

Supplementary
Submission
No 87a

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

Organisation: Council on the Ageing (COTA) NSW

Date Received: 27 February 2025

27th February 2025

The Hon. Dr Sarah Kaine, BEc, PhD MLC
Member of the Legislative Council
Temporary Chair of Committees
Member of the Australian Labor Party
Parliament of New South Wales

Dear Dr Kaine,

We sincerely appreciate the work you and the committee are doing as part of the Inquiry into the Prevalence, Causes, and Impacts of Loneliness in New South Wales.

COTA NSW was grateful for the opportunity to provide a submission to this important inquiry and to present evidence before the committee. It was a privilege to speak with you, and we deeply appreciate the interest and engagement shown by you and the committee in our work.

Since that time, our report, 'Voices of Solitude: Loneliness and Social Isolation Among Older Adults in NSW', has gained significant traction and provided an even stronger foundation for further discussions and policy recommendations. Based on our continued research and engagement with the community, we wish to formally submit additional recommendations for consideration by the committee.

1. Funding for government-led engagement with older adults

This report highlighted an urgent need for further research into loneliness in older adults across NSW. As such, COTA NSW is calling on the NSW Government to fund COTA NSW \$175 000 per year for two years, to undertake two critical pieces of further research. The research will involve two parts.

Part (i) A deeper understanding of loneliness in the ageing population with a focus on hard to-reach communities

While COTA NSW's research establishes that loneliness is widespread among older adults in NSW, further investigation is required to understand its underlying causes and to ensure that hard-to-reach communities are properly represented.

This research will take an ethnographic approach, incorporating focus groups and one-on-one conversations to explore the experiences, causes, and impacts of loneliness. The findings will inform targeted interventions to effectively address loneliness.

In particular, we will engage with the following communities:

- First Nations
- Carers
- LGBTIQ+ individuals
- CALD
- People with disabilities
- Remote and regional communities
- People living in social housing

Part (ii) Investigate what “ageing well” means to these communities.

The fact that 60% of people over the age of 50 in NSW are lonely, means that there is something that is missing from our approach to ageing well in NSW. This is not a statistic that is reflective of a community that is ‘ageing well’.

To meaningfully address this issue, we need a deeper understanding of what "ageing well" means to different communities, acknowledging the social, cultural, and economic factors that shape their experiences.

Using the same ethnographic approach, this research will focus on identifying what is missing from existing policies and how to develop more inclusive and effective support systems. Again, hard-to-reach communities will be a particular focus.

2. Introduction of a social connection voucher program

Part of our research examined the impacts of loneliness, revealing that loneliness touches people’s lives deeply. It is deeply shocking that our report found that 11% of lonely older adults leave their homes only once a month or less. People from the lowest income brackets are also twice as likely to experience severe loneliness when compared to the highest income brackets.

Therefore, drawing inspiration from the Dine and Discover voucher program rolled out during COVID-19, COTA NSW proposes the NSW government introduce a \$20 monthly voucher for older adults to encourage participation in social activities. This voucher would enable older adults to be able to meaningfully leave their homes, meet friends, or join local events, providing a vital incentive to combat isolation and engage with their communities.

Our findings show that factors such as losing loved ones, reduced mobility, and relocation amplify loneliness, making programs like this essential for reconnecting older adults with their communities.

3. Reintroduction of the \$250 Regional Seniors Travel Voucher

We strongly advocate for the reintroduction of the Regional Seniors Travel Card, which previously provided a \$250 prepaid card to assist seniors in regional, rural, and remote areas with travel expenses.

Affordable transport is critical in reducing isolation for older adults, particularly for those in regional areas where services and social opportunities are limited. Restoring this program would significantly improve social participation and community engagement for seniors outside metropolitan areas.

4. Expansion of community transport accessibility

Currently, access to community transport services is limited, for example individuals receiving support through a Home Care Package. Many older adults, particularly those with low incomes or mobility challenges, are unable to access community transport, significantly restricting their ability to engage socially and maintain independence.

We recommend expanding eligibility for subsidised community transport to include all pension card and seniors card holders.

Providing broader access to community transport would ensure more older adults can participate in social activities, medical appointments, and community events, directly reducing the impact of loneliness and social isolation.

We appreciate the committee's ongoing efforts in addressing loneliness and social isolation in NSW and trust that these additional recommendations will be of value to your inquiry.

Should you require any further information or wish to discuss these recommendations in greater detail, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,

Gohar Yazdabadi
Chief Executive Officer
Council on the Ageing NSW