

**Submission
No 76**

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

Organisation: RALLY4EVER
Date Received: 1 November 2024



Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

Loneliness - HOW RALLY4EVER CAN IMPACT CHANGE

Loneliness, is a slow often hidden poison

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LONELINESS – HOW RALLY4EVER CAN IMPACT CHANGE

Loneliness has emerged as a significant public health issue in Australia, with profound implications for individual well-being and economic costs to society. The increase in social isolation, particularly post-pandemic, plus over reliance on digital platforms for connection have exacerbated feelings of loneliness among many Australians. Early intervention and preventive programs, such as RALLY4EVER are addressing this crisis.

RALLY4EVER is a complimentary community tennis program designed to foster social connection, improve mental health, and reduce loneliness. It integrates physical activity with meaningful engagement – delivering a sense of belonging.

Loneliness, a slow and often hidden poison

Addressing loneliness necessitates building communities that prioritise safety, reciprocity, belonging, and equitable care. Despite efforts from healthcare providers, pharmaceuticals, and self-help tools to alleviate stress and loneliness, societal structures often perpetuate these issues. There is a need for accessible Programs that can help at both the prevention and ongoing care stage.

Introducing RALLY4EVER

RALLY4EVER is an early intervention and preventative Program. It was founded in 2020 by former WTA tennis player and Grand Slam commentator Louise Pleming. It had its beginnings in a simple human interaction. Louise was approached by a homeless man named Brian while she was volunteering in an inner Sydney soup kitchen who recognised her and asked if she would play a game of tennis with him. Mental health issues had ended Brian's hopes of a professional tennis career, leaving him living on the streets for years, estranged from his family and friends. Louise started noticing the positive changes their weekly hit sessions had on Brian and was inspired to help more people who were struggling and feeling isolated and lonely. RALLY4EVER'S 10-week tennis program is still working with at-risk groups in Sydney's Woolloomooloo, the first RALLY4EVER location.



Watch our back story on ABC's Australia Story

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9Hp6dVgKik&list=PLDTPrMoGHssDzqE7spxT_VH3Zd266tSEp&index=1&t=26s

How the R4E Program works

The RALLY4EVER program consists of free on-court tennis coaching - games and drills followed by informal chats to help build self-esteem, camaraderie and connections. It is a specifically design Community Tennis Program which is vastly different to traditional competitive Tennis.

Up to twenty (20) participants can participate per court in a one-hour group session each week for 10 weeks. This format is ideal for creating a shared experience between participants, establishing a pattern of exercise and social interaction, creating positive change in people's lives. Programs are inclusive and open to all.

Here's a look at how the program runs:

1. Welcome and warm-up:

The session begins with a friendly introduction by our on-court coach, who welcomes everyone and ensures new participants feel included. It starts with a quick overview of the basics, how to hold a racket plus easy techniques to make everyone comfortable.

2. Building skills with a social twist:

On a single court, participants rotate between hitting and chatting, building connections while learning. Coaches feed balls, offer individual feedback; an extra coach may be added for larger groups.

3. Teamwork & mindfulness games:

Games mimic volleyball, where they work as a team, stay alert, and boost their brain activity while engaging in a fun challenge. These exercises promote team responsibility, communication and generate support among players, encouraging them to build confidence in their skills.

4. Skill progression & counting games:

Everyone hits balls to each other, tracking small improvements over time; reinforcing progress and encourages a growth mindset week after week.

5. 'Community' game - our highlight:

At the end of each session, we play a game called 'Community', to bring everyone together in a fun, collaborative challenge. Everyone is on the court and rules are very flexible to keep the rallies going. This embodies the spirit of RALLY4EVER - working together and having fun, everyone is laughing, engaged, and feeling supported.

6. Social time off the court:

After sessions, participants are encouraged to gather, chat, and relax over tea, coffee, or a cold drink. This time helps build friendships and gives everyone a chance to connect. Many programs have WhatsApp groups, allowing participants to stay in touch, organise meetups, and build connections outside the weekly sessions.

Organisation Structure

R4E exists with the generosity of the tennis community, volunteers, community organisations and our relationships and partnerships with companies and individuals.

There is a governing Board of three, Simone Bartley, Suzanne Jones and Louise Pleming. The day to day administration is carried out by volunteers and paid 'contractors and consultants'. We also have a team of Certified RALLY4EVER Coaches.

To establish locations we reach out to tennis clubs and local Councils to explain the format of programs and benefits to the clubs/local Council.

Requirements from a tennis club:

- 1 hour of court time and coach time per week.
- program runs in-school hours and at a low peak time for the club.
- program runs only during the school terms and not during school holidays.
- targeting young and middle aged adults and seniors needing a soft social and active activity.

Once engaged, we send out a welcome email containing coaching videos, program poster, press release, banners, t-shirts and racquets if required. We assist the club liaising with community organisations in their area who may want to introduce participants and list on the RALLY4EVER website plus promote on social media.

