



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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Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

February 2024

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Our Commitment to Inclusion

The Salvation Army Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet and work and pay our respect to Elders, past, present and future.

We value and include people of all cultures, languages, abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and intersex status. We are committed to providing programs that are fully inclusive. We are committed to the safety and wellbeing of people of all ages, particularly children.

Our values are:

- Integrity
- Compassion
- Respect
- Diversity
- Collaboration

Learn more about our commitment to inclusion: salvationarmy.org.au/about-us

The Salvation Army is an international movement and our mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in his name without discrimination.

More information about The Salvation Army is at **Appendix A**.





Executive Summary

The Salvation Army is one of the largest providers of social services in Australia with extensive services in the ACT. In addition to social services, we provide ministry and pastoral supports and spaces for community connection through our Corps (churches). Loneliness and social isolation are recurring themes for those we work alongside.

Our observation is that loneliness and social isolation are prevalent in our society and have lasting physical and mental health impacts on the people who experience them. Loneliness and social isolation also have negative impacts on society more generally and can lower the resilience and connectedness of whole communities.

The Salvation Army welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to The Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion in relation to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT.

There are many drivers and experiences of loneliness and social isolation, and each individual circumstance will be distinct. In this submission The Salvation Army focuses on:

- the experience of loneliness and social isolation for people facing hardship and disadvantage, particularly in ways that present most starkly in our services including poverty, homelessness, alcohol and other drug issues and domestic and family violence;
- disadvantage as both a driver, and consequence of, loneliness and social isolation;
- connection as necessary for wellbeing and resilience in individuals and groups; and
- opportunities to build more connection and community in the ACT.

It is also important we consider the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our experience is that loneliness and social isolation were emerging as major wellbeing issues in the ACT long before the pandemic, however COVID-19 has amplified and exacerbated the impact. The impact of the pandemic was, predictably, most acute for those who were already experiencing disadvantage and therefore had fewer resources to adapt. What we do know is that the pandemic exposed how critical our relationships and social connection is in our community and how various forms of disadvantage interrelate with loneliness.

Although prevalent, we do not believe these issues are hopeless.

Everyone has a role to play in addressing social isolation in the ACT – individuals, community groups and the government – and together there are concrete steps that can be taken to address social isolation and loneliness.

The Salvation Army has made **22** recommendations for The Education and Community Inclusion Committee to consider. A summary of these recommendations follows on the next page.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

1.12 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government work with the Commonwealth Government to ensure that the base rate of the JobSeeker Payment and the Youth Allowance Payment are raised immediately and meaningfully to ensure recipients are able to live with dignity, and connection to their community.

Recommendation 2

1.14 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government considers increasing the funding to The No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) to provide another full-time case worker.

Recommendation 3

1.18 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government engages in deep collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations and ensure that any interventions to address loneliness and social isolation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are culturally sensitive and trauma informed.

Recommendation 4

1.25 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government increases social housing and affordable housing supply and the scale and capacity of homelessness services, to prevent homelessness forcing people, including children, into a scenario of social isolation and loneliness.

Recommendation 5

1.28 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government expands investment in prevention and early intervention for young people at risk of homelessness.

Recommendation 6

1.30 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government works with youth homelessness services to ensure that service design and funding allows for social and community connection, including the provision of education, skills building and access to mental health treatment.

Recommendation 7

1.35 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government addresses the severe disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the development of housing and homelessness responses. This should include the ACT Government collaborating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations.

Recommendation 8

1.40 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government works with AOD service providers to ensure that service design and funding allows for social and community connection both during and post treatment.

Recommendation 9





1.47 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government increases investment in frontline family violence services.

Recommendation 10

1.48 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government works alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations and leaders to ensure culturally appropriate family and domestic violence service responses.

Recommendation 11

1.55 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government:

- Focuses on prevention, early intervention, and community education including education around financial literacy and financial abuse to empower victim-survivors to seek help.
- Develops a comprehensive education and awareness campaign to ensure key institutions and the community more broadly obtain an understanding of coercive control and its impacts on women.
- Develops education campaigns in relation to active bystander interventions as a community prevention measure.

Recommendation 12

1.57 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government implements specialist training for frontline services including police officers, judicial officers and prosecutors, and workers in the family and domestic violence, health care, housing, education, finance, and child protection sectors. This training should be repeated regularly.

Recommendation 13

2.6 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government ensures there is a wide variety of accessible and affordable community sport activities, including affordable access to sporting groups and gyms.

Recommendation 14

2.12 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government collaborates with community groups, health, education, housing, and other service providers to ensure that those experiencing or at risk of experiencing hardship or disadvantage have wrap around support and access to loneliness reduction and intervention services.

Recommendation 15

2.14 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government continues to invest in initiatives such as Hands Across Canberra grants to support innovative solutions to loneliness and social isolation.

Recommendation 16

2.16 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government work towards maintaining a single, comprehensive, proactively updated directory of services and activities in the ACT that is widely distributed and accessible for community members and service providers.

Recommendation 17



2.23 The Salvation Army recommends The ACT Government investigates additional opportunities to co-locate community organisations and State and Commonwealth Government funded services to improve client access and improve collaboration between services.

Recommendation 18

2.27 The Salvation Army recommends the ACT Government invests in more meaningful and longer lasting partnerships between government agencies, and individuals and community services.

Recommendation 19

2.31 The Salvation Army recommends the ACT Government collaborates with community groups and service providers to develop a public awareness campaign highlighting the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation within the ACT, and to publicise the existence and accessibility of loneliness reduction and intervention services

Recommendation 20

2.40 The Salvation Army recommends the ACT Government, together with the Commonwealth Government, works to improve and increase access to affordable healthcare and treatment services to meet people's basic health and mental health needs, including access to more affordable psychologists and bulk-billing GPs.

Recommendation 21

2.46 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government invests in improving the accessibility and reliability of public transport, especially for those people who are most isolated and disadvantaged, by:

- Ensuring the public transport across the ACT links people to the services and activities of their choice;
- Increasing public transport services at night and over weekends;
- Ensuring all public buses are wheelchair accessible; and
- Improving payment options, including through the use of debit card payments

Recommendation 22

2.54 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government works to develop a state-wide social isolation and loneliness strategy with a vision to long-term delivery of social isolation and loneliness resources that provides a framework for collaboration between community groups, community service providers and state governments.

