

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

August 2021

Introduction

National Seniors Australia welcomes the opportunity to participate in the *Parliamentary Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland*.

National Seniors Australia is the leading consumer lobby group representing older Australians, with many of our members and supporters located in Queensland.

We commend the Queensland Government for consulting on this important issue as we navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

The impacts of COVID-19 are far reaching. They have created a 'new world' that will see many 'everyday norms' such as catching public transport, shopping, eating out, attending appointments, attending grandchildren's school concerts and sporting games as well as socialising with friends change forever. Many older Australians will either adapt to this new way of life, while others will be forced to find alternatives. Many of these broken routines and connections will not be mended.

We hope this inquiry will lead to the development of new initiatives to combat loneliness and social isolation which complement existing programs and services (such as the network of 125-plus neighbourhood and community centres and the government's Care Army initiative).

Based on our experience implementing similar programs, our research and the feedback received from older Australians, we believe the following initiatives offer cost-effective interventions to address loneliness and social isolation among older people in Queensland:

- call centres / helplines,
- community networks, and
- digital training programs.

We hope our contribution will help to shape a strategy to prevent, alleviate and address the devastating impacts of social isolation and loneliness faced by older Queenslanders during the pandemic and will inform the policy agenda on ageing in the longer term.

We look forward to receiving the Parliamentary Inquiry's findings in December this year.

Social isolation and loneliness – Impacts and drivers

Before the world was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation and loneliness were identified as increasing problems. They affect people of all ages, including older people, seriously impacting their mental and physical health and wellbeing, leading to increasing health costs.

While this “epidemic” of loneliness is increasingly recognised as a social issue, what’s less well recognised is the role loneliness plays as a critical determinant of health. Loneliness can be deadly: this according to former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, among others, who has stressed the significant health threat. Loneliness has been estimated to shorten a person’s life by 15 years, equivalent in impact to being obese or smoking 15 cigarettes per day. A recent study revealed a surprising association between loneliness and cancer mortality risk, pointing to the role loneliness plays in cancer’s course, including responsiveness to treatments.¹

A report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) reveals that more than one-third of adults aged 45 and older feel lonely, and nearly one-quarter of adults aged 65 and older are considered to be socially isolated.²

Older adults are at increased risk of loneliness and social isolation because they are more likely to face factors such as living alone, the loss of family or friends, chronic illness, and hearing loss.

Social isolation & loneliness – Interplay with Covid-19

While the current environment has helped to highlight issues of social isolation and loneliness it has also exacerbated the issue.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) recently reported that “loneliness was the most widely reported source of personal stress for Australians during April 2020, according to the third ABS Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey.”³

¹ Scientific American. *Loneliness is harmful to our nation’s health*, March 2020 [Loneliness Is Harmful to Our Nation’s Health - Scientific American Blog Network](#)

² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25663>

³ ABS 2020. *Loneliness most common stressor during COVID-19*. Released 18 May 2020. <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/loneliness-most-common-stressor-during-covid-19>

These statistics are supported by National Seniors Australia own research that includes a *Report into the hidden impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic* (March 2020)⁴ and *Older Australians' life and care during the pandemic* survey (July 2020)⁵ that together reveal older Australians felt isolated, overlooked and forgotten during the pandemic; were hidden; and needed to be heard.

The *Older Australians' life and care during the pandemic* research report reveals how older Australians were feeling during the survey period (13th March to 21st April 2021) in relation to –

- 1) their emotional and digital needs
- 2) inability to see family
- 3) closure of community groups
- 4) other issues

These not only contributed to feelings of loneliness; but also highlight the potential gaps in support provided to older people and point to emergent issues of isolation and loneliness facing older Australians in the post-crisis period.

Emotional needs

While the mental health impacts of COVID-19 have been widely published, National Seniors Australia research shows that older Australians have specific mental health vulnerabilities such as bereavement of a spouse, living alone and lack of extensive social network that were made worse by the need to socially distance and isolate.

Being socially isolated from family and friends not only increased feelings of loneliness, but it also increased fears and worries of loneliness.

“Isolation is really hard and scary when you are elderly, single and live alone. If it is OK to have a partner visit, it should be ok to have one close friend visit, if you don't have a partner.”

“How to maintain social contacts while staying at home. Many seniors are fearful and are looking for reassurance.”

⁴ Hosking, D., Ee, N., D., Maccora, J., Ee, N., McCallum, J. (2020) *Older Australians' life and care during the pandemic*. Canberra: National Seniors <https://nationalseniors.com.au/uploads/COVID-FINAL-Connect.pdf>

⁵ National Seniors Australia 2020. *Older Australians' life and care during the pandemic* survey. A Short National Seniors Report, July 2020. <https://nationalseniors.com.au/uploads/National-Seniors-Short-Report-COVID-19-Hidden-issues.pdf>

“There are many elderly people living almost completely isolated in the community, no surviving spouse and seemingly forgotten by their families (many themselves in their 60’s). I think and worry about them a lot.”

