INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: VIEW Clubs of Australia

Date Received: 25 October 2024

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The Hon. Dr Sarah Kaine, MLC
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Email:

Dear Dr Kaine,

VIEW Clubs of Australia (VIEW) - Submission for the Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Loneliness in New South Wales

Please find attached our Submission to the NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues inquiry into the prevalence, causes, and impacts of loneliness in NSW.

VIEW (Voice, Interests and Education of Women) is a national women's organisation and support network bringing women together in local communities to enjoy social activities, develop skills, make connections and participate in networking events while supporting and advocating for the education of young Australians in need.

For 64 years, VIEW has positively impacted the lives of women in NSW and throughout Australia by providing opportunities for them to actively engage in their communities.

By promoting social connections, fostering supportive networks, and encouraging participation, VIEW actively addresses loneliness and social isolation, and plays a crucial role in enhancing the well-being of women and the broader community. Ongoing efforts to understand and combat loneliness will contribute to healthier, more connected communities across Australia.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Birch
National President 2024-25

Introduction

When Minister for Mental Health Rose Jackson announced a Parliamentary inquiry into loneliness and its effects on residents of New South Wales, VIEW Clubs of Australia (VIEW) recognised an important opportunity to contribute meaningfully. By examining the Terms of Reference, VIEW can highlight the measures we implement to mitigate loneliness and identify populations most at risk, ultimately helping to alleviate the financial burden of loneliness on the NSW Budget.

Loneliness and social isolation are significant issues affecting individuals and communities across Australia. VIEW (Voice, Interests, Education of Women) Clubs is dedicated to addressing these challenges by fostering connections among women.

This submission outlines the prevalence and causes of loneliness, its measurement, the link between social connection and physical health, and the steps community organisations like VIEW can take to mitigate loneliness.

Prevalence and Causes of Loneliness

Loneliness is a complex emotional response that can arise from various factors, including the loss of loved ones, relocation, health changes, and a societal shift toward increased digital interaction over face-to-face communication. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has reported on the prevalence of loneliness across various demographics, particularly older adults and single parents. The "Australian Loneliness Report" (2018) from the Survey of Social Attitudes in Australia examined the prevalence, causes, and impacts of loneliness, emphasising the importance of age and social connections. Additionally, multiple studies have shown that COVID-19 has intensified feelings of loneliness, especially among vulnerable groups in Australia. The impacts of loneliness extend beyond emotional distress, increasing the risk of mental health issues, cardiovascular diseases, and decreased life expectancy.

Extent of Loneliness and Measurement

The extent of loneliness is often measured using standardised scales, such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale. These tools assess subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation, helping to identify at-risk populations and monitor the effectiveness of interventions. Initiatives like the Australian Loneliness Report provide valuable data, revealing that young adults and older individuals are particularly vulnerable, with notable increases in reported loneliness during significant life transitions.

Evidence Linking Social Connection to Physical Health

Numerous studies have established a clear link between social connections and physical health outcomes. Social isolation increases the risk of chronic conditions, while strong social networks are associated with lower morbidity and mortality rates. For instance, a meta-analysis demonstrated that individuals with strong social ties have a 50% greater likelihood of survival compared to those with weaker connections.

Encouraging women to actively participate in social activities offers substantial health benefits for both individuals and communities. Membership in organisations like VIEW Clubs (Voice, Interests, Education of Women) enhances these benefits by fostering a supportive environment for social engagement.

Active participation in social activities is closely linked to improved mental health; women in VIEW Clubs often report lower levels of depression and anxiety, which can significantly reduce the need for mental health services. The strong social ties formed within these clubs contribute to better physical health, lowering the risk of chronic diseases and easing the overall burden on healthcare systems.

Moreover, members of VIEW Clubs are more likely to seek preventive care and adhere to treatment plans, enabling early identification of health issues and minimising treatment costs. The camaraderie and shared interests within these clubs effectively combat loneliness, a major risk factor for various health problems, by fostering meaningful connections that mitigate the negative effects of isolation.

Additionally, VIEW Club membership builds supportive community networks that empower women to access healthcare services more readily and navigate health challenges effectively. Through regular meetings, community service projects, and personal development workshops, members gain a sense of belonging and purpose, which further enhances their overall well-being.

Actively promoting social engagement through organisations like VIEW Clubs not only enriches the lives of women but also leads to significant health benefits, ultimately reducing healthcare costs and improving the quality of life in communities.

VIEW: Six Decades of Support for Women

Founded in 1960, VIEW has dedicated over 64 years to connecting women and providing opportunities to support The Smith Family charity through volunteering and fundraising. VIEW is the largest community supporter of students in The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program, assisting over 1,785 students experiencing disadvantage. With more than 6,100 members across 149 clubs in metropolitan, regional, and rural areas of NSW, VIEW fosters connections among its members and within local communities.