1 The Association with Disadvantage

1.1 In working with those who experience disadvantage, The Salvation Army has seen how loneliness and social isolation can be both drivers and consequences of disadvantage. All forms of disadvantage can push people to the margins or cause them to withdraw from their community. Where multiple and complex areas of disadvantage merge, the sense of exclusion and the need for services to develop community connection, becomes more acute. The Salvation Army believes that by addressing significant disadvantage, the incidence of loneliness and social isolation can be reduced.

Poverty

1.2 There is a clear relationship between financial hardship and loneliness and social isolation. People who are experiencing poverty or financial hardship are often forced into a position of social isolation and develop feelings of loneliness.

1.3 There is a prevailing misconception that there is no poverty in the ACT. The Salvation Army wishes to make it very clear that this is inaccurate. Despite high standards of living for many Canberrans, the prevalence of poverty in the ACT is alarmingly frequent, and disconcertingly hidden—or worse—ignored.

1.4 The Salvation Army provides extensive emergency relief for people experiencing financial hardship as well as financial counselling in every state and territory in Australia. In recent research undertaken with people who accessed our emergency relief services we found a high rate of loneliness and social isolation.¹ The majority of respondents (54 per cent) identified loneliness and social isolation as one of their biggest challenges in the past year. Furthermore, almost two in five (37 per cent) reported feeling lonely for most or all of the time during the past year (see figure 1).²

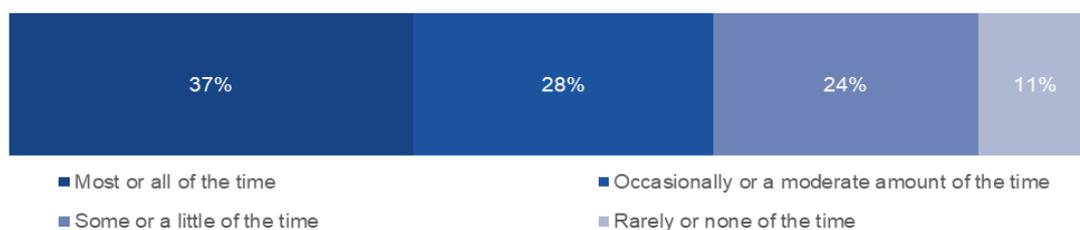


Figure 1. Frequency of Loneliness in the past 12 months (1,626)

Source: *Doorways Emergency Relief Survey Findings for the 2023 Red Shield Appeal*

¹ Verrelli, S., Russell, C., Taylor, E., & Xu, H. (2023). *Doorways Emergency Relief Survey Findings for the 2023 Red Shield Appeal*. The Salvation Army, Australia

² Ibid

- 1.5 These high rates are in line with recent research by Ending Loneliness Together which found people with poorly met financial needs are 2.8 times more likely to be lonely³ and Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre who found the loneliness gap between the richest and the poorest remains significant even when controlling for all other factors – meaning the experience of poverty itself creates loneliness.⁴
- 1.6 There is also a clear relationship between persistent poverty, poor mental health, and loneliness.⁵ The Salvation Army’s research found the experience of loneliness was most frequent amongst those with the poorest mental health; 66 per cent of those with poor mental health reported feeling lonely most or all of the time, while only 13 per cent of those with good-to-excellent mental health reported the same.⁶
- 1.7 The Salvation Army’s 2023 Red Shield Appeal research identified that among all groups of people seeking support, respondents receiving the JobSeeker Payment were experiencing the highest levels of financial hardship, with not enough money to cover even basic needs.⁷
- 1.8 The Salvation Army has done extensive research around the impact of poverty on people reliant on the JobSeeker Payment as their main or sole source of income. People on JobSeeker often cut back on spending to focus on their most basic needs – food and shelter. Money for almost all social activities is sacrificed. With no money for social activity and as the stresses of poverty become more dominant in their lives, those experiencing financial disadvantage withdraw. People we work with report being unable to afford to go on normal social outings, but also that they feel like they are a burden to their friends.

“

“I couldn’t even shout a friend a cup of coffee. It was easier to stay home as much as possible so I didn’t spend any money... it [the JobSeeker Payment] cut me off from my friends and family.”

”

- Maria, Community Member

³ Ending Loneliness Together. (2023). State of the Nation Report: Social Connection in Australia 2023.

https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ELT_LNA_Report_Digital.pdf

⁴ Duncan, A. et al. (2021) Stronger Together: Loneliness and social connectedness in Australia. Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre. https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2021/11/139532_BCEC-Stronger-Together-report_WEB.pdf

⁵ See footnote 2.

⁶ See footnote 1.

⁷ Russell, C., Verrelli, S., Taylor, E., & Xu, H. (2023). Salvos community hardship snapshot 2023: At breaking point.

[https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/subscribe/sites/auesalvos/files/RSA2023/RSA23_RSA_Research_Report_At_breaking_point_FINAL_\(1\).pdf](https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/subscribe/sites/auesalvos/files/RSA2023/RSA23_RSA_Research_Report_At_breaking_point_FINAL_(1).pdf)

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- 1.9 Unemployment more generally has an impact on a person's social life, as there is a significant degree of comradery and connection in the relationships between co-workers in most workplaces. A person who is unable to find employment faces additional stigma from the fact of unemployment, as well as the financial pressures of unemployment. The Salvation Army has observed that the longer a person remains unemployed, the more susceptible they become to deteriorating mental and physical health and increased social isolation. Financial distress and uncertainty exacerbate existing barriers to both social connection and employment making it more challenging to successfully re-enter the workforce.
- 1.10 The Salvation Army's service delivery experience leads us to conclude that increasing welfare payments, including the JobSeeker Payment and Youth Allowance, remains the single most effective way to address poverty in Australia.
- 1.11 While income support is a Commonwealth responsibility, all governments must work to ensure that those experiencing unemployment can afford to live with dignity, and not become socially isolated while searching for employment.

