



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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HUMANS:CONNECTING

Submission to the
Standing Committee on
Education and Community Inclusion's
Inquiry into Loneliness and
Social Isolation in the
Australian Capital Territory

February 2024

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Phil McAuliffe

Founder

HUMANS:CONNECTING

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Mr Michael Petterson MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion
ACT Legislative Assembly
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Thursday 22 February 2024

Dear Chair

Thank you for conducting your inquiry into loneliness and social isolation in the Australian Capital Territory.

I have been working on loneliness and human connection since 2018 when I created The Lonely Diplomat (addressing loneliness for diplomats and their families) and The Loneliness Guy (addressing loneliness experienced by gay and queer men) in January 2020.

I created these two sites based on my own lived experience of loneliness working as an Australian Public Servant based in Canberra since 1999 and who served as an Australian diplomat throughout my career. I'm also a gay CIS-gendered man. I created the sites because the resources available to me to address the loneliness I experienced were inadequate. My sites provide the support, advice and services I wish I had when I first realised that the thoughts and feelings I was experiencing was loneliness.

My team and I are now creating HUMANS:CONNECTING, a Canberra-based social enterprise whose mission is to de-stigmatise loneliness and help people use their loneliness to get the connection that they need and deserve.

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Our work is needed because the size and scope of the responding to the challenge of addressing loneliness and social isolation before us all is immense.

We are pleased to provide the following submission for the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion's consideration.

I remain available to answer any questions or provide further statements to the Standing Committee should they be requested.

Yours sincerely

Phil McAuliffe
Founder – HUMANS:CONNECTING

Part of the lonely diplomat (ABN: 245 667 509 55)

www.humansconnecting.org

www.thelonelydiplomat.com

www.thelonelinessguy.com



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1. Defining loneliness and social isolation

- 1.1 We use the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#)' definition of loneliness, as 'a person's subjective feeling about, or perception of, the quality of their social connections. Usually, a negative feeling of being unsatisfied with their social relationships and connections. Loneliness is often a catch-all term for how people feel when there is a gap between their actual and desired levels of social relationships and connection (sources in link).'
- 1.2 Beyond this definition, HUMANS:CONNECTING feels that the terms '*feeling lonely*' or '*are lonely*' can be interpreted in a pejorative way, leading the human to be seen as lonely in a permanent or semi-permanent sense (i.e.: once lonely, always lonely). Loneliness is meant to be a transitory state, so we refer to the complex thoughts and feelings of loneliness as a 'loneliness experience' to reflect this.
- 1.3 Loneliness is an experience that can be difficult to describe and articulate. From our own lived experiences and from those whom we support, common words used to describe the thoughts and feelings of a loneliness experience are 'hollow', 'empty', 'nothingness', 'lack of purpose', 'a spectator in my own life', 'no one knows me', 'unseen', 'unheard' and 'I don't feel that I belong.'
- 1.4 Our approach is from the perspective that loneliness is not a mental health issue. Loneliness is a *social health* issue. Responding to loneliness as a mental health issue can provide a useful frame of reference from which to mount a public policy response, however only seeing it through that perspective can unintentionally feed the stigma of loneliness.
- 1.4.1 Loneliness does not require a clinical diagnosis. If you feel lonely, you are experiencing loneliness.
- 1.4.2 We know that loneliness, left untended, puts humans at significantly higher risk of developing anxiety and depression.
- 1.4.3 Loneliness, left untended, puts humans at significantly higher risk of developing heart disease, diabetes and some forms of cancer.
- 1.4.4 Loneliness is a social health issue but left untended and unacknowledged develops into mental and physical health issues.

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- 1.5 We also use the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#)' definition of *social isolation*, meaning 'an objective, measurable lack of contact with social connections, usually when a person experiences a low number of social interactions.(sources in link).'

2. About HUMANS:CONNECTING

2.1 HUMANS:CONNECTING is proudly based in Canberra.

2.2 We are creating a social enterprise that supports humans experiencing loneliness to move through loneliness and take steps to get the connection we each need and deserve.

2.3 We are doing this by:

2.3.1 talking widely in the media about loneliness within humans, in our communities and in our workplaces;

2.3.1.1 our work and lived experience have featured on ABC Radio National, SBS Radio and SBS Television, ABC digital and the BBC World Service. See www.humansconnecting.org/media.

