



VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA – QUEENSLAND CHAPTER INC.

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# Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

## **Introduction**

The Vietnamese Community in Australia –Queensland Chapter Inc. (VCA-QLD) has been funded by Queensland Government to operate, as a Neighbourhood and Community Centre, for more than 10 years, to provide many community services ranging from:

- Assistance for social issues e.g. generation conflict, isolation, domestic violence, employment, family problems, counselling etc..;
- Emergency relief to support disadvantaged people in financial hardship,
- Community education related to social and health issues
- Resettlement assistance
- Information sessions and referrals to specialized services.

We represent more than 18000 Australians of Vietnamese origin in Queensland.

During COVID-19, we have been providing delivery and counselling services via calls in response of social isolation due to the pandemic-related quarantines.

The following are our submission into the Loneliness and Social Isolation in the communities in Queensland in general, with emphasis on the Vietnamese community.

## **The loneliness and Social Isolation issues**

Within our records, we have tallied up to more than 400 community members with improved social connectedness within the last 3 years.

Within the Vietnamese community, elderly people are in the greatest risk of experiencing loneliness and social exclusion due to several issues:

1/- They were refugees from the Communist regime in Vietnam, still bearing the trauma, physically and/or emotionally, from the re-education camps, new-economic zones, land reform campaigns from the Communist government, perilous journey to escape Vietnam etc... but don't have the chance to share this experience, to vent their anger against the communist regime in Vietnam.

2/- At their middle age when arriving to Australia, they experienced hard life in Australia: to start a new life from scratch, after losing everything from VN, with little time to improve themselves thru education, to adapt to new lifestyle, new culture etc...

3/- Due to ageing and health issues, old people face difficulty in travelling and gradually losing even their limited English, consequently, reduce their chances of social connection among the community.

4/- Limited English that hinders communication and social interactions. As a result, these individuals felt isolated from the rest of the community and unable to engage with others including neighbours, workmates and even their children or young family members.

At the moment, most Vietnamese refugees are at the retirement/elderly age and the number is increasing rapidly, they are living mostly by themselves either in their rented accommodation (in private or government properties) or in private 'Australian' retirement villages/nursing homes.

They are not happy and perhaps feel lonely, social isolated because surrounding them are people of different cultures, languages, lifestyles that they can't communicate, share stories, food, hobbies...

A small proportion are living with their children but prefer to live by themselves if suitable places are available.

With those who are lucky enough to receive aged care packages, they have the chances to go to places like market, temple, church, community centre, friends accommodation... to meet to socialise, to chat with etc.. their countrymen, but only for a very limited number of times which fall well short of what they want or what is needed to improve their mental wellbeing.

Below are some feelings and thoughts from aged people who shared with us when we served them as our clients in other issues:

- "The staffs at my retirement village often only have a very short and brief conversation with me, due to my limited English, which makes me feel disengaged and not being supported"
- "I don't know English, but I cannot find Vietnamese newspaper very often"
- "My children are too busy so they can't help me or even give me time to talk"
- "I miss my country food as this nursing home/retirement village only provides Aussie meals"

With the pandemic outbreak of COVID-19, there has been an evident decline in health and wellbeing of old people as they are more vulnerable to the virus. More particularly, VCA QLD observed a drop in physical attendance to our projects and events due to the risk of contracting the virus.

- "Due to COVID-19, my children do not allow me to hang out with my friends, but I live alone and have no one to talk with. I feel lonely and I want to die soon, so I do not need to suffer these feelings"

### **Our suggestion to Loneliness and Isolation**

It's obvious that aged people of Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) with little English prefer to live around their own communities where they can communicate, socialise and also to help each other among their countrymen.

There are supports/services from 3 levels of government, but still not sufficient. Another factor is that when these people are living in different, scattered suburbs, the supports/services delivery will be less cost effective compared to when they are living close together in retirement villages.

We believe that the government should encourage, support ethnic communities to establish their own retirement villages, under suitable circumstance, for the following reasons.

- 1/- As built and run by not-for-profit, community-based organisations, running costs as well as selling prices will be very reasonable so that many people can join in.
- 2/- Home care services (most aged people are/will be entitled to) will be more converged into an area, reducing the time/cost of transport and of the aged care services generally.
- 3/- Public housing accommodations currently occupied by these aged people will be freed up to some extent, reducing the shortage of accommodations for other targets: unemployed, homelessness, DV victims, crisis accommodations etc....
- 4/- By living in a suitable environment: without language barrier, surrounded by people of similar culture: food, lifestyles etc... the health and welfare of aged people will be improved resulting in the reduction of overall aged care services expenses which are provided by the government of all levels.

The above community specific retirement villages will actually be necessary/relevant only for a certain period when there are many aged people with language, cultural, lifestyle difficulties. The number of these people will naturally reduce gradually with time, therefore the number of accommodations in a retirement village and even the number of retirement villages will obviously be available for other aged people as well.

## **Conclusions**

VCA-QLD welcomes the Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation. Loneliness and social isolation have been recognised as having considerable negative impacts on the community in many previous research and studies.

We believe that all 3 tiers of governments should encourage, strongly support financially, if necessary, ethnic communities to establish their own retirement villages, under suitable circumstance, to look after their aged people. That will be more cost effective and achieving better outcomes for the aged people.



Bac LAM  
Secretary