Recommendation 1

- 1.12 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government work with the Commonwealth Government to ensure that the base rate of the JobSeeker Payment and the Youth Allowance Payment are raised immediately and meaningfully to ensure recipients are able to live with dignity, and connection to their community.
- 1.13 The Salvation Army sees many people enter debt who are faced with no option to make even further sacrifices - be it falling behind in utility payments, credit cards, or sourcing other, poorly regulated forms of credit like a 'pay day' or Buy Now Pay Later loans. These then place not only financial strain, but mental burden upon people who are already struggling to make ends meet, as debts grow and payments become unmanageable. We have seen community members in need enticed to enter consumer leases and rent-to-buy schemes for necessary purchases. These can see community members end up paying three to four times the normal retail price over the life of the lease. Comparatively low amounts of debt can spiral into significant and unmanageable debt. The Salvation Army's No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) provides a vital service for many people in the ACT to avoid this debt spiral.

The Salvation Army's No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS)

The Salvation Army's No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS) provides individuals and families on low incomes with access to safe, fair and affordable credit. The loans enable people to purchase household items or services that improves their quality of life or enhances social and economic participation.

We thank the ACT Government for providing funding to staff The Salvation Army's No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS). This funding has provided a qualified case worker to process and approve loans, currently they are able to process around 150 loans per year. Car repairs and car registration are the topmost popular loan purposes, meaning this service has not only helped to prevent people falling into debt, but ensured they can continue to use their vehicles to access their community.

The demand exists to increase loan applications by 100 per cent. With extra funding from the ACT Government to hire another full-time case worker, The Salvation Army could double the loan volume. This could effectively increase annual loan approvals from 150 to 300, helping twice as many people to avoid unserviceable debt and lessen the risk of increased loneliness and social isolation for this cohort.

Recommendation 2

- 1.14 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government considers increasing the funding to The No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) to provide another full-time case worker.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective

- 1.15 It is well established that there are strong historic and contemporary reasons that help explain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's disadvantage. The history of colonisation in Australia has meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have experienced extreme hardships, ranging from the loss of traditional culture and homelands to the forced removal of children and denial of citizenship rights. Government officials were also empowered to remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, resulting in the 'Stolen Generation'. The intergenerational trauma experienced by people of the Stolen Generation continues to impact on a range of wellbeing outcomes. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to face discrimination and racism, including institutional racism, to this day.
- 1.16 It is also important to have a holistic understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's view of social and emotional wellbeing which encompasses social, spiritual, cultural and community elements.

1.17 The Salvation Army supports the Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap's calls for deep and enduring change to Government systems and culture.⁸

Recommendation 3

1.18 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government engages in deep collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations and ensure that any interventions to address loneliness and social isolation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are culturally sensitive and trauma informed.

Homelessness

- 1.19 The Salvation Army is one the largest providers of housing and homelessness services in Australia, providing nearly 820,000 beds for crisis accommodation across Australia over 2022 and 2023. In the ACT, our Oasis Youth Services have a focus on youth homelessness.
- 1.20 Individuals experiencing homelessness in any form – sleeping rough, sleeping in cars or shelters, or living in overcrowded dwellings – are highly susceptible to loneliness and social isolation.
- 1.21 Our experience supporting people experiencing homelessness is that they often face discrimination and exclusion due to their housing status, in addition to the financial hardship they face. This is also reflected in the interactions, or lack of interaction, they have with the community in general. Even highly visible forms of homelessness, such as sleeping on the street, can be ignored by the community or receive negative attention that can lead to further discrimination and stigma. People experiencing homelessness are also vulnerable to violence, exploitation and extreme social isolation. These factors in turn create further barriers to stable housing and employment and increase the likelihood of triggering or worsening mental health issues.
- 1.22 Homelessness can often keep individuals from certain spaces due to the fear of being ridiculed or harassed. This deepens the marginalisation of people who are already struggling with meeting basic needs, such as food, transportation and clothing.⁹
- 1.23 For many people who come to The Salvation Army for support, social housing provides a vital role in an increasingly unaffordable and insecure housing market. It often represents the only path out of homelessness. Yet, the number of social housing households as a proportion of all households across Australia has fallen in recent years. A 2018 study estimated a national shortfall of social and affordable housing of

⁸ Productivity Commission. (2024) Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study report, volume 1, Canberra. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gap-review/report>

⁹ Bower, M. (2018). Homelessness, Loneliness and Intersectionality: An Australian study. <https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws:52308/datastream/PDF/view>.



437,586 dwellings. It also estimated that by 2036 there will be a shortfall of nearly 730,000 dwellings. Everybody's Home has estimated the ACT has a social housing need of 5300 homes, and that rental stress is as high as 42 per cent in Canberra.¹⁰ Recent research has also found that Canberra has the fewest rental properties listed for less than \$400 per week, making up less than 2 per cent of available rentals.¹¹

- 1.24 The Salvation Army believes that Housing First approaches should underpin the homelessness response and social housing allocation policy across Australia. This also requires a supply of available social housing that is sufficient to meet demand. Despite examples of enhanced investment, it is likely to take many years and rolling budget commitments before there is adequate flow within the social housing system and capacity to deliver Housing First programs at scale. Therefore, in the short term, we consider that an increase in the stock of transitional housing and crisis accommodation centres is also necessary.

Recommendation 4

- 1.25 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government increases social housing and affordable housing supply and the scale and capacity of homelessness services, to prevent homelessness forcing people, including children, into a scenario of social isolation and loneliness.

Young people

- 1.26 Homelessness is experienced by different cohorts in differing ways. For instance, it can become increasingly difficult for a child or young person experiencing homelessness to stay engaged in education. They experience an increased likelihood of developing academic and learning delays, absenteeism or leaving school early. Based on our experience, children experiencing homelessness also tend to experience emotional isolation and difficulty relating to their peers, along with difficulties making and keeping friends. Most importantly, experiencing homelessness can have a lasting impact on both the physical and mental health of children. Young people also face a fear of stigma that could lead them to hide their housing status, which may hinder their ability to enrol in services or find housing among their social networks.
- 1.27 To address youth homelessness, a range of prevention, early intervention and intensive responses are required for young people before they become homeless. Intervening before a young person becomes homeless can help keep them connected to their families or support networks and prevent against poorer long-term housing, educational and health outcomes for young people.

¹⁰ Everybody's Home. (2022). *Financial Stress Map Canberra*. . <https://everybodyshome.com.au/financial-stress-map-canberra/>

¹¹ Dellow, Karen. (March 2023). *Where can you find a rental for less than \$400 per week in our big cities*. Prop Track. <https://www.realestate.com.au/insights/where-you-can-find-a-rental-for-less-than-400-a-week-in-our-big-cities/> .



