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

Organisation: Blacktown Area Community Centres Inc

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Blacktown Area Community Centres (BACC) is a not-for-profit community based incorporated association serving the suburbs in the Blacktown local government area. We have been operating in the Blacktown LGA for over 12 years though previously were several smaller centres throughout the LGA that combined to become Blacktown Area Community Centres, to ensure streamlined place based continued support to the community.

BACC envisages an empowered community that is well resourced, inclusive, diverse and safe. Our vision is, to provide a holistic range of strategic, accessible and inclusive initiatives that are responsive to the needs of the community. Guided by social justice principles, BACC empowers individuals and families to actively participate in community life.

One of our teams is the Community programs team their aims are to improve the community's connectedness and capacity and provides a space for residents to meet. Community Development Officers focus on providing programs and activities that build cohesion, inclusion and well-being across all members of our community. These include (but are not limited to): Information/advice/referral, events, social support groups, Emergency support (food, personal hygiene products). Community Engagement Officers provide activities that support individuals and families and provide opportunities for personal development. These include (but are not limited to): Parenting programs, Supported playgroups, Advocacy and assisted referrals.

Loneliness and social isolation are two interrelated yet distinct concepts that significantly impact individual well-being and community health. Loneliness is defined as a subjective feeling of being alone or disconnected, regardless of actual social contact, while social isolation refers to an objective measure of the absence of social relationships or interactions. Understanding these definitions is crucial in addressing the broader context of their implications on public health.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness was already a pressing issue in Australian communities, often described as one of the most significant public health challenges of our time (Ending Loneliness Together, 2020). This problem was compounded by the pandemic, which amplified feelings of loneliness and social isolation across various demographics, particularly affecting vulnerable populations.

Our Community Programs Team (CPT) faces considerable challenges in engaging these individuals who experience both loneliness and social isolation. Limited resources and funding requirements restrict our ability to offer comprehensive support, making it difficult to reach those who need it most. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that recognises the distinct nature of loneliness and social isolation. It is essential to develop tailored strategies that consider the specific needs of these populations, even within the constraints of funding limitations.

Loneliness remains a critical public health issue that demands immediate and significant attention. To effectively support those who are lonely and isolated in our communities, we must advocate for enhanced resources and strategies aimed at bridging these gaps and fostering meaningful connections among individuals.

In the Blacktown Local Government Area (LGA), loneliness and social isolation manifest in various ways across different demographic groups. Vulnerable populations, including young people, seniors, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) individuals, often report feelings of disconnection. For instance, a recent community survey indicated that 20% of seniors felt neutral about their sense of belonging, while 23% expressed neutrality regarding their neighbourhood connections. Alarmingly, 40% of CALD individuals reported not feeling connected to their community, and 33% of ATSI residents voiced similar sentiments, highlighting a pervasive sense of isolation. These insights help us identify not only the prevalence of loneliness but also its underlying causes, such as cultural barriers, lack of transportation, and limited access to community resources.

Populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation include young people navigating transitional life stages, the elderly facing mobility or health issues, individuals living with disabilities, and those with limited finances, limited resources and with Mental health concerns. Social prescribing is limited for many community members due to costs, availability of services or activities and their own personal limitations that prevent them from being accepted or comfortable with mainstream paid services.

Research highlights the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and even physical ailments like cardiovascular disease. People with disabilities and the elderly are particularly vulnerable, as are those living in isolated regions. The lack of social connection has been linked to adverse health outcomes, emphasising the critical importance of fostering community ties. Several factors contribute to the development of chronic loneliness, including prolonged social isolation, life changes such as bereavement or relocation, and mental health challenges, disability, language barriers, mobility and financial barriers to name a few. These factors create a cycle where loneliness feeds further isolation, making intervention crucial.

Financially, loneliness poses a burden on the NSW budget and economy, with costs related to healthcare, social services, and lost productivity. Addressing loneliness can alleviate some of these financial pressures through community programs that promote social engagement and well-being.

Various initiatives that have existed to mitigate loneliness, that have been delivered by community health programs, outreach initiatives, community and neighbourhood centres and support groups aimed at fostering connections have slowly decreased with the loss of

funds. To reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness, the State Government can reintroduce funds to adequately fund community programs.

Addressing loneliness and social isolation in Blacktown LGA requires a collaborative approach that recognises the distinct needs of the vulnerable populations, promotes social connections, and advocates for systemic change at both community and state levels.

In addressing loneliness and social isolation, both government and non-government organisations can implement various initiatives aimed at fostering community connection. These programs could focus on vulnerable populations, including the elderly, people with disabilities, and culturally diverse communities. Examples include government-funded community health programs, local council initiatives promoting social engagement, and non-profit organisations offering social activities.

At our centre, we recognised a critical gap in support for highly vulnerable individuals who struggle with mobility, illness, language, financial barriers and mental health challenges, particularly as the Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) reforms were rolled out. Many of these individuals find it difficult to leave their suburbs, and there were few offerings tailored to their needs. In response, we launched the, ''Community Connections Group'', which has become a cornerstone of our efforts to reduce loneliness and foster social interaction, for those that do not fit into TEI programs.

Initially, the Community Connections Group operated as a simple coffee and chat gathering, providing a safe space for participants to connect. Over time, we evolved this initiative into a more dynamic program that includes games, guest speakers providing valuable information, group lunches, and even a cooking collaboration with Oz Harvest. This approach not only addresses social isolation but also promotes skill development and shared experiences among participants.

