

SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN THE ACT

BY

**ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY
CANBERRA/GOULBURN**

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St Vincent de Paul Society
CANBERRA/GOULBURN

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INTRODUCTION

The St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn (the Society) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission as part of the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in the ACT¹. As an organisation, we seek to address social injustice within our community and have tailored our program delivery around empathy and compassion.

The Society is a member based lay Catholic organisation that has been assisting people experiencing poverty and disadvantage in the region since 1895. We seek to shape a more just and compassionate society by working to address the causes of poverty and injustice, with a focus on prevention and early intervention.

As a registered charitable not for profit organisation, we operate in the Australian Capital Territory and surrounding southern and western regional areas of New South Wales. Volunteer members of the Society's conferences undertake visits to the homes of people experiencing disadvantage, including those at risk of homelessness. Members refer those at risk to our homelessness services, where specialist staff provide case management, support services, and referral to other agencies to help prevent people becoming homeless.

There are presently 520 Members, 1482 volunteers and 242 employees working to deliver person-centered assistance to those most in need in our community. We thrive in the partnership we have built with the community and welcome the opportunity to input into this inquiry.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS: DATA

State of Nations Report: Social Connection in 2023²

This report launched in June 2023, aims to understand the distribution of social health across the Australian population and examine the relationships between loneliness and social isolation and community knowledge, stigma, physical and mental health, health service utilisation, quality of life, and work productivity. The report sampled 4026 Australians aged 18 years to 92 years old.

- Almost 1 In 3 Australians feel lonely, and 1 In 6 Australians are experiencing severe loneliness.
- Men and women are equally lonely: 3 in 10 women and men are lonely.
- There are more lonely Australians living in rural areas (35%) than metropolitan areas (30%).
- People with poorly met financial needs are 2.8 x more likely to be lonely. 27% of people who reported well met financial needs are lonely compared with 51% of people who reported poorly met financial needs.
- 39% of people living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods are lonely compared with 28% of people living in the least disadvantaged neighbourhoods.
- Those living in most disadvantaged neighbourhoods (54%) were more likely to be socially isolated compared to those living in less disadvantaged neighbourhoods (41%).

These statistics from the report draw out the gender, geographic and financial dimensions which contribute to the issues of loneliness and social isolation. Individuals may have different exposure levels to the various factors which may ultimately cause them to experience some form of social isolation.

¹ Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. [Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT](#) Legislative Assembly for The Australian Capital Territory. Accessed on February 01, 2024

² Ending Loneliness Together. [State of Nation Report: Social Connection in 2023](#). Accessed February 17, 2024

ACT Wellbeing Framework³ and Living Well in ACT Report⁴

Social connection is one of the indicators in the ACT Wellbeing Framework. The “Living well in the ACT region: The changing wellbeing of Canberrans during 2020 and 2021” report by researchers from the University of Canberra provides insights that the ACT Government uses to track the wellbeing of Canberrans. The report provides statistics on social connection according to four main wellbeing domains: Levels of loneliness, Levels of volunteering, Participation in community events and activities, and Sense of Social Connection.

- **Levels of Loneliness:** In 2023, 8.8% Canberrans (1 in 10) often felt lonely, and 64.3% of Canberrans reported rarely experiencing loneliness. In terms of key population groups, people with a disability, carers, people living on their own, single parents, parents with adult children living at home, and those renting, sharing a home or living in a unit/apartment reported higher rates of loneliness. The groups with lower rates of loneliness are older people and those with no children living in the home or with young children at home, where English is not the main language at home and/or those who come from a non-English speaking country, and those who own their home (either outright or with a mortgage).
- **Sense of Social Connection:** In 2023, data available on the ACT Wellbeing Framework indicates 29.1% of Canberrans reported having high levels of social connection. In 2021, the groups reporting the lowest social connection included those who were unemployed and looking for work, renters, carers (particularly those with higher caring obligations), those living in a unit/apartment, couples with children at home, those with a mental health disability and younger residents. Among older residents, those who own their home outright, those in the LGBTIQ+ community, sole person households, share/group households, and those without a disability reported higher social connection.
- **Levels of Volunteering:** ACT Wellbeing Framework reports that engagement in volunteering in the ACT declined between 2019 and 2020, from 38% volunteering time unpaid in 2019, to 32% in 2020. However, engagement in volunteering rose slightly in 2021 to 35%, not significantly lower than the engagement in volunteering in 2019.