Recommendation 5

1.28 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government expands investment in prevention and early intervention for young people at risk of homelessness.

1.29 Often the circumstances leading to homelessness for a young person are complex and outside of their control. Relationship and family breakdown is one of the common factors we see bringing young people in to contact with our homelessness services. In addition to assistance with accommodation and finances, many young people facing homelessness need help to develop social and living skills and build relationships and positive connections. Youth homelessness services must be adequately funded so staff can provide or link young people with the right support to prevent and address loneliness and social isolation.

Recommendation 6

1.30 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government works with youth homelessness services to ensure that service design and funding allows for social and community connection, including the provision of education, skills building and access to mental health treatment.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

- 1.31 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented in the homeless population. The significant dispossession and displacement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has also created what is now recognised as spiritual homelessness.^{12 13}
- 1.32 Today, rental discrimination based on race also continues to perpetuate homelessness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.^{14 15}
- 1.33 In 2021, 24,930 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were estimated to be experiencing homelessness, up 6.4 per cent from 23,437 in 2016. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up around 3.2 per cent of the Australian population yet they made up around 20 per cent of the estimated number of people experiencing homelessness on Census night in 2021.

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013). 4735.0 - Discussion Paper: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Perspectives on Homelessness, 2013. Available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4735.0Appendix22013?opendocument&tabname=Notes&prodno=4735.0&issue=2013&num=&view=>>.

¹³ Council to Homeless Persons (2019). Victorian Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Homelessness. Available at <http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-Indigenous-homelessness-in-Victoria-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

¹⁴ Shelter South Australia, 2019, "I'm tired of being treated like a second-class citizen!"; Racial Discrimination in the Private Rental Market, Adelaide.

¹⁵ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2012. Locked out: Discrimination in Victoria's private rental market.

1.34 Not having affordable, secure and appropriate housing can further compound the social exclusion and disadvantage experienced by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recommendation 7

1.35 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government addresses the severe disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the development of housing and homelessness responses. This should include the ACT Government collaborating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations.

Alcohol and Other Drug issues

1.36 Our alcohol and other drug (AOD) services are dedicated to creating a platform and pathways for people to build their lives in ways that are meaningful and purposeful. A core part of our services is focused on encouraging physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual health. During treatment people are encouraged and supported to remain connected with their community or build new relationships and connections.

1.37 Our observation from across our services reinforces the evidence that misuse of alcohol and other drugs is both a precursor and a result of loneliness.¹⁶ Those experiencing loneliness might 'self-medicate' with substance use. There is also a cohort whose use of substances drives them into self-isolation, whether due to shame or fear of discovery.

“

“When you can no longer hide the problem, you hide yourself.”

- A Salvation Army officer

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1.38 We have also observed that the process of recovery for many who have struggled with substance use disorders often includes walking away from their former community connections. Fear of relapse can also lead people to withdraw or totally cut off connections with their social circles. Based on our experience, this is true for illicit substances, but also for alcohol, which plays a large part in many social gatherings.

¹⁶ Ingram, I., Kelly, P.J., Deane, F.P., Baker, A.L., Goh, M.C.W., Raftery, D.K. & Dingle, G.A. (2020). Loneliness among people with substance use problems: A narrative systematic review. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 39(5), 447-483. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.13064>; Mohsen, H., Ardekani, S.M.Y., Bakhshani, S., & Bakhshani, S. (2014). Emotional and Social Loneliness in Individuals With and Without Substance Dependence Disorder. *International Journal of High Risk Behaviors & Addiction*, 3(3). doi: 10.5812/ijhrba.22688

- 1.39 Our AOD services saw during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the increased isolation and loneliness, many people increase their use of alcohol and other drugs or return to problematic use.

Recommendation 8

- 1.40 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government works with AOD service providers to ensure that service design and funding allows for social and community connection both during and post treatment.

Family and Domestic Violence

- 1.41 The Salvation Army regularly interacts with victim-survivors of family violence in the ACT through many of our local services. For example, our Doorways service supports victim-survivors of family and domestic violence by providing case management, referring them to other services, engaging with the Family Violence Unit within ACT Police, and assisting in developing permanent solutions.
- 1.42 The Salvation Army also offers a range of specialist family and domestic violence services in all other jurisdictions within Australia. These services include outreach, crisis interventions, counselling, men's programs, advice, refuge, transitional housing, and housing support. This submission has been informed by this extensive frontline experience collaborating with victim-survivors of family and domestic violence.
- 1.43 The experience of family and domestic violence is deeply isolating. Coercive and controlling behaviour is at the core of family and domestic violence. Perpetrators isolate victim-survivors from existing or potential support networks. This pattern of abusive behaviours leads to a complete loss of an individual's autonomy, self-esteem and independence. This makes leaving abusive situations more dangerous and it also makes recovery after leaving more difficult.
- 1.44 Leaving a situation of violence can involve a victim-survivor needing to be separate from much of their social network in order to remain safe. This can involve moving from their community, changing, or ceasing employment and, because of the threat of digital surveillance, losing access to online and social media communities. Relocating can force a victim-survivor into unemployment with the associated economic and social impacts that brings.
- 1.45 Social isolation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experiencing family violence is a factor that the ACT Government should consider in some depth. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women may not seek help or report violence because they fear isolation from community and family relationships, racism, and lack of understanding from support services in their region. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women often live in tight knit communities, the whole community can be affected by family violence and a shared sense of shame can reinforce the unspoken rule to keep silent, especially within the historical context of white settlement and



colonisation and the continuing impacts of loss of traditional roles and status within communities.¹⁷ Others may have to leave the community and their spiritual connections to the land, creating trauma for both women and their children. Due to this sense of loss of community, land and family, many women leave family violence services and return to unsafe and violent relationships.¹⁸

- 1.46 Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have also mentioned to our staff that there is a lack of culturally appropriate family violence services that enable victim-survivors to safely disclose and build trust.

Tanya's Story

Tanya is 32 years old and has a 2-year-old daughter and a 5-year-old son. The perpetrator had threatened to kill Tanya and her family if she left him, isolating her from family and friends. After leaving the perpetrator, Tanya was forced to leave her full time job as he was stalking her at work and threatening other employees. She also lost access to childcare, which was provided by her parents, as she and the children were no longer safe at her parent's home. Tanya and her children sustained serious trauma and PTSD from their experience with family violence and required counselling.

