.

During the pandemic our NCC played a pivotal role in assessing and responding to local resident needs, organising and delivering emergency food and medical supplies, organizing neighbour-to-neighbour and friend check-in support and launching new online social support using tablets, mobiles and ipads to help isolated, lonely and fearful residents.

One of our effective strategies addressing Loneliness and Isolation

With the language skills of our volunteers and staff, we are able to address isolation and loneliness within the linguistic and cultural framework of the CALD community member where required as well as within the general wider community. Our organisation is well known within the community and we have a long history of successfully counteracting isolation and alienation across a range of ages.

One of our current self-funded programs called 'Stay Active' has a dual purpose of creating friendship groups as well as increasing willingness in older people to become involved in more physical activity. The program directly responds to the identified need of increasing healthy physical activity in older people in the community but the collateral benefits of increased socialisation are measurable. These sessions are free and run weekly twice at Kalinga, once at Carina, and twice at Bracken Ridge with over 80 attendees and more than 20 on waiting lists.

The members of these groups have forged strong friendships that have extended beyond the exercise sessions and many participants tell us that the classes have been instrumental in increasing their sense of well-being, making them feel so much better physically and emotionally and enlarging their friendship groups. Each session ends with a brief social get together where they discuss and plan activities outside of the exercise sessions. They have also exchanged contact details and often chat over the phone. Some comments from participants have been:

"Even if I don't come for a week, I feel that my body isn't the same."

"I come for the exercise of course, but it's nice to see my friends there too."

NCCs are vital to the gathering of the local community, whether these be younger children, women, families and older people. The pivotal location of NCCs guarantee a safe environment and professional implementation of activities within their local area and are seen as non-threatening, non-institutional facilities. To foster greater participation we often collaborate and work with The Community Place at Kalinga to widen access to planned programs and events and we often share publicity and marketing to reach a wider audience of participants across a number of areas.

During the pandemic and lockdown restrictions, through our consortium of 5 'CALD Partners', we were able to share resources and support CALD members of the community with information, well-being checks and referral to emergency services as required.

The value of Co.As.It. NCC in reducing loneliness and social isolation

Our services for the local community ensure a healthy, active and socially thriving environment in which to live. We provide opportunities for wider civic engagement, volunteering, capacity building and the empowerment of people in our local area that enhances community life. Having been deeply embedded in community service provision for decades means that we are in the best position to not only understand and respond to the community's needs, but we are also able to tap into the local sources of knowledge, expertise and funding. We have developed and maintained strong partnerships with the local community, service providers and stakeholders which has enhanced our ability to diversify our services, especially in equilibrizing isolation, loneliness and disengagement.

Being citizen-centric, we respond to the vision that services are to be dynamic, that they focus on collaboration created with locals for locals. Some services have utilised local libraries to run activities and we have maximised whatever other resources and assets are available e.g. The Community Place (Kalinga and Stafford); Amici House (Bracken Ridge), Co.As.It. offices (Lutwyche) to reach as many people as possible who may be living in isolation within the community .

Apart from being a focal point for our local community, we deliver a broad array of services within a civic location that meet identified local community needs and we have a proven track record of addressing isolation and alienation through programs that are inclusive and able to respond with flexibility and resourcefulness.

We also recognise the importance of building partnerships with other service providers to meet emerging community needs, i.e. working with specialised partners to deliver specific services in-house e.g. employment training and job application processes; aligning community members to other organisations that are in the local area e.g. English classes; connecting ladies from diverse cultural backgrounds to group crotchet sessions. (The Community Place). These partnerships have positive outcomes such as increasing efficiency and convenience for more participants. They also have creative outcomes where new service responses are achieved jointly if one agency cannot bring outcomes to success and they have transitional outcomes that help many individuals, families and communities to connect in ways that build resilience, promote problem solving, greater economic participation and increased social inclusion.

These partnerships are vital for sharing of knowledge, initiating best practice, creating innovative ideas and working together to develop funding proposals. The potential to provide multiple benefits like improving and simplifying access to services and activities, improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the funding, delivery, and outcomes of service provision.

Neighbourhood Community Centres State-Wide are the solution going forward

NCCS are open to all, regardless of cultural background, age or gender. They also act as gathering places for democratic forums within communities and society because they bring people together, foster social relationships and enhance cohesion within its civic identity.

NCCs have a unique characteristic in that they reflect their local community presence, they establish a sense of place and purpose. A welcoming NCC bursting with positive, nurturing and inclusive activities is an enrichment of social capital – essential in every local community. When people have a place to meet, they build trust, share concerns and create solutions that may develop into successful projects, local services or social missions.

*Numerous studies in the UK have evaluated the associations between participation in community centre activities, the psycho-social wellbeing and health related behaviours in people. * The results suggest that community centre activities offer benefits that are generically supportive of health behaviour changes and can perform an important role in supporting the health improvement objectives of formal health care services.*

Additionally, NCCs by their sociability and location at the front line of community life can be catalysts in the identification of emerging needs and are at the enviable position to receive feedback and anecdotal information from community members. They are in a position to offer meeting spaces that foster social connectivity and capital and they can also identify and support emerging community leaders who have a direct link to their community, interest groups or common goals.

NCCS have proven to bring multi-faceted benefits to the locality in which they are present. Apart from bringing people together they bridge the gap between institutional organisations and social infrastructure of local communities; increase skills, knowledge and build cohesion between residents especially during the Pandemic and where green space is available enable people to reap both the physical and mental health benefits of being outdoors.

In response to Covid-19, parallel to the Government's focus on keeping its citizenry safe and helping us to rebuild our economy, we need to recognise that a strong recovery also requires a substantial investment in our local social infrastructure and NCCs are the ideal platform for this investment.

***[Int J Environ Res Public Health](#). 2013 May; 10(5): 1948–1962. The Role of Community Centre-based Arts, Leisure and Social Activities in Promoting Adult Well-being and Healthy Lifestyles**

Conclusion and Recommendations

NCCs nurture a sense of community and contribute to the social, emotional and physical wellbeing of its members. As a catalyst to bringing people together from diverse levels of civic life at an individual and collective system, NCCs are a valuable mechanism in filling gaps in service delivery at a grass roots level.

Most significantly, the nature of the NCC structure, viz. its informality and openness to all-comers particularly isolated and lonely people living in the community makes it a highly effective enterprise for inclusivity and increased civic participation.

If nothing else, our 43 year experience and the incidence of the pandemic has shown us that our social connections are critical if we are to maintain a healthy and active citizenry, regardless of age, gender or cultural background. It has generated new interest and new systems of volunteering to stave off loneliness and isolation for vulnerable people. Viz. virtual contact, digital technology.

NCCs as community-based agencies for change, need investment by local and national government as they work towards creating tighter community cohesion as well as recovering from the Covid pandemic.

NCCs are already in place, they serve as gateways that connect culturally and linguistically diverse families with each other and offer a wide range of services that meet community needs. They have direct contact with their local community, are at the front line to identify new and emerging needs as they arise and have the resources, contacts and established partnerships to carry a broader range of services across a wider number of communities, CALD; refugees; senior, older frail people; families; etc.

Investing in NCCs is a positive strategy that supports the knitting of our social fabric – one that can be resilient, responsive and cohesive.