The ACT Wellbeing Framework further highlight the multi-dimensional perspective to loneliness and social isolation and introduces a demographic component to the discussion.

St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn: Programs and Data

As an organisation, the Society delivers a range of services that requires a seamless blend and partnership between employees and volunteers. This workforce is deployed across our services to walk with those we serve during their difficult times. As a volunteer organisation, we understand the value of volunteering and its impact on the social wellbeing of many who volunteer as well as those people we support.

As an organisation our support programs and services play a crucial role in addressing the specific needs of socially isolated people. Whether it's through home visitation, case management support and referrals or a simple social outing and friendship our programs provide tailored support to help individuals overcome the challenges of isolation.

³ Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, [ACT Wellbeing Framework](#), ACT Government. Accessed February 17, 2024.

⁴ Jacki Schirmer and Mel Mylek. [Living well in the ACT region: The changing wellbeing of Canberrans during 2020 and 2021 report](#). Regional Wellbeing Survey Website. July 2023. Accessed on February 19, 2024

Compeer Program⁵:

Compeer is a mental health program that connects an adult living with a mental illness diagnosis (Compeer participant) to an adult volunteer in the community (Compeer volunteer). The purpose of the connection is to develop and foster a one-on-one friendship as participants have often spoken about feeling isolated or labelled. Compeer promotes social inclusion and the reduction of stigma by supporting friendships that are built on mutual trust, respect and understanding. The program is based on the premise that 'friendship is a powerful medicine'. As of December 2023, the program supports 18 Companions who are currently connected with a volunteer, and we have 8 companions who are awaiting a match.

Emergency Relief (Conferences):

A core part of the Society's work is through our Conferences. Conference Members, who are volunteers, attend regular meetings which include discussion about how to improve assistance given within their local conference area. The Conference responds on a person to person basis, visiting people in their homes and providing companionship and the required assistance.

This help is directly related to the specific needs of the individual, and can include, among other things, assistance with food, rental payments, utility bills, clothing, education support, care registration or repairs, medical bills, transport, or connection to services.

With 50 Conferences made up of approximately 630 members, we cover the following areas: Canberra, Cootamundra, Lake Cargelligo, Temora, Tumut, West Wyalong, Batemans Bay, Bega, Merimbula, Moruya, Narooma, Eden, Cooma, Jindabyne, Queanbeyan, Goulburn, Gundagai, Yass, Braidwood, Boorowa, Harden and Young.

Social visits are an essential part of work the Conferences do. *A ninety three year old woman recently was so looking forward to the visit that she rang the help centre two hours before the promised time worried our Conference members were not coming.* We have learnt that, for some of those we visit we are the only regular human contact they have which is very important.

The Migrant and Refugee Program⁶

The Migrant and Refugee Program aims to connect and empower children from a migrant or refugee background so they can thrive in their new communities. By connecting volunteers with more vulnerable children, we aim to build relationships between individuals, communities, and relevant service providers. We do this through the following ways:

- Volunteers visiting schools to work 1:1 with children who need additional learning support.
- Kids Club at Gungahlin and Tuggeranong Libraries
- School holiday activities
- Reading Buddies school partnerships, where secondary students visit schools that have a highly culturally diverse population. Example Radford and Franklin Primary School.

The Society also provides support for people from a refugee or asylum seeker background in need of emergency assistance through our Caritas Christi conference. Volunteers will visit people in the homes to hear their stories and establish what they need in terms of financial and wellbeing support.

⁵ St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, [The Compeer Friendship Program](#). Accessed on February 19, 2024

⁶ St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, [The Migrant and Refugee Program](#). Accessed on February 20, 2024

St Nick's Young Carers Program⁷

The St Nicholas' Young Carers Program aims to provide a place of belonging for young people (aged 9-17 years) who have a caring role in their family, offering a place to connect with others who share relatable life experiences and engage with positive adult role models. Young carers are prone to social disconnection due to their carer responsibilities. The program offers respite activities and holiday programs, allowing young people the opportunity to build social confidence and life-long resilience, explore new experiences in a "safe-to-fail" environment and, most importantly, to have fun!