Due to competition for limited housing in her local area, Tanya couch-surfed with her children out of area and interstate while searching for housing. While assisting Tanya in finding suitable housing, only five properties were affordable for her. However, intense competition for these properties led to Tanya being unable to secure one.

Tanya and her children have become isolated from family, friends and school. Tanya and her children's social connection, development and mental health have suffered.

** names changed*

Recommendation 9

- 1.47 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government increases investment in frontline family violence services.

¹⁷ National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service. (2017). *Strong Families, Safe Kids: Family violence response and prevention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families* (Policy paper). http://www.natsils.org.au/portals/natsils/Strong_Families_Safe_Kids-Sep_2017.pdf?ver=2017-10-18-111427-643.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Recommendation 10

- 1.48 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government works alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations and leaders to ensure culturally appropriate family and domestic violence service responses.

Prevention, Early Intervention and Community Education

- 1.49 Prevention, early intervention and community education remain one of the most effective ways to address the underlying problems that influences patterns of family and domestic violence that impact on women's safety. Our frontline experience is that many victim-survivors may not realise they are experiencing family and domestic violence and may only come to this realisation for the first time after speaking to our domestic and family violence caseworkers, Moneycare financial counsellors and Doorways case workers, or when presenting at one of our Doorways emergency relief centres.
- 1.50 As a community, we need to continue to empower all victim-survivors to identify all forms of abuse and to address discrimination, disadvantage and entrenched gender bias and exploitation in the home, in relationships and in the workplace. Our faith communities are also places where people can identify family and domestic violence occurring, for example through playgroups and women's friendship groups, and the communities become a critical link for referral and support services.
- 1.51 We wholeheartedly support the Our Watch 'Change the Story' policy approach to prevention and education.¹⁹ We also advocate for better awareness raising to ensure that every individual in Australia considers themselves active bystanders, and for greater support for community-based violence prevention.

Training for Frontline Services

- 1.52 Due to the nature of family violence, police or justice staff will not always be the first responders for victim-survivors. For this reason, it is critical that all frontline staff and those volunteering in an organisation have access to specialised training to correctly identify people in need of protection and respond with meaningful support options for both adult and child victim-survivors, and persons using violence. Our frontline staff report that many of the services that victim-survivors interact with do not have sufficient training, education, and awareness to understand that coercive control and non-physical forms of abuse are as harmful as physical violence.

¹⁹ Our Watch. (2015). Change the Story: A shared prevention for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. <https://d2bb010tdzqag7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/21025429/Change-the-storyframework-preventviolence-women-children-AA-new.pdf>.



1.53 The Salvation Army's Doorways service and Moneycare program provides free access to qualified financial counsellors who can help with crisis intervention and financial resilience services. In many cases, victim-survivors are running households with minimal funds as perpetrators direct all income for personal use, attach all bills, purchases and rental contracts to the victim-survivor's name and acquire significant debt, making it more difficult for the victim-survivor to escape violence. We have also assisted clients who have incurred government debt through incorrect reporting of income or coercive action by a perpetrator. In most cases, use of technology-facilitated abuse is also present with other forms of financial and economic abuse.

1.54 As 'first responders' to victim-survivors experiencing financial abuse we continue to advocate for financial counsellors and the broader financial sector to be included in coordinated family violence responses. Our experience delivering financial counselling, as well as family violence support, is that banks do not always have sufficient protections in place to safeguard against financial abuse.

Recommendation 11

1.55 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government:

- Focuses on prevention, early intervention, and community education including education around financial literacy and financial abuse to empower victim-survivors to seek help.
- Develops a comprehensive education and awareness campaign to ensure key institutions and the community more broadly obtain an understanding of coercive control and its impacts on women.
- Develops education campaigns in relation to active bystander interventions as a community prevention measure.

1.56 We call on the ACT Government to deliver consistent and mandatory specialised training to identify and respond to coercive and controlling behaviours to frontline services. Training and response needs must also extend to the identification of other high-risk factors of violence, in particular the understanding that family and domestic violence is a pattern of behaviours as opposed to a one-off event of violence.

Recommendation 12

1.57 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government implements specialist training for frontline services including police officers, judicial officers and prosecutors, and workers in the family and domestic violence, health care, housing, education, finance, and child protection sectors. This training should be repeated regularly.



Intersecting disadvantage

1.58 Disadvantage, social isolation and loneliness can all interact in a way that leads to greater and more complex forms of disadvantage. For example, income insecurity may lead to loneliness, which can develop into serious mental ill-health, which can in turn impact on a person's ability to maintain housing. To prevent one form of crisis transforming into further isolation, interventions must acknowledge the risks for people experiencing all types of hardship and be alert to the ways in which these factors can contribute to the severity of each form of hardship.

Issues specific to the ACT

- 1.59 Any loneliness and social isolation strategy in the ACT must consider the number of people arriving, leaving, and moving within the ACT, and what their specific needs are.
- 1.60 Canberra attracts many new residents for work or study, including thousands of international students, and a number of these people do not plan to settle here. Recent census data showed that more than 20 per cent of ACT residents aged 18 and 19 are 'fresh arrivals' who moved from interstate in the past year.²⁰ Our services in the ACT are seeing an increase in refugees connecting with us. Each of these groups face unique challenges building connections and community in a new place. Also rising house prices are pushing some people to move outside of the city centre and many Canberrans move outside of the ACT as they reach retirement age.
- 1.61 All this movement creates unique challenges for the ACT. New residents need support or resources to settle into a new area and build community and connection. Required transport infrastructure and services change, such as demand for better public transport links across Canberra and outside of the city. Many services face issues with hiring and retaining staff and staffing turnovers impact on the people using those services.

