



# Older Women's Network (Qld) Inc.

505 Bowen Tce  
New Farm Qld 4005

ABN 91 345 516 361

**Phone:** (07) 3358 2301

**Email:** [admin@ownqld.org.au](mailto:admin@ownqld.org.au)

**Website:** [www.ownqld.org.au](http://www.ownqld.org.au)

19 August 2021

## **Submission to the Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland On behalf of Older Women's Network Queensland (OWNQ)**

OWN Queensland is a state-wide organisation of ten branches and part of our charter is to assist with social connection and prevention of social isolation for older women. We receive funding from Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships.

It is quite common for women to experience considerable life changes at or after middle age, including factors such as empty-nest syndrome, retirement, death of a partner, divorce or separation, becoming a Carer, change to income, deterioration in health, loss of mobility or independence, possibly changing living arrangements such as moving into a facility for retirement or older age. At times this can also result in housing vulnerability or even homelessness. Women can find that their established life is transitioning to something different from their previous experience and they do not have the social supports and networks to support them as they go through those changes. In addition they may not necessarily know where to go to seek that support. Their previous self-concept may have been deeply tied into their self-perception in a career or work-role, or as a parent, or a carer for example.

For some people this can be quite a distressing and challenging change of focus in their life and it can take them time to find their new 'self'.

Older people, and especially older women, too-often feel they are under-valued, disregarded or diminished in today's community. It is vital to their wellbeing to feel valued and that they belong in their community and have something to contribute. We are able to provide that through our branch meetings and membership of our organisation. Women can explore who they are in their later years, and share experiences with those at a similar stage of life.

OWNQ recognises the value in having a space and place particularly for women, so they may explore friendship and other factors relevant to their stage of life. Similarly, we uphold the value of men having the same opportunities to share friendship and life experiences with other men in spaces particularly relevant to their needs.

### **Covid-19**

Covid-19 spurred our branches into seeking creative and varied ways to keep members connected, supporting mental health and wellbeing. These included telephone trees, zoom meetings, learning new technological skills, emails, chain - cards with uplifting messages, driveway catch-ups (maintaining very good social distancing), greater use of Facebook, text messages, Whats App etc.

In spite of this, some of our members became very concerned about possible exposure to covid-19 as they were identified as a high-risk group, being older women. As Convenors of our branches described it, those people simply "went to ground". Some of those withdrew altogether and were not receptive to phone calls or any contact from their branches. Some others would receive contact by phone, but were very fearful of any in-person contact, or even of receiving letters or paper which could be a possible source of transmission. They simply did not want to take any chances of risking covid exposure (this was prior to the Delta variant becoming more prevalent).

Due to those reasons, about 25% of our members did not renew membership for the 2020-2021 financial year, in spite of efforts to reassure them that safe ways of meeting would be found and that it was not advisable for mental wellbeing to completely isolate. We held fears that if this withdrawal continued, this could evolve into social anxiety or perhaps even agoraphobia in the longer term for those people. Indeed a small number became uncontactable and it is unknown how they are currently faring. Perhaps their need to be socially connected may draw them back to their branch at another time.

Conversely, the periods of lockdown and uncertainty about the future drew other women out from their life as they knew it, and demonstrated the absolute importance of having a network of supportive people around them. They seemed to be seeking some other enrichment in their life, and the company of women at a similar stage of life. Women who may have been quite independent and self-sufficient seemed to realise their need to be part of something bigger than their immediate network. Our membership recovered, and indeed grew. Four new branches have been established since that time.

In spite of the challenges that venue size created, along with at times some quite-unreasonable demands of the extent of cleaning required at venues after meetings, members found ways around those barriers. New members continue to join the organisation.

### **Some challenges ahead:**

- As women grow older and perhaps lose independent mobility, their capacity to attend meetings and groups which would sustain them diminishes or disappears. At times they have no way to physically get out of the house and attend meetings, they become far more housebound and in turn socially isolated and lonely. There is not always public transport or someone living nearby who could pick them up and provide transport. They become more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, dementia and at times under-nourishment because they stop eating properly. Physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing suffers.
- If women have experienced long periods of inadequate social opportunity and outlet, they can become socially anxious and withdrawn and the willingness to venture out to try new possibilities evaporates. It can become self-perpetuating. One of our newer branches commenced in such an environment, where women were spending their day closed up in their room,

either lacking confidence or were unwilling to venture out. Starting out with small numbers and offering safe, fun activities is gradually drawing them out, providing a sense of self and enjoyment, but most of all, a sense of belonging, which have been previously lacking.

- With increasing numbers of Baby Boomers moving into the older generations, anecdotally there are signs of an evolving culture around that change. Many women have been active contributors to their roles at work, home, and for their families in the home, in schools, sporting clubs, and community groups. They are now seeking time for themselves and with reduced responsibilities, which is entirely understandable as they have often carried the load of family and work largely or entirely on their own. As well as being in the paid workforce and having too many balls to juggle while raising families, helping to care for relatives etc, they may have carried more load than even their mothers have done especially if they were primarily home-makers. This can understandably result in more focus on taking care of their own needs after moving on from multiple responsibilities, and less willingness to take on roles and work in community groups, which can actually serve them well in the longer run. We need to find more ways to connect with those natural community leaders and support them in taking on roles which benefit both themselves and others. We need to keep values of the importance of contributing to one's own community, helping others and giving of one's self at the forefront of our communities. The benefits to a person's own wellbeing when they support others are well known and documented.

### **Older women in public housing:**

As the population ages and with other social and economic contributing factors, older women are cited as the fastest growing group of people becoming homeless or vulnerable in housing. Whilst it is a major step forward when public housing can be found to ameliorate the plight of these vulnerable women, we are aware that some issues in public housing can be confronting for older women. Men and women are in some facilities living very close by one another, some of whom have had convictions and which can make the women feel more vulnerable.

Many people who are in public housing have experienced many challenges and adversities in life and are at risk of becoming quite socially isolated and lonely. The social needs can be complex and varied. More support is required in some public housing facilities, where some of the residents are like the women mentioned above spending their time alone in their rooms, not feeling comfortable to go out and meet others. They may have nowhere to go for support, companionship and a sense of belonging. Some women do not necessarily feel safe even though they have a roof over their heads, as they may be living side-by-side with others who have had convictions, which tends to lead them to stay indoors in their own room. They may not necessarily feel comfortable living side by side with men, they may feel safer living in a cluster of women.

It would be a very positive step forward for those public housing facilities without such support to have more community development input to make the facilities

more inclusive, welcoming, supportive, and catering for a wide range of needs people who live there. Much could be done to assist facilities and residents feel they are safe, and welcome to call their place their home. This will help reduce social isolation and loneliness.

Written by:

Leonie Swainston  
Coordinator  
Older Women's Network Qld Inc.

On behalf of OWNQ.

Signed *Dianne E Hill*  
Dianne Hill,  
Secretary  
OWNQ.