“Older Australians are more likely to have other health issues and to live alone. This means that they are in almost total isolation during the lockdown. This could result in extreme loneliness.”

Digital needs

During the COVID-19 shutdown, the transformation of the world into a predominantly digital one was incredibly rapid. Overnight, digital literacy became essential rather than optional for engaging with most aspects of life, from shopping, socialising and entertainment to business transactions, work interactions and information exchange.

Many older Australians were forced to adapt to a digital world without warning or preparation. Unlike younger people for whom digital interaction is the norm, older people were asked to acquire new skills at a time of heightened anxiety, without access to their regular support networks.

“Mental health is a huge problem due to lack of social contact. Small tasks become a major effort and apps for essential services can become major stumbling blocks. I had trouble using the Telstra app today as it has changed since I last used it. To talk to a person for support is incredibly difficult. My experience today pushed my anxiety over the top and I became a shaking, blubbing mess. Usually, I am a very capable, computer literate person but in my isolation and heightened state of anxiety, I fell apart!”

“Loneliness and fear of the unknown during self-isolation a lot of older Australians are not computer savvy.”

“Just miss personal contact, with Family & friends but have been able to maintain regular contact via technology, I feel for those seniors who do not have that luxury or ability.”

A key example of this was the rapid use of QR codes and other tracking technology to facilitate rapid contact tracing.

QR codes became a particular concern for older people who were frustrated and worried they may be refused entry to venues because they were unable to use QR codes. This uncertainty and potential embarrassment could have resulted in people too fearful to go

out, further increasing feelings of loneliness and social isolation, as evidenced by the following emails from National Seniors Australia members and supporters:

“When QR codes become mandatory how will people without a phone enter a cafe? It seems that it is assumed that everyone has a phone, carries it around and has the manual dexterity or knowledge to install the app.”

“Hi, just wishing to express my frustration with the lack of consideration for older Australians who do not own mobile phones, but are expected to scan QR codes on entry to all shops, restaurants, theatres, churches etc. I realise it makes tracing easier, but not all shops provide alternative methods to record entry. I'd like to see someone clever invent a small, simple, gadget to scan QR codes?”

“I am all for beating Covid 19 and my wife and I carry out all necessary precautions, BUT we do find it difficult to use the QR code with our phones. Yes, we are getting on a bit in age. We would like to see this system made quicker and easier. Why can't we use a card.....like a licence, bank credit /debit card. When we go into our local Library all we use is our library card....good and easy. The same at the local clubs, also good and easy.”

Inability to see family / unpaid carers

While there has been a strong focus on aged care during COVID-19, much has been on the residential care setting. However, there are many older people providing significant age and disability care without payment either in their own homes or in the homes of care recipients.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the vulnerability of unpaid community-based care provided by older people; care that is frequently hidden, overlooked and taken for granted, existing as it does outside the aged care system.

A recent National Seniors survey of over 4,000 people aged 50 plus found that 22% provided unpaid care to another adult. While informal care is well-known to provide significant workforce and economic benefits (and social and health benefits), respondents were deeply concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on these care arrangements.

“I am a full-time carer to my elderly mum who is 88. I am fearful of getting the virus and passing it on to her. What happens if I get it and have to self-isolate? I live with her. What will happen then? She most likely will get it and she has other risk factors other than her age, which are, heart disease and lung disease including emphysema. I do not have anyone else who can care for mum. I am worried about this.”

The responsibility of many of these older carers increased as isolation and social distancing requirements undermined their usual support networks of family members and community services.

Older people also provide essential childcare and home assistance to working families. National Seniors research showed that almost one-third of survey respondents provided childcare for their families. During the virus, caring for children became a serious health risk to grandparents and other older carers so this vital contribution was no longer possible, having negative economic impacts for family members reliant on this care and increased loneliness and social isolation for those providing this care.

“As grandparents we are concerned if schools are shut down that we will be needed to mind our grandsons, yet we are in our 70s and with health concerns. Our daughter's work is vital, and she cannot leave her young sons unattended for weeks or months.”

“Living alone now can at times be difficult, not being able to see grandchildren. Keep in contact with friends and family by phone, but not seeing family is so difficult at this stage of life.”

Closure of community-based organisations and activities

Community-based organisations are intrinsic to managing and engaging in everyday life for people no longer working, who don't have family close by or who are on their own. The closure of community facilities and activities due to the virus left many older people without the support and social interaction they so readily rely upon.

Isolation, social distancing and the shut-down of non-essential shopping outlets also occurred early in the survey period. Respondents felt distressed at the loss of social connections with their families and communities.