²⁰ Mannheim, M. (2023) Many Canberrans flee the capital when they get older, but more are deciding to stay for good. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-23/staying-in-canberra-for-life-and-death/102164114>



2 Improving Connection and Community

- 2.1 Social connections and belonging to community are the underlying solutions to the issues of loneliness and social isolation. Social connection and belonging increases wellbeing and quality of life, builds resilience and acts as a buffer against stressful events and hardships. In fact, studies have shown that social connection can reduce the effects of trauma.²¹
- 2.2 The Salvation Army's experience has shown that people can be brought back from feelings of isolation and loneliness through connection and community, and that all efforts to develop these must be made. Belonging to a community and the incidental social connection that comes from being part of that community has helped many of the people we work with to overcome feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The type of community and connection that people desire varies, as does the level of support they may require to engage. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.
- 2.3 The Salvation Army sees a number of opportunities for the ACT to better build connection and community and have a positive impact, particularly for people experiencing disadvantage. Below we will discuss the importance of providing a range of on-going options and support that vary in intensity and are accessible to all who need them. It is also essential for interventions to address the damaging stigma of loneliness and social isolation that still exists. We are aware of many supports and initiatives in the ACT that are internal and external to The Salvation Army, which are successfully increasing connection and community for many people. The ACT Government has a role in providing direction across all relevant policy areas and supporting collaboration to effectively address loneliness and social isolation.

Community activities

- 2.4 Community members must have access to a wide variety of social and community activities so they can engage with those that best meet their needs. We are aware of a range of free or affordable activities in the ACT but there are gaps. Our staff have identified that many people wish to engage in a sport or attend a gym but are unable to due to cost. This means they miss out on the social, emotional, health and wellbeing benefits of these activities.
- 2.5 Work can be done to maximise the number of affordable and accessible sporting activities. Investigation could also be done into supporting affordable access to gym facilities and classes for those who are unable to access these facilities themselves.

²¹ Aldrich, D. (2017) How social ties make us resilient to trauma. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-social-ties-make-us-resilient-to-trauma-78223#:~:text=During%20and%20after%20traumatic%20events%2C%20we%20need%20other,through%20our%20adversity%2C%20and%20create%20and%20offer%20support>.

Recommendation 13

- 2.6 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government ensures there is a wide variety of accessible and affordable community sport activities, including affordable access to sporting groups and gyms.

Holistic support

- 2.7 The breadth and flexibility of the Salvation Army, which includes Corps (churches), community services and Salvos Stores means we are ideally placed to help build social connections, relationships, and community. The Salvation Army is embedded in local communities, and we are locally focused.

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“We would love to sit down and have a cup of tea with all community members, in many cases that is what they need, one on one to be heard.”

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A Salvation Army Doorways Case Manager

***Melinda's story**

Melinda* became isolated after her husband of more than 40 years passed away. One of Melinda's friends put her in touch with the local Salvation Army Officer, Narelle, as she was concerned how Melinda had become detached, and was becoming easily overwhelmed.

Narelle organised to visit Melinda's house and they spent several hours together. Melinda had become overwhelmed and unable to begin even minor household tasks, and the shame had prevented her from inviting friends over, or even going out. Together, Narelle and Melinda were able to prioritise, and begin the process of decluttering and ordering her house.

Melinda didn't need physical help, she needed the company and the emotional support that she used to get from her husband, and friends. She said, "I just needed someone to be there with me through that".

The companionship Narelle provided was able to help Melinda start her journey out of isolation and loneliness.

**Name changed*





- 2.8 For some people, just having access to social and community spaces and activities will be enough to help them build or maintain social connection and community. For other people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage or hardship, and especially those experiencing entrenched disadvantage, more support is required. The Salvation Army's focus is always upon those who are experiencing the most significant disadvantage in every situation.
- 2.9 Our faith communities, social services and community centres provide multiple entry points that are welcoming and inclusive. For example, someone who is referred to our AOD treatment service may be linked to the drop-in community day we run where they may form relationships with other community members and build trust with staff. This may lead them to feeling safe to ask for help with accumulated debt they had been hiding due to shame. From there they could be linked with financial assistance and the opportunity to volunteer as a way to pay off fines.



“People have a lot of traumas in their life. Past experiences tell them to isolate.”



A Salvation Army AOD worker

- 2.10 The Salvation Army recognises that people who are disadvantaged and have complex needs require an investment of time, resources and commitment to support them. Case management and wrap around services are the most effective ways we have found to respond to those experiencing hardship and disadvantage.
- 2.11 The Salvation Army has developed the Doorways service to provide both emergency relief and holistic case management. Treating individuals in a holistic way and ensuring there can be warm referrals to a variety of services both within and outside of The Salvation Army, has proven highly effective.

Recommendation 14

- 2.12 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government collaborates with community groups, health, education, housing, and other service providers to ensure that those experiencing or at risk of experiencing hardship or disadvantage have wrap around support and access to loneliness reduction and intervention services.
- 2.13 Community members and local community organisations such as The Salvation Army are ideally placed to identify opportunities and solutions to address loneliness and social isolation in their community. We are aware of many examples of locally based solutions such as the one below from Oasis Youth Service.



The Next Step Shed- Oasis Youth Service

The Salvation Army's Oasis Youth service, through a Hands Across Canberra grant, has recently been able to invest in a valuable recreation center at their Chisholm site, co-designed with young people. This space creates a safe, welcoming, and fun environment for young people to connect with peers and develop rapport with staff. This recreation center has provided more opportunities for 'by the way' case management, a really effective way to engage and support young people. Some of the most important conversations with young people don't happen sitting across a table, they happen during a game of pool or basketball.

Recommendation 15

2.14 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government continues to invest in initiatives such as Hands Across Canberra grants to support innovative solutions to loneliness and social isolation.

2.15 In order for individuals or service providers to access the resources required to build community and connection they need relevant and up-to-date information about the options available. We are aware of many great community activities and specialised support services in the ACT, as well as multiple places to find information. The ACT would benefit from a single, comprehensive, and up-to-date service directory that includes social and community activities and events as well as all support services. This would allow many individuals to find the support they need independently, and would help service providers more efficiently and effectively link people to the right support.

Recommendation 16

2.16 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government work towards maintaining a single, comprehensive, proactively updated directory of services and activities in the ACT that is widely distributed and accessible for community members and service providers.

2.17 Supporting community and connection is at the heart of what The Salvation Army does. We are working to continue to grow and build on our understanding of people's experiences of wellbeing, connection and community. Our outcomes measurement work and research team are looking in-depth at the impacts of our services on people's lives.