2.3.2 offering products that are easily accessible, convenient and provide high value support to people experiencing loneliness and social isolation;

2.3.3 providing services to workplaces and conferences that engage with loneliness and social isolation to address their impacts in our workplaces and throughout our communities;

2.3.4 measuring our impact through measuring perceived loneliness at the beginning and end of our Connection Starter Course (using the [UCLA Loneliness Scale – Version 3](#));

2.3.5 collaborating with governments, academics, mental health professionals and mental health support providers; and

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- 2.3.6 seeing each human as a unique individual, for while there are similarities, the thoughts and feelings of a loneliness experience are unique to each of us.
- 2.4 HUMANS:CONNECTING was created as it became clear that the topics, insights and perspectives developed through the work done in our two other sites – www.thelonelydiplomat.com (addressing loneliness for diplomats and their families) and www.thelonelinessguy.com (addressing loneliness for gay and queer men) through blogs, podcasts and authoring a book – could be readily transferred to a wider audience. While there are unique contexts that apply to gay men and those who love the diplomatic life, the essential elements of loneliness and social isolation are common for all humans – however they identify, whatever their occupation and stage in life.
- 2.5 HUMANS:CONNECTING's products and services provide upstream support, empowering people to recognise the first thoughts and feelings of their loneliness and take corrective steps to get the connection their loneliness is telling them that they are missing.
- 2.5.1 The intention is for people to become loneliness literate and take steps to address their thoughts and feelings before needing to engage in downstream services in the mental health sector and/or crisis support services.
- 2.6 Our approach is rooted in ensuring that the three pillars of connection are strong within us all. These connection pillars are: connection to self, connection to those most important to you and connection to community. Each of these pillars must be as strong as the others for us to feel fully connected.
- 2.6.1 We find that the oft-provided advice to 'put yourself out there' to someone experiencing loneliness is unhelpful. The emphasis is on the *out there*, rather than put your *self* out there. If we are not putting our authentic selves into the world, the connection we receive back from those around us and our communities is not the connection we need, and our loneliness experience will return and could persist.
- 2.6.2 It takes great courage to put our authentic selves into the world, and our products and services are focused on helping people learn from their loneliness and then put themselves into the world.

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2.7 HUMANS:CONNECTING empowers humans experiencing loneliness to listen to their loneliness whenever they experience it and use the skills they have learned and the tools they have developed to quickly get the connection that they have been missing.

2.7.1 We empower humans to speak of their loneliness and to hear stories of other people's loneliness and respond with empathy, and without pity, judgement or leaping to fix it. This sense of self-agency is important.

2.8 HUMANS:CONNECTING is here to initiate and lead conversations about loneliness in the public sphere in a way that reaches humans where we each experience loneliness: within our hearts, minds and souls.

3. Loneliness in the ACT

3.1 Loneliness – like joy and sadness – is part of the human condition. All humans experience it at times throughout their lives. As such, 100 per cent of people in the ACT will experience loneliness during their lives.

3.1.1 It is important that loneliness is a temporary experience, however it is such an uncomfortable state that it is often denied, ignored or otherwise wished away. This can be how loneliness turns into chronic or severe loneliness.

3.2 The [State of the Nation: Social Connection in Australia 2023](#) report published by [Ending Loneliness Together](#) shows that:

3.2.1 an average of almost 1 in 3 Australians feel lonely;

3.2.2 1 in 6 Australians are experiencing severe loneliness;

3.2.3 **40 per cent (or 2 in 5) people in the ACT feel lonely.** This is the highest rate of loneliness reported in any Australian state or territory;

3.2.4 men and women (so reported) are equally lonely;

3.2.5 40 per cent of people living alone and 30 per cent of people living with others feel lonely;

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3.2.6 27 per cent of people whose financial needs are being met are reporting feeling lonely, compared to 51 per cent of people whose financial needs are not being met. Those whose financial needs are not being met are 2.8 times more likely to be experiencing loneliness.

3.2.7 young people (aged 18-24) and those in middle age (aged 45-54) report the highest rates of loneliness (38 per cent and 36 per cent respectively). People aged 75+ report the lowest rates of loneliness in the community (13 per cent).

3.3 We understand that the Standing Committee has seen this data in other submissions and is well-familiar with the source, especially as the data is current and is some of the only Australia-specific data currently available.

3.4 We would like to dig deeper, extrapolate this data and share with the Standing Committee what the data tells us about loneliness in the ACT.

3.4.1 Young people – Canberra's schools and universities are working hard to provide care and support for students who feel socially disconnected. Those students are learning and figuring out their place in the world while experiencing loneliness and the latent physical, mental, emotional and social stress and tension this puts them under.