“As an older retired citizen, I used to go to Lawn Bowls and Bridge Club about 17 hours a week. This gave me enjoyable exercise for body and brain. It seems now that us older folk are expected to stay home for the next 6 months and wither, would rather enjoy the little time I have left!! The closing down of all activities is severe over-kill.”

“I am concerned about the closure of Social Support Groups which, for some elderly people, are the only contact they have with the outside world.”

“I worry about older people in the community who have no one to help them. Our welfare organisations e.g. Community Houses are shutting down. Where do they get help?”

As these responses reveal, the social upheaval caused by the pandemic has made a vulnerable sector of society even more vulnerable as it is forced to respond to a new and changing world.

Other issues

It should also be noted there were a range of other issues raised in the research. These contributed to everyday stresses for older Australians, and include:

- the economic impacts of COVID-19 when the Reserve Bank reduced cash interest rates to a record-low 0.25 per cent.
- access to essential food, groceries pharmaceutical items at the peak of panic-buying and
- lack of public transport options for people no longer able to drive.

While not explored in detail in this submission, these should be noted as important contributing factors to older persons health and wellbeing.

Effective Responses

In the current environment, the Queensland Government and community must be better equipped to take a bigger role in helping combat social isolation and loneliness felt by older Queenslanders regardless of where they live.

We need to focus on critical but less visible impacts of COVID-19 that deeply affect this vulnerable group, as evidenced earlier by National Seniors Australia member and supporter comments.

Strategies and resources are required across all levels of government, enabling communities and organisations such as National Seniors Australia to ‘step-up’ and meet seniors’ needs in the COVID environment.

COVID Older Persons Information Line

In May 2020 (after the National Seniors Australia survey was disseminated and responses received) National Seniors Australia together with other peak bodies established a National COVID Older Persons Information Line to help older Australians receive critical information to stay healthy and safe during the pandemic.

Operated by specially trained staff, the information line enables older Australians who face risks of social isolation and loneliness (because of COVID-19) to pick-up the phone and talk with a friendly and qualified person to obtain up-to-date information and support.

Between 22 April and 23 October 2020, the support line received more than 5,000 inbound calls and provided more than 29,000 outbound calls. The top five reasons for calls included:

- wellbeing checks,
- information about COVID-19,
- advice to vulnerable people,
- travel restrictions, and
- access to new, or queries about existing, home care services.

In recognition of the value of the service and the importance of remaining connected, the service was extended in December 2020 to include outbound calls to carers of people living with dementia, as well as more specific community supports for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) seniors. It has been funded to operate until December this year.

This has provided an important non-digital means of delivering information, fostering social connection and addressing feelings of isolation and loneliness.

As the following testimonials for the Covid Information Line demonstrate “having a conversation” and “feeling heard” are vitally important to health and wellbeing, especially for older Australians, many of whom are living alone:

“My wife that took the call and we were quite pleased that National Seniors was being proactive in this way. Whilst we are fine at the moment and we have support from our family and our church it is good to know that others not in our position”

“We appreciate the call to check our progress through the lockdown especially our access to social networks. Very thoughtful and caring.”

“I was surprised to receive this call from Robyn, however it is very much appreciated that National Seniors is thinking of us during the COVID lockdown. Robyn was so delightful to talk with and contact with another person is very important.”

In addition to the Covid Information Line, during the pandemic National Seniors Australia together with Australian Unity established the CALD Assertive COVID-19 Outreach Program for New and Emerging Communities to assist older Australians who are part of new and emerging culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

The extent of isolation revealed by this program reinforced the necessity of support services that go beyond perfunctory referrals and information, and instead provide community members with a receptive ear and, to an extent, companionship. The communities covered were: Afghan, Arabic-speaking, Chin Burmese, Khmer Cambodian, Filipino plus regional Victorian CALD groups and Spanish-speaking particularly Central American refugee swaps.

The initiative established extensive contacts and provided information on COVID and vaccinations as well as services available. Each community was serviced by a Liaison Officer who was an experienced community worker and was fluent in the relevant language and culture. A full report on this will be available in the near future.

Local National Seniors Australia branches

As a peak body that represents older Australians, National Seniors Australia has long understood the importance and benefits of remaining connected and having a sense of belonging.

Services such as the COVID Information Line and Call Centre are vital to helping people get through the pandemic, however nothing can replace face-to-face contact. This has traditionally been provided through our branch network, which consists of 100 branches nationally, and 41 throughout Queensland. Our branches range in size from 20 to over 100 members of which more than 70% are women.

Our branches provide older Australians, especially women, with opportunities to participate in social events, meet like-minded members, take part in bus trips and tours and get to know more people. They also provide a space to deliver important information and to get feedback on matters that are important to older people at the federal, state and local levels.