These and many other of our programs thrive on the support the community gives to the Society especially through volunteering. Our experience and observations have shown us that:

- One of the key benefits of volunteering for those experiencing social isolation is the opportunity for increased social connection and interaction and doing purposeful work. Individuals have the chance to engage with a supportive community, fostering meaningful relationships and reducing feelings of loneliness. The companionship and sense of belonging that volunteering provides can have a profound impact on one's overall wellbeing.
- Additionally, volunteering can enhance mental and emotional wellbeing. By actively volunteering, individuals can find a renewed sense of purpose and fulfillment. Engaging in meaningful activities and contributing to the community can boost self-esteem, improve mental health, and provide a sense of accomplishment.
- Furthermore, volunteering can offer individuals an avenue for personal growth and skill development. Through volunteering, individuals learn new skills, gain valuable experience, and expand their knowledge and skill set. This can not only increase self-confidence but also enhances employability leading to further opportunities.

CASE STUDY 1: THE VALUE OF COMPANIONSHIP

For the past twelve months, the St Peter Chanel's Conference in Yarralumla has been pursuing conference-initiated visits in addition to visits responding to calls made to the Emergency Relief Helpline.

These visits are made by two Conference members to individuals in our community who we have met through calls to the Helpline or through other means, and who would benefit from non-material support. Primarily these visits are with companions living on their own and are an opportunity for companions and conference members to share about their lives, hopes and challenges. Sometimes these visits can be an opportunity to discuss different approaches to a particular problem or issue or introduce them to community services (such as the library). However just as often these visits are simply an opportunity to share a cup of tea, have a chat about the news, practice speaking English or take a walk around the garden.

One companion who we visit on a monthly basis was happy to share his perspective. Mark^{8} lives alone and first reached out to us after experiencing problems post dental treatment. While initially the conference provided material support, over the past year primarily our support has been more social and conversational.*

Mark commented "I am very grateful that every few weeks someone from the conference reaches out to me to schedule time to meet. I have met over a dozen members with all different background and ages. I am very grateful to St Peter Chanel's Conference, and I look forward to meeting new members when they come along. Although my meetings with members started when I needed

⁷ St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, [St Nick's Young Carers Program](#). Accessed on February 19, 2024

⁸ Di-identified name

material support, I actually like the social and conversational support better. Somehow, I feel more relaxed and satisfied”.

These visits to Mark and others are mutually enriching for both companions and conference members. We share the work of the Society, during these visits and have learned a new way of recognizing the value and importance of interacting with people in our community as companions, and a new way of living out companionship, compassion, respect, and empathy in our work.

CASE STUDY 2: FRIENDSHIP THROUGH ADVERSITY

A young woman in her 20s was matched with an older volunteer under the Compeer Program.

Initially, the young woman was hesitant to engage with the volunteer: “What value do I bring to this friendship” she asked. The Compeer Officer engaged and worked with her through this initial period of hesitance.

After the first month trial period, in which the two connected friends met for 4 hours, they had discovered they shared more common interests despite the age difference.

“She is a great and awesome person”, she says of the volunteer. The two discussed and agreed to meet for social engagements outside of the mandated 1 hour per week.

RECOMMENDATION

The Society acknowledges loneliness and social isolation has many layers, and to address them will require a series of interconnected actions both at the micro and macro level. The recommendations below are informed by our experiences and when factored into the broad range of actions to be taken by the ACT Government, would go a long way to addressing the issues.

Recommendation 1: Incentivising Volunteering: Data suggests formal volunteering through organisations has declined over the last decade with informal volunteering remaining steady.⁹ This means, individuals committing time to organisations have declined. As a short-to-medium time measure, the Society recommends the Government establish a mechanism where the number of hours an individual or cooperate organisation donates via volunteering could be accounted to them for a benefit. A tax incentive through a tax credit scheme could be explored and developed, to encourage more individual and cooperate level formal volunteering. This could be fully fleshed out in a Volunteering Strategy for the ACT.

