



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA (Chair), Miss Laura Nuttall MLA (Deputy Chair),
Ms Nicole Lawder MLA (Member)

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

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MARSS Australia Inc.

Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services

Patron: His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd)
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

Legislative Assembly for the ACT
Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

25 March 2024

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: INQUIRY INTO LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN THE ACT

I am writing on behalf of the Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services (MARSS) in relation to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT. I am the Interim Chief Executive Officer of MARSS. Social isolation is an issue that profoundly touches people from refugee and migrant communities living in the ACT, and thus a lens that we believe should be considered by the Committee within the breadth of its inquiry.

a. Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services (MARSS)

MARSS stands for Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services. It is a Canberra-based community not-for-profit organisation that provides a range of settlement services to migrants, refugees, humanitarian entrants, and asylum seekers in Australia. It was established in 1980 as a Migrant Resource Centre and incorporated in 1983. MARSS helps new arrivals successfully settle into their new communities by providing them with the support and resources they need to build a new life in Australia.

MARSS provides a wide range of services, including assistance with finding housing, accessing health care, and enrolling in education and training programs. The organisation also provides language and cultural support services, to help clients better understand and navigate Australian society.

MARSS is funded by the Australian government and ACT government and operates in partnership with other community organisations, agencies, and local businesses. The organisation is committed to promoting social inclusion and supporting the successful settlement of migrants and refugees in Australia.

b. The experience of people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in the ACT

Many clients from refugee and migrant backgrounds who arrive in the ACT often come without networks, families, or friends. They find that they must rebuild their lives from the ground up, a situation which is exacerbated for people from refugee backgrounds, who might have had to flee war, conflict, or persecution and thus have trauma effects that compound their situation. Settlement in Australia is a long and complex process. Supports and services that the person must identify and put in place may include getting connected with Centrelink; learning English; finding employment; seeking health services and supports, amongst a myriad of other concerns. Putting such supports in place is often time-consuming, not leaving much time or energy for seeking or making new friends.

Moving to a new country for any person can be a challenge. When that challenge is augmented due to language barriers, this can make it difficult for the person settling into Australia to make friends. Not being able to communicate in English can make it hard to access the services and supports one needs, as well as make new friends. If the person originates from a country where not many other people from the same country live in the same region, the isolation can increase.

The other concerning issue that compounds isolation relates to cultural challenges. It can be hard to connect with others when a newly arrived migrant does not understand that culture that dominates the country of settlement. If one does not understand Australian culture, then it can be extremely difficult to make new friends. Practices and behaviours that are normal to Australians might be perceived as problematic or negative when perceived from a dramatically different cultural lens. Thus, social isolation can be augmented by cultural challenges.

Being able to connect with others is severely curtailed when a person from a culturally and linguistically diverse background encounters racism. Racism is a behaviour that makes many people feel like they don't belong, are misunderstood, and are thus isolated from connecting with others. To decrease social isolation amongst people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds it is imperative that racism is effectively addressed. Racism needs a comprehensive societal approach for it to be diminished or even eradicated. This happens when societal change occurs that attempts to make people understand about the inherent power structures and imbalances that exist in society, that result in racist behaviour occurring. Community education, training, and information, relating to anti-racism needs to be implemented on an Australia-wide basis, in a similar way that domestic violence is addressed in this country.

c. Mental health impacts of social isolation on the refugee and migrant communities

The National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum states the following: 'Australia's CALD population can face huge resettlement challenges including. The effects of conflict, torture and trauma and the migration or refugee journey itself. They are twice as likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues compared to Australian-born residents. Culture shock, the challenge of adjusting to a society with different social structures, the stresses associated with organising housing, health care, schooling. and other services. These factors can have an impact on the mental health of CALD populations.'

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, the Australian Capital Territory has 28.7% of the population born overseas. Considering this statistic, there would exist a considerable number of people from CALD backgrounds who experience mental ill health in the ACT. Many, for the reasons provided above, struggle to access the services and supports they need, or to connect and socialise with other people, and are at risk of experiencing social isolation, and not being able to contribute or participate in society.

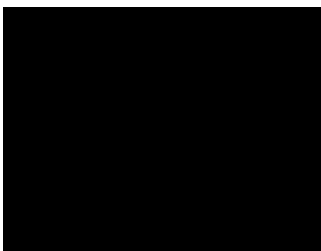
d. How we can work to improve this situation

To decrease social isolation amongst communities in the ACT from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, we make the following recommendations:

- * Support multicultural NGOs, such as MARSS, to implement cultural events and festivities. These events help create greater understanding in Australian society with regards to the diverse cultures and help build bridges between people from culturally diverse backgrounds and mainstream Australian society.
- * Provide opportunities for people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to meet and interact with Australians from mainstream society, so that there are more opportunities for people to make friends. Friendship networks and groups could be helpful in this regard.
- * Invest in culturally appropriate mental health support services, that can help to improve the overall wellbeing and mental health of people from culturally diverse background.
- * Invest in an anti-racism campaign, that consists of information and training about the issue of racism, with the objective of creating change in the ACT.

I wish the Committee well in its deliberations.

Yours sincerely,



Sonia Di Mezza
Interim CEO
Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services (MARSS)