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- 2.18 Research recently conducted by The Salvation Army with people who accessed our Moneycare services found that following the support we provided there was an improvement of wellbeing scores in the areas of personal relationships and feeling a part of community. However, the participant's increased levels of personal wellbeing following intervention were still lower than the Australian average. This highlights the complexity and disadvantage faced by the people who access our services.
- 2.19 In other research conducted by The Salvation Army with people who accessed our Moneycare services we found that people considered budgets for social activities as non-essential and were redirecting funds to debt repayment, leading to unintended consequences of diminished social engagement. Moneycare then introduced social inclusion funds in budget discussions, to recognise the benefits of social activities, including social capital as a crucial buffer against financial shocks and a significant factor in mental health and wellbeing.

Partnerships

- 2.20 Effective partnerships and collaboration between services, including government and non-government services, improves experiences and outcomes for people.
- 2.21 Our staff in the ACT have developed many positive and effective relationships with a wide range of service providers, including government services such as ACT Housing and Centrelink. Many services show a willingness and a commitment to collaborate together to best serve the needs of our community.
- 2.22 Co-location of services can improve accessibility for people and help services to collaborate and operate more efficiently. Our Braddon Community Days provide an excellent example of this.

Recommendation 17

- 2.23 The Salvation Army recommends The ACT Government investigates additional opportunities to co-locate community organisations and State and Commonwealth Government funded services to improve client access and improve collaboration between services.



Braddon Community Days

The Salvation Army Braddon Corps (church) in the ACT serves as a welcoming hub of support for anyone in the local community. A diverse and extensive range of faith activities, services and connections are available to people.

Twice a week, the Corps hosts a Community Day, with a cooked lunch, and staple items available through partnership with local supermarkets and other providers.

Representatives from The Salvation Army's services, such as Doorways Emergency Relief and Moneycare attend along with external service providers such as Legal Aid, ACTEW AGL and Housing ACT.

These services all form part of the community and make the Braddon Community Days an accessible point of entry to many Salvation Army, and other essential supports and services.

Beyond being an example of flexible, and collaborative support, Braddon Community Days are an example of community building, with everyone welcomed to join, eat together and connect to services.

2.24 The Salvation Army is always looking for ways to improve collaboration and partnerships and deliver holistic support. Our clients tell us they are frustrated when they have to re-tell their story multiple times to different services, or different staff within the same service. When they do this and there is no follow-up or resolution, they become more frustrated or disengage and stop asking for help, leading to further isolation and feelings of abandonment.

“The community services organisations that we are currently seeing as being at full capacity relate to family and domestic violence support. We often have clients of Salvos Loans telling us that ... they are stressed by having to re-tell their story multiple times, only to be told that a service is at full capacity and can't assist them right now.”

- A Salvation Army ACT Microfinance Worker

2.25 For partnerships and collaboration between services to better address people's needs they must be meaningful and long-lasting. Government services such as Housing ACT and Centrelink could build on the current connections they have with community





organisations by providing a greater commitment to consistent engagement and responsiveness to community need. We believe better partnerships will lead to better outcomes for people.

2.26 Continuity is also important. Our Braddon Corps have identified that their partnership with Housing ACT is most effective when there is one regular and consistent Housing ACT staff member to attend the Community Days. Additionally, providing one key contact person within Government services, for people with complex needs or issues that take time to resolve, would greatly improve their experience and likely help to resolve issues more efficiently. We find that effective partnerships can breakdown when staff members leave or change roles and we recommend more effective handovers within Government services so that partnerships and continuity can be maintained.

Recommendation 18

2.27 The Salvation Army recommends the ACT Government invests in more meaningful and longer lasting partnerships between government agencies, and individuals and community services.

Stigma

2.28 One of the key issues The Salvation Army sees in our social services and ministry work is how the stigma of loneliness and social isolation leads people already in the margins to withdraw further from community. One of the things community members value about our Corps is that they can be places where community members can find social connection without judgement and where people 'know their names.'

2.29 One of the reasons this Inquiry is so important is that it starts the process of normalising the discussion of loneliness and social isolation.

2.30 An effective next step could be to engage in an awareness campaign that highlights both the prevalence of loneliness in the community and the availability of supports for those who are experiencing loneliness. This awareness campaign needs to be accessible to the wide range of people who experience loneliness noting the significant barriers to accessing information experienced by many within the community.

Recommendation 19

2.31 The Salvation Army recommends the ACT Government collaborates with community groups and service providers to develop a public awareness campaign highlighting the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation within the ACT, and to publicise the existence and accessibility of loneliness reduction and intervention services

Accessibility

- 2.32 Barriers to accessing community connection are diverse, and some barriers affect different cohorts more significantly.
- 2.33 We expect the Committee will receive submissions from experts who will provide insight into the importance of accessibility for people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Accessibility for these cohorts is fundamental. As discussed above, it is also critical that there is financial accessibility of services and supports for people experiencing loneliness and social isolation, given the relationship between social isolation, loneliness and poverty.
- 2.34 Three other forms of accessibility that need to be considered are accessible healthcare and treatment, accessible transport and digital accessibility.

Healthcare and treatment

- 2.35 Many people trying to access healthcare and treatment services face a range of barriers. People experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage experience more health disadvantages.²² Aside from this obviously leading to higher rates of illness, it also has an impact on their ability to address other hardships including loneliness and social isolation.
- 2.36 There are two key services in the ACT where we see people facing significant barriers, they are General Practitioners (GPs) and mental health and psychological treatment.
- 2.37 Many people are unable to attend a GP when needed due to the cost. People on low incomes rely on GP practices offering bulk billing and these can be incredibly hard to find and access. The ACT has the lowest rate of GPs offering bulk billing, sitting at 5 per cent, compared to NSW where just under half of its clinics offer bulk billing.²³ Our clients also tell us when they do find a bulk billing GP, they may be on the other side of Canberra which is difficult for them to access.

²² Health and inequity in Australia. (2023). The Lancet Public Health. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(23\)00157-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(23)00157-3/fulltext)

²³ Tamer, R & Macleod, K. (2023). Just 35 per cent of GP clinics bulk bill new patients. Here's how your area compares. SBS News. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/just-35-per-cent-of-gp-clinics-bulk-bill-new-patients-heres-how-your-area-compares/zeiwn5er0>

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- 2.38 Another key service that we see people struggling to access is mental health and psychological services. In our youth homelessness services timely access to psychological treatment not only helps young people with their mental health but it improves their ability to engage in other areas of their life such as work, study and social activities. We see many young people having to wait six to eight weeks to access an affordable psychologist. A lot can change in that time for a young person facing homelessness and they may no longer be willing or able to engage with therapy.
- 2.39 Oasis Youth Service in the ACT is currently exploring options to address this disadvantage for their client group. They are working towards offering psychology services on-site, which would drastically improve access.