The tennis club provides the court for free and generally the coach's time is pro bono. If not, RALLY4EVER pays the coach a small stipend. The cost is \$4000 per program per year.

Our Growth

Starting with one court in Woolloomooloo in 2020, there are now over 45+ programs, providing opportunities to 20,000 participants nationwide. RALLY4EVER is the largest free community tennis program in Australia. Currently running in four (4) states, NSW, Queensland., Victoria.and South Australia each has their own coordinator.

In 2023 Strathfield Sports Club funded a RALLY4EVER coaching team to travel to western NSW to introduce and support youth and underserved communities to 12 country towns; these are now weekly programs.

Partnerships and Funding

To date we have partnered with Lifeline, Black Dog Institute, Carers NSW, Flourish, Groundswell, Inner West Council, VTA (Victorian Tennis Association), Tennis Australia Foundation (coach training), Illawarra Vinnies Vans, Baptist Care Hope Street Group, Rotary, Salvation Army and many more.

Our funding comes from a variety of sources - individual donors, corporate and association donors, special events, some grants and in-kind donations.

Ambassadors and Supporters

Key relationships have been established with the professional tennis world, e.g. Sam Stosur, Nick Kyrgios, Pat Cash, Billie-Jean King, Coco Gauff, Raphael Nadal, Roger Federer. Entertainers Seal and Michael Caton.

To continue to scale and impact

We will need to:

- progressively employ permanent RALLY4EVER staff – with operations, administration and marketing and IT skills and continue to rely on a range of volunteers.
- Expand our reach nationally.
- improve our software
- fund coaches fees and hire of courts where they are not available at no charge.

At our recent NSW Parliament Breakfast The Hon. Rose Jackson was a key speaker, she endorsed RALLY4EVER,

“When I heard about this program I knew immediately how impactful it was going to be.” Rose spoke about the need for Government to support and partner with RALLY4EVER because the social element is absolutely critical to making friendships and provided that opportunity every week to make connections.” The Hon. Rose Jackson

Testimonials

Carl

When Carl first came to RALLY4EVER he was suffering from loneliness, had no support network around him, was using drugs and suffered from childhood trauma. He now plays tennis every week and has meaningful conversations with people that can help him on his journey to improve his life, i.e. doctors, coaches and counselors, all part of our group. He states that he feels valued and respected and is thriving by being with good positive people. Carl is also working on becoming a RALLY4EVER trainer/tennis coach.

Sebastian

Arriving from Chile, he had never played tennis before and was struggling with social connections and is now a fully fledged Tennis Coach working in the industry. Sebastian also gives back as a volunteer coach for RALLY4EVER whenever he can.

Ian

Ian has been coming to RALLY4EVER for over three years and has progressively developed dementia. Attending RALLY4EVER has been the only time his wife would get a real reprieve from the constant repetitive conversations they were having, and it was the one key activity that Ian looked forward to every week. Now in his 80s, Ian states it is the highlight of his week and gives him great joy and people understand and accept his situation.

Michael

Attending RALLY4EVER for the social connections, Michael is an academic who is extremely lonely and feels isolated. He has made friendships with the people at RALLY4EVER seeing them both on the tennis court and catching up outside the program.

Shaun

Struggling with low mood swings and possible bipolar, Shaun is a very intelligent man that was having suicide ideation; RALLY4EVER has really impacted his life in a very positive way, giving him the sense of self and purpose he was missing, and the reward of caring for others. He is now one of our lead RALLY4EVER Tennis Coaches and attends programs 4-5 days a week, plus has been supportive in introducing RALLY4EVER to the western regions of NSW.

Our Mission

RALLY4EVER has a mission to create long lasting and sustainable programs throughout communities. To receive multi year funding for our programs would provide the financial security to achieve this. It would increase stability for us and the community plus allow for improved planning and resource allocation. Multi year funding would allow RALLY4EVER to maintain and build on the programs that have been set up in remote areas.

The aim is for approximately 100+ new locations over a three (3) year time frame, so additional funding is needed to set up new programs. Some locations require further assistance for court and facility upgrades. RALLY4EVER has organised 'court rescues'. Further work would necessitate a longer term commitment or more than one year.

One initiative for 2025 that is currently in the planning stage is to run RALLY4EVER programs in a numbers of Universities for the 20 year old students across Australia that are reported to have higher sociological distress and mental health challenges (Headspace & National Union of Students 2017). By improving the long term physical and mental health of the local populations there will be reductions in rates of hospitalisation, deaths, incarceration, crime, domestic violence - beneficial to everyone and especially to Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders.