3.4.2 Middle aged people – Canberra's suburbs and workplaces contain people who are possibly raising families and/or caring for elderly parents all while also working hard to make their economic and social contribution to their local communities. They are in the middle of their careers in the public and private sectors, making decisions and recommendations that affect the lives of their fellow citizens. They are doing this while experiencing loneliness.

3.4.3 Financial distress – we know that people experiencing financial distress are more likely to be feeling lonely. Financial distress compounds social isolation, as people opt out of opportunities to socialise as a way to economise. High rents and large mortgage repayments can mean that people can initially jettison their social spending as a first response to saving money, only to find that they are consequently experiencing loneliness and social isolation.

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3.4.4 While connection does not need to cost anything, it can be socially challenging for people to admit that they cannot afford to eat out or frequent bars, cafés or go to the movies to spend time with their friends. Additionally, the cost of transport to get to social events (petrol, public transport and rideshare services) can put social events outside the home financially out of reach, compounding feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

3.5 The prevalence of loneliness in the ACT has consequences in our workplaces, schools and communities. People who are experiencing loneliness:

3.5.1 report higher levels of absenteeism. They are less productive, less efficient and are more likely to leave their employer;

3.5.2 are less engaged in physical activity and are more likely to have a social media addiction;

3.5.3 are twice as likely to have chronic disease, 4.6 times more likely to have depression, 4.1 times more likely to have social anxiety and are 5.2 times more likely to have poorer wellbeing (source: [Ending Loneliness Together](#)).

3.6 Loneliness imposes economic costs on society, through the adverse health behaviours of those affected. Analysis from the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (published November 2021) suggests that the economic cost of loneliness from these adverse health behaviours is approximately \$2.7 billion each year; an equivalent annual cost of \$1,565 for each person who becomes lonely (source: [Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre](#), p15).

3.6.1 Extrapolating this Australia-wide data, if 40 per cent of people in the ACT are reporting experiencing loneliness, an indicative cost from the adverse health outcomes of loneliness to the ACT economy is approximately \$292 million (based on [ACT Treasury data](#) from December 2023).

3.6.2 Given Canberra's role as the national capital and base of the Australian Public Service, the social and economic impacts of loneliness and social isolation are not only felt in Canberra's community and in the ACT economy – they are felt throughout Australia.

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- 3.7 Too many people in the ACT are living, studying and working while being weighed down by thoughts and feelings of loneliness. The Standing Committee is undoubtedly reviewing submissions from other individuals and agencies with testimonials of how members of our community are enduring loneliness and social isolation. In many ways, it is a triumph of collective perseverance and resilience that people continue with their lives. But there are limits to what humans can reasonably sustain.

4. Getting real about loneliness and social isolation

- 4.1 It is time to get real about loneliness and social isolation. We at HUMANS:CONNECTING are here to use our experience, our skills and our insights to be an innovative part of the solution in the ACT.
- 4.2 While people experienced loneliness and social isolation during the pandemic, loneliness was prevalent in society prior to 2020. However, people may not have been aware that the thoughts and feelings they were experiencing were signs of loneliness. It is difficult to quantify this, as there was little public discussion about loneliness and social isolation in society beyond an emotion experienced by the elderly and the bereaved.
- 4.3 HUMANS:CONNECTING notes the public discourse around depression, anxiety, suicide and mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. This discourse is tremendously important. However, we know that loneliness – left unacknowledged and untended – is an antecedent condition for depression and anxiety. It is telling that we can discuss and normalise the impacts of loneliness within humans, but we still struggle to talk about loneliness itself.
- 4.4 It remains that loneliness is part of the human condition. Loneliness does not discriminate. No job title, education qualification or other perceived status or privilege brings immunity from loneliness. We all experience it, and we are meant to experience it.
- 4.5 Loneliness is our body's way of telling us that we are missing some kind of connection that is important to us. It is in this way that loneliness has commonalities, but manifests in diverse ways for varied reasons in each human.

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4.6 For context, it is useful to compare loneliness to thirst or hunger. Hunger tells us that we need food. Thirst tells us that we need to drink something. Loneliness tells us that we need to connect. Just like all foods and drink are not what we need when we are hungry or thirsty, so all forms of connection are not what we need when lonely.

4.6.1 Helping a person understand what connection they are missing and then having the skills and courage to get that connection is an important part of our work at HUMANS:CONNECTING.