Recommendation 2: More Funding for Demographic Specific Programming: Data suggest that certain cohorts of our population are more likely to experience social disconnect. As the demography may vary across several localities, it is imperative to consider the demographic peculiarities in the development and framing of interventions to promote social connection. With more funding, programs like Compeer, the St Nick's Young Carers, Migrant and Refugee Programs can be scaled-up and replicated to cater for people across the ACT, particularly young people.

⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) [Volunteers](#), AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 16 February 2024.

Recommendation 3: Improved Access to Public Transport: Our experience in running our programs indicate that easy access to affordable transportation has a significant impact on an individual seeking social connection. It is imperative to remove any perceived obstacle that may impede access to current solutions that address social isolation and loneliness. Proximity to service centres also play a crucial role. The ACT Government should expand the list of beneficiaries for a Travel Concession Card to include individuals who are dealing with social isolation and loneliness. Improvement in the public transport system to make it more efficient for this cohort is also recommended.

Recommendation 4: Centralised Referral System or Helpline: Our emergency helpline often receives calls from individuals who reach out not for support but a conversation. Our team is able to refer them to services that are professionally equipped to engage with them. For proper follow up and follow through measures, the Society recommends establishing a central referral system for people experiencing social isolation and dealing with loneliness. This could be designed as a standalone referral system or attached to an existing helpline.

Recommendation 5: Investment in community safe spaces: The complexity of living with isolation and loneliness means that it is often extremely difficult to manage alone. We recommend these people need to have case management support in order to change their circumstances. Lessons and learning from St Vincent de Paul Society NSW through their Ozanam Learning Centre¹⁰ suggests that, having a community safe space with focus on personal development, creativity, health, and wellbeing, living skills and social participation goes a long way in organically building social connection among different people. The Society recommends more investment in the development of such community hubs and support services that will appeal to those members of our community struggling with loneliness and social isolation.

¹⁰ St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, [Ozanam Learning Centre](#). Accessed on February 19, 2024

ABOUT THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY CANBERRA / GOULBURN

The Society implements many programs that deliver services to a cross section of the vulnerable population within the ACT, some of which are outlined below.

Street to Home Program supports people who are 'sleeping rough' and/or experiencing long term chronic homelessness through case management and assertive outreach. The program provided case management to 75 rough sleepers and outreach to 184 more in the last year.

Families and Youth Program provides outreach support services to families and young people in the ACT currently at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness to enable them to access and maintain safe, secure, independent, and affordable housing. The program supported 112 families throughout the year.

Samaritan House is a 13-bed facility in Canberra that provides crisis accommodation and support for men experiencing homelessness, working to break the cycle of chronic and acute homelessness. The service supported 79 men throughout the year.

Blue Door Program is a drop-in centre located in the middle of Ainslie Village in Canberra. It provides support to those living in the village and beyond in the form of meals, emergency relief material aid, information, referral, and support. The service had about 1,500 drop-ins per month and provided some 34,000 free meals throughout the year.

Night Patrol operates across Canberra and Queanbeyan on every night of the year from its 2 vans and with the support of 300 volunteers. It provides food, material items such as jackets, sleeping bags and hygiene items, and most importantly, an opportunity to engage socially with companions who are experiencing homelessness and/or social isolation. It served 7,992 companions throughout the year and provided 5,212 material items.

Community Inclusion Program, which operates out of the Oaks Estate and is designed to offer support for people living with psycho-social disabilities who are ineligible for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) funding. It is funded by an Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Grant from the Australian Federal Government. It exists to build innovative ways to increase the independence, social and community participation of people with a psychosocial disability who are ineligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme. It provides advocacy, support, information, referral case management and the development of activities in response to identified needs. The program supported 276 companions throughout the year.

Justice Housing Program provides accommodation options for individuals who otherwise would remain in detention due to a lack of suitable community-based accommodation. The program also provides accommodation support services to women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved with the criminal justice system, with a focus on trauma informed, gender-informed and culturally safe practices. Funded by the ACT Government, the program is a core element of its Building Communities Not Prisons initiative, which seeks to address the lack of available and affordable housing for people released from custody.

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