The NSW Government Support needed

Proposed steps that the Government could take to support RALLY4EVER and other similar organisations in NSW to bolster their operational sustainability and impact include:

1. Establish a Comprehensive Grants Database: Develop a centralized database for State, Local and Commonwealth grants to streamline access for non-profits, allowing them to efficiently find relevant funding opportunities.
2. Awareness Campaigns: Create collaborative awareness initiatives with local Councils and organisations to promote R4E's and similar programs and events, e.g. co-branded campaigns and joint social media posts.
3. Long-Term Grants for Greater Stability: Extend grants and tenders to multi-year terms e.g., two to four years to allow ongoing, not one off activities and reduce resources needed to be continually reactive.

4. Identify Key Contacts: Offer greater transparency to key contacts in State Government agencies and preferably work in conjunction with local Councils, organisations and research institutions to enable the fostering of partnership opportunities in health, sport, and community development sectors
5. Skilled Public Servant Secondments: Offer public servants with specialized skills (e.g. IT, marketing, legal) the opportunity to work temporarily with non-profits to fulfill critical needs while providing valuable on-the-ground experience for public sector employees
- 6.. Support for Evidence-Based Decision-Making: Non-profits often struggle to fund the collection of reliable and credible data. Clear guidance and resources from the government for what research is needed, scoping, gathering, and validating evidence would enable them to present more credible, impactful results. Additionally, help with project management, review and the preparation of the evidence would support the State Government in making evidence-based decisions.
7. Addressing Common Non-Profit Challenges: Given the difficulties many face—grant management, workforce planning, donor relations, compliance, and funding allocation—targeted support programs could include training workshops, advisory services, or resources aimed at enhancing capacity in these areas.

The NSW Government's involvement in addressing these key aspects is of mutual benefit as it aligns with the Government's goals of not only reducing loneliness but increasing overall community well-being.

The Cost-Effectiveness of Group Therapy

RALLY4EVER's model incorporates many elements of group therapy, with participants sharing their experiences, providing mutual support, and engaging in collective activities, enhancing their overall mental and physical well being.

One on one therapy costs approx. \$4000 for a 10 week program for one individual.

One RALLY4EVER program costs \$4000 for 40 weeks per year, potentially helping up to 100 people in one year.

The Five Core Benefits of the RALLY4EVER Program

RALLY4EVER'S community-based approach is built around five core benefits that contribute to mental wellness:

- 1. Social Connection**
- 2. Physical Exercise**
- 3. Learning Something New**
- 4. Mindfulness**
- 5. Encouragement & Giving Back**

Building Hope and a Sense of Belonging

One of the most profound impacts of RALLY4EVER is the hope and sense of belonging it provides to participants. RALLY4EVER helps individuals build these connections and gives them something to look forward to each week, fostering a sense of purpose and belonging.

Impact research conducted by Black Dog Institute

Pilot research has been conducted by the Black Dog Institute to evaluate the effectiveness of RALLY4EVER on mental health and overall wellbeing: positive mood, empathy, and social inclusion and to explore the programs acceptability for participants.

The key message from the study to date is that Black Dog has found positive benefits to RALLY4EVER participants that have engaged with the benefits rising the longer the time the participant is engaged with the program. Higher mood has been reported after attending a RALLY4EVER session and this effect was consistent over the nine-week evaluation.

The Black Dog Institute is currently completing their research of the RALLY4EVER program.

Conclusion

RALLY4EVER represents a practical solution to address the rising epidemic of loneliness across Australia. By fostering social connection, promoting physical activity, and providing opportunities for personal growth, the program is not only improving the lives of a diverse set of individuals, but also reducing the long-term financial burden on the healthcare system. Early research results have proven that participants benefit increases the more they engage with the program. With its unique psychosocial approach, RALLY4EVER is well-positioned to complement existing mental health services, offering a practical and effective solution for a healthier, more connected Australia.

The NSW Government may support this state's desperate need for loneliness support by funding and expanding community programs like RALLY4EVER to help combat loneliness, improve mental health outcomes, and reduce the overall costs associated with mental health care on an ongoing basis.

The Team

Louise Pleming - CEO & Director
Simone Bartley - Board Chair
Suzanne Jones - Board Director

IMPACT for 2024

20,000+

Participation Opportunities

We have created more than 20,000 playing opportunities for participants for members of our community who might normally not have the confidence, financial position or mental state of mind to engage in exercise and social interaction.

100+

Charities and Organisations

RALLY4EVER has reached out and connected with many new organisations. We are committed to helping vulnerable people and breaking down barriers by delivering free community tennis programs.

1,000+

Outcomes

1000's of conversations, 1000's of tennis balls hit, 1000's of steps made to enforce the benefits of social connection and mental wellbeing to strengthen our communities.

100%

Growth

Starting with one court in Woolloomooloo, we now over 50+ programs nationally. RALLY4EVER has grown to be the largest free community tennis program to improve Australia's mental and physical wellbeing.



Sources of Research

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