4.7 While the comparisons to hunger and thirst are helpful, it remains that there is a stigma to loneliness which prevents us from engaging with it when we experience it. It is our experience that the stigma of loneliness comes from the misguided belief that feeling lonely means that we are somehow broken, we are sad, clingy and that – deep down – that feeling lonely means that we're unworthy of love and belonging. This is heavy.

4.8 Rather than acknowledging our loneliness when we first notice it, we seek to avoid the discomfort through numbing and distractions.

4.8.1 There are infinite ways in which we numb and distract ourselves from these uncomfortable thoughts and feelings: drug and alcohol use, gambling, shopping, sex, exercising/working out, eating, scrolling social media through to the socially-acceptable – and often celebrated – busyness.

4.9 We cannot yet speak the language of loneliness. When we inevitably experience loneliness in our life, our collective inability to talk about loneliness and to sit with loneliness makes us feel even more alone. When we courageously admit our loneliness aloud, we can be met with pity, being told to think positively and cheer up or to someone leaping to fix our loneliness (which sounds like 'Oh, you just have to do this...'). We wait until we know we can say the words right before we say them, only we never know how to say them, so we never speak up.

4.9.1 HUMANS:CONNECTING notes that conversations about loneliness and social isolation develop elements of *comparative* or *competitive loneliness*. These conversations are characterised by who is lonelier and more deserving of support. To us, loneliness is loneliness. It is an undesirable state at any and every stage of life.

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As a gay man himself, HUMANS:CONNECTING's founder, Phil McAuliffe, often speaks about his experience and observations about coming out as gay and coming out as lonely. People often respond better to him coming out as gay than coming out as lonely. We know what to say when someone comes out of the closet and how to be supportive. Phil's observed that coming out as gay generally does not challenge someone else's relationship to their own sexuality.

However, coming out as experiencing loneliness challenges the recipients of that news to sit with the thought – even if for a moment – that the quality and quantity of their connections is not what they want or need. Coming out as lonely can make others confront the possibility – even likelihood – that they are also experiencing loneliness. We fear that loneliness is contagious. It makes us deeply uncomfortable.

4.9.2 Coming out is a useful metaphor to help talk about how difficult it is to accept our own loneliness and then admit it aloud. The fear of being perceived as broken, sad, clingy and unworthy of love and belonging. That perception marks us as different. Accepting and admitting loneliness then allows us to take important first steps to feeling connected again. Indeed, talking about loneliness through general discussions and hearing individual stories is the way to break down the stigma that keeps loneliness a taboo topic.

4.10 We know the antidote already.

Connection – specifically *authentic connection* – is the antidote to loneliness.

We humans feel connected when we feel that we belong.

We feel that we belong when we feel genuinely seen and genuinely heard.

We humans need to feel that we belong, and not getting that feeling drives us to behave in ways that are counter to our personal interests or the community's interests as we attempt to feel that we belong.

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- 4.11 We at HUMANS:CONNECTING feel that 40 per cent of people in the ACT (per Ending Loneliness Together's statistics) do not feel seen and do not feel heard in some way. Helping people in the ACT feel that they truly belong – not just as a platitude – is the key to creating a community where people feel connected to themselves, to those most important to them and to their community.

5. Addressing loneliness and social isolation in the ACT

- 5.1 HUMANS:CONNECTING believes addressing loneliness and social isolation in the ACT starts in two ways.

5.2 First, we work to de-stigmatise loneliness.

- 5.2.1 We need to normalise conversations about loneliness and social isolation. While there are common characteristics of loneliness, the loneliness experienced by an individual is unique to them. Opening safe ways to sit with the concept of loneliness can empower people to look at how and why they feel lonely so they can have agency over their response.
- 5.2.2 For something that every human experiences from time to time, loneliness is often talked about in a dry, conceptual way. Talking about loneliness in statistical terms and how it affects our physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing does not resonate. Humans do not easily relate to statistics; we relate to stories. We de-stigmatise loneliness by moving from talking about it in the third person ('Loneliness is...') and second person ('You're not alone') into the first person ('I experienced loneliness when...').

- 5.3 Secondly, we create a connected community. Connection to community is one of the three pillars of connection. To feel genuinely connected to community, we need to become more authentically connected to our selves and to those most important to us, too.

- 5.3.1 Giving people agency over how they respond to their loneliness supports them to begin getting the connection that they need.

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5.3.2 *Belonging* is placed at the centre of budget, design and planning decisions. Asking the question: *how does this help humans feel seen and heard?* and then providing a considered response is simple, powerful and effective.

