

**Submission
No 68**

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

Organisation: Australian Men's Shed Association

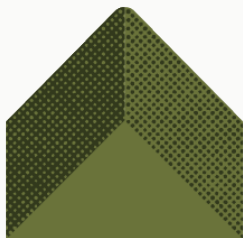
Date Received: 1 November 2024

Men's Sheds & their role in preventing loneliness in NSW communities

SUBMISSION TO THE NSW PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO LONELINESS

AUSTRALIAN MEN'S SHED ASSOCIATION | NOVEMBER 2024

The Australian Men's Shed Association is registered with ASIC as a Company Limited by Guarantee with an exemption under section 150A of the Act to replace the word 'Limited' with 'Association' in accordance with the constitution's democratic structure. AMSA is a registered deductible gift recipient charity with the ACNC and applies the ACNC Governance Standards.



**AUSTRALIAN
MEN'S SHED
ASSOCIATION**

Shoulder to Shoulder

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
About AMSA	4
NSW Men’s Sheds at a Glance.....	4
Loneliness in Older Men	5
Causes of Loneliness	5
Impacts of Loneliness	5
About Men’s Sheds	6
The Role of Men’s Sheds.....	6
Recommendations.....	7
Funding Priorities.....	8
Conclusion	8

Introduction

Australian men die in greater numbers than women from almost every non-sex-specific health problem and preventable cause. This includes three of every four suicides in Australia.

Males also experience a greater share of non-fatal burden of disease and years of healthy life lost. We also know that Australian males are have a higher incidence of social isolation and wait longer to seek help.

With their origins steeped in Australia in the mid-1990s, Men's Sheds are now a worldwide initiative operating in 12 countries aimed at the prevention of social isolation. At the heart of this movement, and located in Newcastle, is the Australian Men's Shed Association (AMSA). Established in 2007, AMSA now has a network of 1,370 Men's & Community Sheds nationally. New South Wales (NSW) boasts the largest state concentration of Men's Sheds in Australia – with a total of 394 Men's & Community Sheds operating within the state.

We know from research that men get involved in Men's Sheds at a time when they are in the process of one or more difficult transitions, in terms of work or retirement, relationships with a partner, children or family, health issues or financial status. We also know that loneliness can peak at these transitional periods.

Typically, men who join and stay engaged with their local shed are retired. Men's Sheds engage older Australian men because sheds are familiar, attractive and culturally iconic, particularly if men have spent much of their younger years working 'hands-on'.

Each Men's Shed develops its own rules and guidelines. The success of the concept lies in the adaptable nature of the Sheds, where the members decide on what activities the Shed will offer and how it is run, with assistance from AMSA.

Men's Sheds provide a 'health by stealth' process where men absorb the messages, but aren't being forced to deal with health professionals. There are an abundance of stories from people who say the Men's Shed has saved their life because they have been able to discuss health problems and other issues, but even more critically found a sense of belonging and purpose in their lives.

David Helmers
Executive Officer

ABOUT AMSA

The driving force behind the Australian Men's Shed movement – and at its heart – is the Australian Men's Shed Association (AMSA). At AMSA's conception less than 50 pioneering Men's Sheds were in operation. Since that time AMSA has nurtured the development of Men's Sheds nationally – and internationally – on the premise of reducing social isolation and improving men's health by bringing men together to facilitate positive lifestyle choices and connecting communities.

AMSA's mission is to promote, advance, and support an effective and sustainable Men's Shed movement by bringing men together enabling them to lead a positive lifestyle while strengthening communities. We provide practical support, specialised services and resources, and men's health programs and initiatives, to support Men's & Community Sheds grow as vibrant and thriving community hubs all over Australia.

Over 15 years Men's Shed use of, and participation in, AMSA services and programs has proven to enhance individual Men's Sheds and the national community by delivering a centralised hub of information, resources, networks and access to funding (Government, philanthropic, corporate and community).

NSW MEN'S SHEDS AT A GLANCE

There are currently 394 Men's Sheds in NSW (Appendix A). This represents the highest proportion of Men's Sheds (29%) in the country (1,370 Sheds in Australia).

- ▶ 98% of Men's Shed members agree their shed makes an important contribution to community.
- ▶ 69 is the average age of Men's Sheds member.
- ▶ 55% of Men's Sheds (and their members) reside in Regional Australia.



Loneliness in Older Men

Loneliness is a significant concern among men in New South Wales (NSW), particularly in older age groups. Research indicates that men are less likely to seek help for emotional issues, often leading to feelings of isolation. The Australian Loneliness Report (2020) found that men, especially those aged over 60, experience high levels of loneliness, which can have detrimental effects on both mental and physical health.

Many men have a strong social connections through their workplace and sense of purpose, once out of work either by choice or situation they are at much higher risk of social isolation and loneliness.

CAUSES OF LONELINESS

Cultural Norms: Societal expectations often discourage men from expressing vulnerability or seeking emotional support, leading to isolation.

Life Transitions: Retirement, loss of a partner, or changes in living situations can significantly increase feelings of loneliness among men.

Lack of Social Connections: Men may struggle to maintain friendships outside of work, and when they retire or leave the workforce, their social circles often shrink.

Mental Health Stigma: The stigma surrounding mental health can prevent men from acknowledging their feelings of loneliness and seeking help.

