



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

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Early Morning Centre Submission
Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT
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1. Introduction

The Early Morning Centre (EMC) is a community hub supporting Canberra people who are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing homelessness, and those experiencing social isolation.

The EMC is a safe, respectful and welcoming space where guests can access essential services, support and community activities. At the EMC, we focus on our guests' individual needs.

The EMC offers a free, hot nutritious breakfast five days a week, prepared and served by our volunteers. The EMC also provides essential services and facilities including showers, lockers and computers with internet access along with healthcare services, accommodation support and community activities.

Additional services include EMC guests being offered access to legal services, health education, AOD education and support, financial management services, pet care, guitar and music, current affairs discussion group, bingo and quizzes, cooking classes, computer classes and a range of one of and special events such as Easter lunches, Christmas lunches, BBQ's to celebrate and commemorate national and international days that include homelessness day, international women's day, anti-poverty week, NAIDOC week and many more.

2. Service User Overview and Experiences of Loneliness and Social Isolation

The EMC collects data on the numbers of service users attending EMC along with numbers accessing the different services provided. This data shows the majority of EMC service users are men, approx. 80%. Of these approx. 40% are between the ages of 25 and 45 and another 40% over 45. Older age groups can be more prone to loneliness and social isolation due to factors such as family dispersal, decreased income, mobility and poor health (Courtin

and Knapp., 2015) These are all factors that are experienced by many if not all guests visiting the EMC with the negative outcomes of these being obvious in their impact on their lives.

The experience of poor mental health is higher in guests to the EMC than in the general population. Although the centre does not collect qualitative data on service users there is anecdotal evidence based on interactions and observation that shows that a large percentage of service users experience detrimental mental health issues. Poor mental health is a factor in creating barriers that lead to loneliness and social isolation. Along with this poor physical health is experienced by many guests with this being another factor in exacerbating loneliness and social isolation (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015) There is a high incidence of co-morbidities amongst EMC guests with these conditions including mental health and physical health issues.

There are a range of other factors that impact a person's experience of loneliness and social isolation that include family breakdown and disconnection, criminal history, alcohol and other drug use. (Ma, R et al., (2020) Service users of the EMC have a history of and current lived experience with one or more of these. These are all impacting negatively on the well-being of guests that are compounded by other factors most of which have been previously mentioned.

3. Service Use Overview for the financial year 2022-2023

The Early Morning Centre provides breakfast during the week between the hours of 7.30am and 8.30am. In the financial year 2022 to 2023 breakfast was served to 5,656 people. The Community Hub operates weekdays between the hours of 9am to 2pm with 11,597 people accessing the service in this same financial year. The centre is open weekends with 3,664 people accessing the service and food provided to 2,010 people during this same period. A range of facilities are provided through the service. The following is a list of the most frequently used services and the number of times these services were utilised. This is not an exhaustive list as there are a range of other services provided from the EMC.

Service	Number of Guests Accessing
Showers	925
Laundry	99
Food Packs	2,577
Computer Usage	1,047

EMC Guest Survey

The EMC conducted a Guest Survey late in 2023 with 36 guests completing this survey.

There were 32 responses to the question “What best describes your situation” with the following table showing responses:

Secure accommodation, low income	59.4%
Experiencing homelessness, long term (over 2 years)	15.6%
Experiencing homelessness, short term (under 3 months)	12.5%
Experiencing homelessness, long term (over 3 months)	9.4%

The three responses below are the notable points from survey responses:

- Chatting to staff as the most popular of health and wellbeing services,
- 55.9 % visiting the centre for more than a year and
- 56% visiting the centre on a daily basis.

In summary, this survey revealed most respondents have secure accommodation and are living on a low income. The responses to frequency of visits to the EMC show that most service users visit daily and have been visiting the centre for more than a year.

These results highlight the importance of the EMC providing services that not only meet essential, immediate needs such as food and showers but also that social and educational activities are an important aspect of the EMC. The survey shows that connections between staff and guests are valued and well utilised with the large number showing “Chatting to staff” as a popular activity.

4. EMC Addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation

The EMC provides guests with a range of services that meet essential needs such as meals and showers along with services and activities that address loneliness and social isolation. The centre promotes good physical and mental health through providing access to health information and education, groups that focus on life skills and activities that are fun and relaxing for participants. Many service users of the EMC are on a low income which prevents participation in social, educational, recreational and sporting activities due to cost. Membership to clubs and attendance at social activities are cost prohibitive for people living on a low income. The EMC presents the opportunity for low-income earners to attend and participate in activities that would not usually be available. Groups that are provided by the EMC such as cooking classes not only provide an educational opportunity but also a social/recreational opportunity that assists in enhancing self esteem and self-worth.

Activities and events available at the centre assist in building social networks that provide a sense of social inclusion.

The EMC hosts events such as Easter lunch and Christmas lunch for guests to assist in reducing loneliness and social isolation as for many these are culturally or religiously significant events. Missing out on participation in such events can increase feelings of isolation from the broader community. The EMC aims to not only to have guests attend these events but encourage participation in preparation and running of these events. The result of this participation is a greater feeling of responsibility and importance for the individual through providing a sense of accomplishment and pride.

5. Summary

The many studies into loneliness and social isolation, some cited in this submission, show the detrimental impacts this has on an individual. Studies additionally highlight the positives impacts that can be achieved through engagement in social activities and groups. Social activities are offered by EMC with the goal of increasing the overall health and well-being, the quality of life, of our service users. The EMC achieves successful outcomes with many of the guests with this success being measured antidotally through observation and conversations. Guest discuss with staff their satisfaction with activities and groups conducted at EMC and how these have a positive impact on their lives. This improved quality of life has flow on effects that potentially increase engagement in employment, study and other areas.

References

Courtin E., Knapp M. (2015) Social Isolation, loneliness and health in old age: a scoping review. *Health and Social Care in the Community* **25** (3),799- 812

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