Recommendation 20

- 2.40 The Salvation Army recommends the ACT Government, together with the Commonwealth Government, works to improve and increase access to affordable healthcare and treatment services to meet people's basic health and mental health needs, including access to more affordable psychologists and bulk-billing GPs.

Transport

- 2.41 Transport infrastructure is a critical element supporting accessibility and social connection. Difficulties accessing transport, including public transport, locks people into isolation. People with transport disadvantage often have the least flexibility about how they interact with their community.
- 2.42 It is also a reality that many people who are financially poor are also 'time poor.' A person reliant on public transport or who has moved to cheaper accommodation far away from work and social networks will expend far more time commuting than someone with access to a car or closer accommodation. This leaves many people with a lack of money and a lack of time to invest in social activities.
- 2.43 Although transport infrastructure is always a priority for governments, it is important that the role of public transport in fighting social, as well as physical, isolation is not forgotten. We have observed in our service delivery a range of public transport issues in the ACT that can act to further isolate people.
- 2.44 Some people face lengthy journeys on public transport to access the supports and services they require. Our youth services are aware of young people with housing issues having to access accommodation in one part of Canberra and then travelling up to three hours on public transport to get to their school each day. This increases the risk of them disengaging from school and all the many issues this can lead to.

2.45 A limited or lack of public transport services early in the morning, late at night and over the weekend also restricts people from engaging in activities during these times, including employment opportunities such as shift work or night work. Unreliable and cancelled public transport services also present a barrier and deterrent for many people trying to access the community.

Recommendation 21

2.46 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government invests in improving the accessibility and reliability of public transport, especially for those people who are most isolated and disadvantaged, by:

- Ensuring the public transport across the ACT links people to the services and activities of their choice;
- Increasing public transport services at night and over weekends;
- Ensuring all public buses are wheelchair accessible; and
- Improving payment options, including through the use of debit card payments

Digital access

2.47 The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an acceleration of community supports and social inclusion resources shifting online. Although internet access is a given for many, there is a sizable portion of our client base who are unable to access these resources, including those who cannot afford data or devices. Older Australians too are a large category at risk of social isolation and loneliness, who often are less comfortable using internet resources. The movement online reinforced existing digital, cultural and linguistic divides in our community. There are cohorts that require greater support to engage effectively with online services and that support must be built into any digital service design.

2.48 Our experience is also that face-to-face interactions, where people can experience in-person communication, offer greater connection between individuals than phone or online contact. This has led The Salvation Army to design our loneliness reduction and intervention services with a focus on face-to-face personal interaction.

“Of all the services we provided, people needed things like financial support, but people also needed to talk.

“

We could give them a welfare card, and a blanket, but the companionship, it was about what was really in their heart or on their mind.”

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A Salvation Army officer

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- 2.49 Initially as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, The Salvation Army introduced a phone assessment system for Emergency Relief services. Both feedback from community members and demonstrated efficiency gains, led to a practice change to embed this as the primary method of Emergency Relief assessment, supplemented by physical hubs where face-to-face assessment is preferred. Collection of vouchers generally still occurs at a local hub where community members can access other supports and opportunities as well as be part of a community and have companionship.
- 2.50 It is important that both digital and in-person community connections and loneliness reduction and intervention services remain a focus. Although this may seem like duplication, these services in tandem serve different cohorts and provide complementary experiences to those who access them. Maximising accessibility and availability of services is the best way to ensure that loneliness reduction and intervention services are utilised.

Coordinated strategy

- 2.51 Building connection, trust and a sense of community takes time. A long-term outlook for the issues of loneliness and social isolation is necessary to ensure these issues can be meaningfully addressed. Programs and resources must be maintained to allow their impacts to develop and flow within the community.
- 2.52 From our experience, persistence and stability are critical characteristics for programs to ensure that avenues for connection are reliable, accessible and known to those experiencing loneliness. Where loneliness reduction and intervention services are short term or inconsistent in their programming, vulnerable community members can be left at risk of further isolation and with feelings of abandonment.
- 2.53 Helping people to build positive connections and a sense of community is complex and requires a range of interventions at an individual, family and community level. It requires commitment and collaboration across a broad range of policy areas. The ACT Government and the Commonwealth Government should take a lead role in providing direction and a framework for collaboration to address loneliness and social isolation across the ACT and Australia.

Recommendation 22

- 2.54 The Salvation Army recommends that the ACT Government works to develop a state-wide social isolation and loneliness strategy with a vision to long-term delivery of social isolation and loneliness resources that provides a framework for collaboration between community groups, community service providers and state governments.

3 Conclusion

- 3.1 The Salvation Army thanks The Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion for the opportunity to provide a written submission.
- 3.2 The Salvation Army would welcome the opportunity to discuss the content of this submission should any further information be of assistance. Further information can be sought from The Salvation Army's Department of Government Relations, at government.relations@salvationarmy.org.au.

The Salvation Army Australia Territory

February 2024





Appendix A About The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army is an international Christian movement with a presence in more than 130 countries. Operating in Australia since 1880, The Salvation Army is one of the largest providers of social services and programs for people experiencing hardship, injustice and social exclusion.

The Salvation Army Australia provides more than 1,000 social programs and activities through networks of social support services, community centres and churches across the country.

Programs include:

- Financial counselling, financial literacy and microfinance
- Emergency relief and related services
- Homelessness services
- Youth services
- Family and domestic violence services
- Alcohol, drugs and other addictions
- Chaplaincy
- Emergency and disaster response
- Aged care
- Employment services

As a mission-driven organisation, The Salvation Army seeks to reduce social disadvantage and create a fair and harmonious society through holistic and person-centred approaches that reflect our mission to share the love of Jesus by:

Caring for people

Creating faith pathways

Building healthy communities

Working for justice

We commit ourselves in prayer and practice to this land of Australia and its people, seeking reconciliation, unity and equity.

Further information about The Salvation Army can be accessed at: <

<https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/>>