What sets our centre apart is our unique, place-based response to community needs. Rather than imposing programs on the community, we have actively engaged with residents to understand their specific challenges and desires. This collaborative approach ensures that our initiatives are not just top-down solutions but are genuinely reflective of the community's needs.

Overall, our focus on collaboration and community-driven initiatives has enabled us to create a supportive environment that effectively reduces loneliness and social isolation, demonstrating the importance of working with the community rather than merely for it.

We have several other groups that are available to individuals; Qigong, Yoga, Sewing and Knitting as well as the Women's shed. These groups are limited and rely heavily on

volunteers to support. This at times means that extra support of unmet needs can remain unsupported due to the limited training and understanding of the volunteer.

In the Blacktown LGA, 67% of the population experiences homophobic attitudes, highlighting a significant need for support within the LGBTQIA+ community. While BACC is not a specialised service, we actively advocate for inclusivity, exemplified by our participation in IDAHOBIT raising the progressive flag. We have recently applied for two grants aimed at addressing these needs: one focused on helping young people explore and take pride in their identities, and another designed to foster community among older LGBTQIA+ members. However, these funding opportunities are short-term and may not provide lasting solutions for ongoing support.

Addressing loneliness requires a collaborative effort from community members, organisations, and individuals. One essential step is to encourage local initiatives that promote social interaction, such as community events, support groups, and recreational activities. Building a sense of belonging can significantly reduce feelings of loneliness.

Promoting volunteering opportunities is another effective strategy. Engaging individuals in volunteer work fosters connections and combats loneliness, providing a sense of purpose and community involvement. Furthermore, involving community members in decision-making processes about local programs and services ensures that initiatives are tailored to specific needs, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility within the community.

The NSW Government's investment in Neighbourhood Centres programs is crucial for effectively addressing loneliness and social isolation in our communities. NCCs have consistently demonstrated their effectiveness as social connectors, fostering engagement and well-being through initiatives like the Community Connections Group. These programs have not only improved participants' feelings of belonging but also provided vital support to vulnerable populations.
NCCs have a strong track record of engaging residents and building community cohesion. By creating inclusive environments, NCCs empower individuals to connect, share experiences, and support one another. Anecdotal evidence and program evaluations highlight the significant impact these centres have on reducing loneliness and social isolation.

Looking to Queensland, we see a successful model for investment in NCCs. The Queensland Government recently implemented core funding for NCCs, based on recommendations from their inquiry into social isolation and loneliness. This funding has empowered centres to expand outreach and develop innovative programs that combat loneliness directly. A similar investment in NSW would enable our NCCs to enhance their services and better serve local communities.

Additional funding can facilitate partnerships with local organisations, schools, and businesses, expanding programs aimed at reducing loneliness. These collaborations can leverage community resources and enhance service delivery, creating comprehensive support networks for vulnerable populations.

Systemic barriers, such as limited access to resources and support, exacerbate loneliness in NSW. By investing in NCCs, the government can help mitigate these barriers, providing essential services that foster social connections and promote inclusivity.
It is essential for the NSW Government to recognise loneliness and social isolation as critical public health issues that require urgent attention. Funding NCCs is not just an investment in social infrastructure; it is a strategic approach to enhancing community health and resilience in the face of increasing isolation.

Neighbourhood Community Centres (NCCs) are vital to tackling loneliness and social isolation across NSW. They create inclusive spaces that foster meaningful connections among individuals from diverse backgrounds, promoting a strong sense of belonging.
To amplify our impact, it is imperative that the NSW Government invests in core funding for NCCs. This investment should include paid positions dedicated to developing and implementing targeted programs that address loneliness effectively. By supporting the Local Community Services Association's (LCSA) recommendations to position NCCs as key social infrastructure, the government can ensure that these centres are well-equipped to lead community-driven initiatives.

Just as the Queensland Government recognised the importance of core funding in their approach to social isolation, we urge NSW to follow suit. Together, we can create a vibrant, inclusive society where everyone has the support they need to thrive and feel connected. By investing in NCCs, we are investing in the heart of our communities, ensuring that no one feels alone.
This response effectively advocates for both the funding of NCCs and the creation of paid positions to specifically tackle loneliness and social isolation.

Blacktown Area Community Centres (BACC) firmly believes that Neighbourhood Community Centres (NCCs) are essential to effectively addressing the pressing issues of loneliness and social isolation in our communities. As pivotal social connectors, NCCs create inclusive spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds can come together, build meaningful relationships, and foster a sense of belonging.
The recent National Neighbourhood Centre Week, with its inspiring motto "Stronger Together," encapsulates the essence of what NCCs represent—the beating heart of local communities. At BACC, we provide essential services that not only address immediate needs but also cultivate environments promoting connection and well-being.

Any future strategy aimed at tackling loneliness and social isolation must recognise and prioritise the role of these local, welcoming, and place-based organisations. We wholeheartedly support the Local Community Services Association's (LCSA) recommendations that position NCCs as key social infrastructure. By placing NCCs at the forefront of efforts to build healthier, more connected communities, we can ensure that everyone in NSW has access to the vital connections and support they need to thrive. Together, we can create a stronger, more inclusive society where no one feels alone.

Considering this, we urge the NSW Government to invest in core funding for NCCs, enabling us to enhance our outreach and develop innovative programs that directly combat loneliness. Supporting NCCs is not merely an investment in social infrastructure; it is a strategic approach to improving community health and resilience in an increasingly isolated world. By driving these efforts, we can truly make a difference in the lives of individuals and families in our communities. Together, we can ensure that NCCs remain the answer to the challenges of loneliness and social isolation, fostering a connected and vibrant community for all.