IMPACTS OF LONELINESS

Mental Health: Loneliness can lead to increased rates of depression and anxiety among men, contributing to a cycle of isolation.

Physical Health: Studies show that loneliness is associated with various health issues, including cardiovascular problems, higher stress levels, and a decreased lifespan.

Community Engagement: Loneliness can diminish men's involvement in their communities, leading to a decline in social cohesion and support networks.

Motivations for joining a Men's Shed are mostly to do with social interaction with others. Being able to give back to the community is also a core motivator which results in greater purpose and a strong sense of being useful and productive.

About Men's Sheds

Men's Sheds are community-based, non-commercial organisations that address social inclusion, participation and community capacity building. Men's Sheds have become vital community assets and, in many regions, the main or only focal point for positive male engagement and activity.

Men's Sheds are vital community investments delivering programmes and activities that foster community spirit and contribute to building a more inclusive Australia. Men's Sheds not only play important roles in the overall improvement of health and wellbeing but also positively engaging within their community for the benefit of their community.

The Men's Shed movement:

- ▶ Primarily focuses on older males, traditionally in rural, remote and regional areas but also captures younger males in metropolitan areas (although typically in lesser numbers).
- ▶ Has more far reaching influences that affect a much broader demographic of Australian society. A secondary tier of the families and spouses of participants and a third tier being the contributions made to the wider community through this significantly effective volunteer force of men seeking meaningful purpose.

THE ROLE OF MEN'S SHEDS

Men's Sheds offer a valuable community resource that addresses loneliness in several ways:

- ▶ **Social Connection:** Men's Sheds provide a welcoming environment where men can form friendships, share experiences, and support one another, thereby combating social isolation.
- ▶ **Skill Development:** Participation in practical activities helps men build confidence, learn new skills, and engage with others, fostering a sense of purpose and belonging.
- ▶ **Health and Wellbeing:** Programs that promote mental health awareness and provide peer support can significantly improve the well-being of participants.
- ▶ **Community Integration:** Men's Sheds can serve as a hub for community activities, encouraging broader community engagement and participation.

Recommendations

The NSW Men's Shed community is a well-established network but is widely underutilised in supporting older men in the prevention of social isolation. With adequate resource being made available to AMSA, through NSW Men's Sheds we can make a significant improvement to preventing loneliness and associated health effects.

Men's Sheds in their nature address social isolation and the emanating poor health outcomes associated with social isolation and loneliness. In addition, AMSA acts as a delivery channel connecting shedders with health information and activating healthy behaviours through programs and initiatives (in consultation with expert clinical partners).

AMSA's Health Promotion Framework brings together the evidence-base for improving men's wellbeing and health with shed expertise to help Australian men live longer and happier lives. We know the positive outcomes impact men, their families and their communities.

AMSA has a number of shovel-ready programs to support social inclusion and positive wellbeing across NSW Men's Sheds and their communities:

- ▶ **Shed Mates – Shoulder to shoulder for shedder wellbeing:** A men's wellbeing and health initiative developed with the support of Black Dog Ride, empowering Shed Wellbeing Teams to positively influence the wellbeing and mental health of Shed members. This program includes suicide prevention training and support.
- ▶ **Living Well:** Engaging Australian communities with practical actions for self-care and preventive mental wellbeing and health, based on evidence-based wellbeing frameworks including Implemental's Wheel of Wellbeing and Black Dog Institute's Ways to Wellbeing.
- ▶ **Shed Nights – Bevvies, BBQ & Banter:** Targeting a younger demographic, Shed Nights provides Men's Sheds with a program of monthly activities and promotional resources to attract and connect with a younger demographic of men outside of regular shed opening hours.

FUNDING PRIORITIES

Social connection and support are effective mechanisms in improving physical and mental wellbeing and also act as a means of connection to mental health support services. Due to their social nature, Men's Sheds are in a unique position in their ability to reach several priority population groups for health interventions and result in proven improvements to the health and wellbeing of participants.

Through Men's Shed community networks, AMSA's activities reach more than 50,000 Australians annually - many within priority population groups identified in the National Men's Health Strategy 2020-2030 - and deliver an effective opportunity to empower and support all men and boys to optimise their own and each other's health and wellbeing across all stages of their lives (Objective & Action Area 1, National Men's Health Strategy 2020 – 2030).

Working collaboratively and in partnership with external organisations AMSA will continue to deliver support to men and communities through a range of preventative strategies through the Australian Men's Shed movement.

Support for Men's Sheds: Increase funding and resources for Men's Sheds across NSW to enhance their capacity to reach more men in need of connection and support.

Awareness Campaigns: Launch campaigns specifically aimed at men to destigmatize loneliness and promote the benefits of joining a Men's Shed.

Collaboration with Health Services: Integrate Men's Shed programs with local health services to provide holistic support for mental health and well-being.

Research and Data Collection: Encourage research on the impact of Men's Sheds in reducing loneliness and improving mental health outcomes among men.

Conclusion

Addressing loneliness in New South Wales, particularly among older men, is crucial for fostering healthier communities. Men's Sheds play an essential role in this effort, providing a space for connection, support, and personal growth. We urge the inquiry to consider the significant impact of Men's Sheds and to support their expansion and integration into broader community health initiatives.