5.3.2.1 *This is an opportunity for the ACT Government to integrate improving social connectedness into all areas of public policy development and implementation.*

5.3.3 We meet people where they are. When we are in the depths of a loneliness experience, the struggle can be more to get out of our own heads rather than to get out of the house. This is one of the reasons why not everyone is going to feel comfortable attending an in-person event to socialise as a first step to moving past their loneliness. A variety of engagement methods – including online, in house and in community – are needed.

5.4 To address feelings of loneliness we cultivate feelings of belonging. A consistent challenge in our work is that humans find their loneliness abhorrent and an issue to avoid. Engaging with other people's loneliness or the concept of loneliness is acceptable, but not our own. However, we are more likely to engage on cultivating our sense of belonging rather than why we feel lonely.

RECOMMENDATION - These approaches culminate in a community campaign centred on *belonging*. A campaign that helps a person feel connected – and inspired to become more connected – is an effective way to reduce loneliness and social isolation.

HUMANS:CONNECTING would be pleased to explain and explore this further with the Standing Committee.

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6. Challenges and opportunities

6.1 Opportunity: The human diversity of the ACT is its greatest strength. This diversity brings a variety of perspectives, insights and responses that can help individual humans feel that they belong here. Cultivating a sense of belonging is important when attracting and retaining students, young professionals, economic migrants and resettled refugees to our community.

6.2 Opportunity: *Small enough to care, big enough to matter*. The size of the ACT and the structure of its government means that Canberra can become an incubator of human connection innovation. Unlike other states and territories throughout Australia, the ACT Government performs both the role of a Territory Government and a local government. This can make it easier to coordinate responses locally and advocate nationally and internationally. Moreover, with Canberra hosting world-renowned universities and the diplomatic corps based in the city, investments and collaborative partnerships can be made in community-wide and/or bespoke local initiatives that can be measured, reviewed, honed and scaled.

6.2.1 HUMANS:CONNECTING works with academics, public policy and human connection experts throughout Australia and in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Singapore and within the European Union. We know that the Standing Committee well understands that governments and communities around the world are also wrestling with the issue of loneliness and social isolation. We believe that Canberra and the ACT can become the global innovator in human connection.

RECOMMENDATION - Canberra becomes an incubator of connection innovation, drawing on the immense skills, expertise, networks and goodwill within this community to work collaboratively to develop policies, programs and other initiatives that help people feel that they belong.

This incubator of connection innovation could make Canberra a world-leader in addressing loneliness and social isolation.

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6.3 Challenge: funding. As loneliness and social isolation are seen as mental health issues, funding to address loneliness has traditionally been given to mental health bodies and crisis support services. This is understandable, as these services are well-known and can respond on a national scale and have a history of managing events and awareness campaigns. However, the risk is that funding mental health bodies and crisis support services can perpetuate the stigma around the loneliness experience.

6.3.1 Loneliness and social isolation are social health issues. They are not mental health and physical health issues unless they are left untended and unaddressed. From our own lived experience, it is confronting to sit with loneliness and feel that the only way to get support and advice is to call a crisis support service or wait to see a mental health service. It does not need to be this way.

6.4 On the other end of the funding spectrum, addressing loneliness and social isolation is given small amounts of money and then relies on the goodwill and energy of volunteers to deliver services. Not-for-profit entities are created with the best of intentions but can fold due in part to volunteers not being available, sources of funding drying up and/or the reporting requirements under legislation being too onerous and complex for small start-ups to sustain.

6.5 **HUMANS:CONNECTING** is part of a growing third way: a social impact enterprise. We invest the majority of our profits back into increasing and measuring our social impact on the issue of loneliness and human connection. We are passionate about what we do. We seek to be self-sufficient, generating our own financial capital through selling products and services and invest our profits into growing our impact. But this takes time and getting seed funding as a very lean start-up is challenging. We persist in seeking sources of funding to increase our impact, knowing that funding will supercharge our efforts and help us be part of discussions among academics and public policy developers shaping collective responses to loneliness.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 The ACT Government initiates and supports a community campaign centred on *belonging*. A campaign that helps a person feel connected – and inspired to become more connected – is an effective way to reduce loneliness and social isolation.
- 7.2 Canberra becomes an incubator of connection innovation, drawing on the immense skills, expertise, networks and goodwill within this community to work collaboratively to develop policies, programs and other initiatives that help people feel that they belong.

