



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

Submission Number: 02

Date Authorised for Publication: 20 February 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. I consider this to be a very important and growing issue for the community and would like to take the opportunity to correct some misconceptions that I discovered when I contacted one of my MLAs (who very graciously gave me some of her time).

In relation to:

a) The prevalence of loneliness and isolation in the ACT community.

There seems to be a myth that loneliness is something that elderly people suffer. This came out in the *State of the Nation Report into Social Connection (2023)*, which found that 42 per cent of Australians thought that only those over 65 years feel lonely. In fact that publication found that 56 per cent of those over 65 never felt lonely. The largest group of those admitting to always feeling lonely was 18-24 year olds (22 per cent) followed by those aged 45-54 (18 per cent). The population of Canberrans aged between 19 and 65 is 54.7 per cent. These Canberrans are largely in the workforce having finished full time education (which provided numerous opportunities to meet others and make connections easily) and not retired (where again there are many opportunities to meet others and make connections easily). Another myth is that those in the working age population are caring for either the young or the old (or both) and thus can meet people in similar circumstances. The 2021 census found that 40 per cent of Canberrans did this (and that would include those over 65). That is not a majority by any count.

b) Experiences of loneliness and social isolation among residents of the ACT, including but not limited to seniors, young people, people with a disability, parents, carers, LGBTIQ+ people, and recently arrived migrants and refugees.

My personal experience is of someone who is of working age, who works full time. I do not have children and I have lost both my parents. My family migrated to Australia when I was a small child and I have no close family. I have lived in the same cul de sac for 17 years and know the name of one neighbour. Accordingly, I didn't have the opportunity to make friends in mother's groups or kids sport. I couldn't cope with my grief by joining a grief group as these are restricted to those who have lost a child or partner, with one called Dead Parent's Society restricted to those who lost their parents young. I am very fortunate to be happily married with great in-laws, but I am aware of many others who are single or divorced. I also have a couple of acquired disabilities.

I have sought help for grief and loneliness through my GP and a psychologist. Trying to find ways to find social connection was very difficult. I was encouraged to try volunteering. I have signed up with the Red Cross, but I did note that most volunteer activities advertised on govolyteer are for (and with) the elderly or the young. They predominantly take place during working hours. I left a previous volunteer position as I was told I wasn't old enough (aged 35!). With my physical condition being what it is getting up early to pull weeds with Landcare is not feasible, nor is joining a social sporting team. I have tried to find people on the internet without much success. I live in Tuggeranong, where there are few community learning opportunities (CIT runs most of these in Belconnen though there are a few at the Tuggeranong Arts Centre). I looked at language classes, but the closest ones are in the

inner south (unless you are retired and can attend U3A in Woden).

This leaves me nowhere.

c) The personal and social costs associated with loneliness and social isolation in the ACT, including the impact of loneliness and social isolation on mental and physical health.

I have been admitted to hospital several times and received some support through Tuggeranong Health Centre. I believe I could have avoided 2 admissions if I was not so lonely. I am not fully functioning as a Canberran as I don't feel like I am part of this community given I do not come within the scope of ACT Government programs designed for the young and the elderly.

d) Opportunities for the ACT Government to support organisations and individuals to address loneliness and social isolation and improve social connectedness in the ACT community.

I urge the ACT Government to support community adult education through Canberra (rather than overwhelmingly on the north side of Canberra). Programs that allow for the engagement of the entire community would be wonderful. The work of the City Renewal Agency is terrific for those on the north side. The National Multicultural Festival is another excellent example. By contrast damning example is when I looked at the SouthFest calendar when it was brought to my attention on facebook with the cheery caption 'something for everyone' – it turned out to be something for everyone over 55 (seniors yoga), or under 18 (predominantly activities for small children and their carers).

e) Opportunities for the ACT Government to integrate improving social connectedness into other areas of policy making.

Social connectedness has clear implications for education and health. Education should not be restricted to preschool, primary and secondary education as the benefits of life-long learning are well demonstrated. As I mention above, I suspect there would be less pressure on ACT hospitals if there was a greater sense of community.