While solutions to loneliness extend beyond mere connections, these relationships empower members to "Make Connections while Making a Difference" in the lives of

disadvantaged children and in their own lives. Members of VIEW Clubs remain vigilant about changes in mental health within their communities, enabling them to support each other in facing issues related to loneliness.

VIEW is non-political, has no religious affiliation, and welcomes women of all ages and ethnicities. Many members join VIEW to become more active and engaged in their communities.

Understanding Loneliness Across Demographics

Predictors of loneliness vary among different demographics, with critical risk periods identified for adolescents and young adults under 25, as well as adults over 65. Many of our members are early retirees facing significant life transitions that can be isolating. Addressing loneliness in these groups requires thoughtful strategies that acknowledge their unique needs, nurturing a sense of agency and purpose for those who have dedicated much of their time to family and careers. Many women choose to volunteer for The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program, enriching the lives of Australian children and their own.

Advocacy and Engagement

VIEW women gather not only for social engagement but also to advocate for women, families, and disadvantaged children. Our unique resolution process allows members to collaboratively identify and articulate issues crucial for driving social change. Over the decades, many VIEW resolutions have successfully influenced legislative changes, including a notable resolution focused on providing adequate internet access to children in rural and remote areas of Australia. This sense of purpose fosters connections and provides support for women feeling isolated.

Interests and Activities

To combat loneliness exacerbated by lack of face-to-face interaction, VIEW Clubs hold monthly meetings, offering members regular opportunities to reconnect over meals while hearing from guest speakers. Members engage in a variety of activities, including outings to local art galleries, movies, and fundraising events for *Learning for Life* students. These gatherings facilitate the formation of new friendships and connections.

Some VIEW Clubs form interest groups - such as book clubs, walking groups, and craft clubs - creating additional opportunities for social interaction. Initiatives like gift-wrapping in local shopping centres during the holiday season raise funds and provide invaluable face-to-face interaction.

Celebrating International Women's Day

VIEW celebrates International Women's Day each March by hosting luncheons that invite women from various organisations. These events feature guest speakers, including local Members of Parliament and individuals who have made significant contributions both locally and globally, showcasing the positive impact of their volunteer efforts. By fostering community connections and a sense of belonging, these celebrations help alleviate loneliness among women. They highlight women's achievements and issues, inspiring attendees and promoting a positive sense of identity. The luncheons also provide valuable networking opportunities, allowing women to meet new people and build relationships, which reduces feelings of isolation. Furthermore, raising awareness of shared challenges encourages understanding and solidarity, reminding women they are not alone in their struggles. Overall, these celebrations promote connection, support, and empowerment, strengthening the community.

Enhancing Social Connection

Community-based organisations like VIEW are essential for strengthening social connections, which can significantly reduce healthcare costs related to mental health challenges and social isolation. In an article in The Sydney Morning Herald 14 September 2024, Nell Geraets quoted Christina Bryant from the University of Melbourne's School of Psychological Sciences, who stated, "Forming new friendships later in life, particularly through shared interests, has been shown to reduce rates of depression and loneliness, enhance well-being, and lower the risk of heart disease." With nearly 300 communities and 14,000 members across Australia, VIEW offers a nurturing network for women to connect, inspire, transform, and educate one another. Many VIEW members have reported that these relationships greatly enhance their health and well-being. Each year, VIEW members raise over $1.2 million for The Smith Family's education charity, volunteering more than 70,000 hours and advocating for disadvantaged children in Australia.

Connecting Women Online

The VIEW Clubs of Australia recognised the significance of digital connections following the COVID pandemic, discovering that these connections helped alleviate feelings of isolation during this challenging period. VIEW continues to promote digital engagement, with the leadership team spearheading a hybrid approach that combines face-to-face and online quarterly meetings via Microsoft Teams. We also encourage members to participate in online training sessions covering various

topics, such as portal training and electronic cashbook training for treasurers. Additionally, we have a working group focused on enhancing our website.

Conclusion

The silent epidemic of loneliness is a complex and pervasive issue with far-reaching implications. Although it may not always be visible or easily measured, its effects are deeply felt and widespread. By understanding its causes and impacts, we can develop solutions that foster connection and support. It is essential for individuals, communities, and policymakers to unite in addressing this crisis, ensuring that no one faces the challenges of loneliness alone.

By recognising the scale of this issue and implementing comprehensive strategies to combat it, we can create a more connected and supportive society. Tackling loneliness requires collective action, empathy, and a commitment to nurturing environments where meaningful relationships can flourish. Only through concerted efforts can we alleviate the silent suffering of millions and build a healthier, more interconnected world.

For over six decades, VIEW has actively addressed loneliness and social isolation through its initiatives. By promoting social connections, fostering supportive networks, and encouraging active participation, VIEW plays a crucial role in enhancing the well-being of women and the broader community. Ongoing efforts to understand and combat loneliness will contribute to healthier, more connected communities across Australia.