While the motivations to join branches differ from person-to-person, most branch members believe that the social connection, sense of belonging and friendships offered by branches make a significant difference to their daily lives and sense of wellbeing.

"I enjoy the friendship and fellowship of the branch, especially since Covid-19. The members are like family, very special."

"Branch meetings are enjoyable. Guest speakers are interesting. Group trips and events are great opportunity to be included in the community."

"Regular meetings to keep in touch and social activities each month, alas no trips for the moment."

While branches suspended their face-to-face activities during COVID-19, some branches remained a vital point of contact for their members.

Some branches opted to use digital technologies, such as videoconferencing, to continue to hold virtual gatherings online. This helps to encourage older people to adopt and adapt to technology use in a peer-to-peer supportive situation.

Others used telephone and email to reach out to branch members to help them to stay connected. Branch members also had the benefit of knowing that when restrictions lifted, they could once again reconnect with their branch.

Unlike other similar organisations, such as Men's Shed, National Seniors Australia does not receive state and federal government funding to assist in the functioning of branches. They rely heavily on volunteers to take on executive roles to organise

meetings and other activities, and to ensure compliance with fair trading regulations and public liability obligations.

Be Connected program

Over-65s are the least digitally connected group in Australia. This was recognised pre-pandemic to have severe impact on social inclusion as well as access to government and other services. It was further highlighted during the pandemic as older Australians were forced to turn to email, videoconferencing and social media like never before, due to restrictions and lockdowns.

While the number of digitally connected older people has increased in the past few years, there are still a considerable number who are not able to access the benefits of this. Research from the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) shows⁶:

- the number of people aged 75-plus who use social media doubled from 18% in June 2019, to 41% in June 2020.
- Emailing increased from 37% in 2019 to 81% in 2020.
- Use of messaging/calling apps and mobile texting also increased significantly.

According to ACMA Chair Nerida O’Loughlin, “The digital divide between younger and older Australians has narrowed, with this trend accelerated by the desire to maintain contact with friends and family during lockdowns.”

The desire and need to become and remain connected has never been so important.

Established in 2019, Be connected is a user-friendly online learning program designed to help older Australians connect to the internet as well as gain experience using digital communications technology such computers, tablets, smart phones and androids.

The program offers free online resources, presentations and courses that cover everything users need to know to feel safe and confident online, from learning the very basics about how computers work to learning how to use Skype, WhatsApp and Facetime.

It also provides a network of community partners, including National Seniors, who train volunteer Digital Mentors who in turn directly help seniors better use digital communications technology such as computers, tablets, smartphones and androids.

⁶ Australian Communications and Media Authority 2021. *Communications and media in Australia: How we communicate*. Accessed online 12 August 2021. <https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2021-04/report/communications-and-media-australia-how-we-communicate>

Since the inception of Be Connected, National Seniors has trained more than 120 Digital Mentors to help older Australians better use digital technologies. From learning how to send emails and share photos to learning how to access Facebook and download apps – Digital Mentors have been instrumental in helping older Australians become connected.

The following testimonials demonstrate the high regard for this important program.

As a long-time member of National Seniors, I checked out their Website looking for some glimpse of help. I signed up for the Be Connected Program and I was contacted almost immediately and matched up with a mentor who possibly could help me.

“Tony”, my mentor contacted me and during the first visit I learned so much. He answered my questions professionally and without judgement. I now have my confidence back and some of my memory has returned re the workings of computers. May I say a huge “Thank You” to Tony and The Be Connected Program. It won’t be long before my Mum and I are surfing the net and shopping online!

The Be Connected program will continue to run until 2024, however, funding limitations mean that organisations such as National Seniors can no longer deliver this valuable service to older people.

Programs like Be Connected will help to ensure that older people feel safer using digital technologies. This will have positive impacts for those facing social isolation and loneliness who might otherwise not be able to connect with family, friends or services.

Conclusion

The impact of social isolation and loneliness as well as the importance of being connected cannot be underestimated, as evidenced by National Seniors own research, supported by members and supporters’ shared experiences and comments.

The prospect of living with COVID-19 long term may be particularly distressing to older people as they navigate the demands of social isolation, loneliness and changing circumstances. The need for effective solutions to alleviate and prevent these devastating impacts has never been so great.

National Seniors Australia again commends the Queensland Government for inviting seniors to consult on this issue as together we navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

We believe that targeted investment in a range of interventions, such as the ones outlined in this submission, will help to address loneliness and social isolation among older people.

Appendix 1: National Seniors Australia research into the impacts of Covid-19 on older Australians

1. Covid-19 Older Australians' life and care during the pandemic, July 2020

<https://nationalseniors.com.au/uploads/COVID-FINAL-Connect.pdf>

2. Seniors speak about hidden impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

<https://nationalseniors.com.au/uploads/National-Seniors-Short-Report-COVID-19-Hidden-issues.pdf>

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