

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

Organisation: San Remo Neighbourhood Centre Inc.

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A safe place for social, cultural, physical, financial and mental health supports

Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation

Submission prepared by

San Remo Neighbourhood Centre Inc.

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Who are we?

The San Remo Neighbourhood Centre Incorporated has been in operation since 1986. We are located on the northern end of the Central Coast. We provide welfare and developmental programs with families, young people and children that address peoples, social, physical, emotional, cultural and financial needs. We have a dedicated and committed team of 47 volunteers with diverse skills and interests. More on this later.

History in brief

In the early 90's government funded Community Centres or Neighbourhood Centres to provide 'social activities'; to bring people together around a common goal or activity and provide generalist information and referral for people who needed other supports. Some of the activities included arts and crafts, indoor bowls and playgroups. It was low key, populations were smaller, demographics were not as complex and people were not facing the issues they are facing today. Over the past 3 and more decades, we have seen one small increase in funding with the Neighbourhood Centre's receiving on average, \$122,000 per year to operate. This is equivalent to 1.3 full-time staff. Please read on.

The role of Neighbourhood Centres has changed under reforms in the past 5 years, from being whole of community to the early intervention child protection space; with the aim to decrease the number of children and young people entering into the child protection system. Recent evaluations released by DCJ's independent evaluator showed that the data we collected for the last 5 years was not robust enough for DCJ to make an informed decision about increasing our current levels of funding. This could primarily be due to the fact that the data collection portal (DEX) was not designed for Neighbourhood Centres to collect any quantitative data on children.

What has changed?

Prior to the reforms in 2019, we under took community development projects that addressed a range of issues including social isolation and loneliness which I will speak to below.

However, as an early intervention service, other driving economic and social forces that are characteristic of today's landscape, need to be taken into account for example; a poor economy;

cost of living, high interest rates, inflation, stagnant wages, loss of employment, disasters natural and man-made, pandemic, housing and global wars and terrorism.

What are we facing?

To this end, the impacts and fall out of these driving forces is real and in my 50 years of experience, it is unprecedented.

Every single day we face woman and children escaping domestic and family violence, woman and men and families who are homeless and living out of cars, families who have nothing to feed their children and the list goes on from debt, to crime to addictions, breakdown of families and extended families, mental and physical health issues, suicidality and a general sense of hopelessness and being alone. Now sadly, the working poor are accessing supports.

What is intrinsically evident with each person is the sense of loneliness; who do I tell, what can I do, I can't tell my family, my friends, they feel shame, they are embarrassed and scared.

In our last financial year, our centre responded to 33,526 requests for assistance. Was one of those people your neighbour, someone you knew, someone you thought was okay? You may never know.

Critical impasse

We have reached a critical impasse with Neighbourhood Centres forced under a child protection model however, community development is where we need to be focussed. Community development activities create change at a community level by engaging with people authentically around a common goal and supporting the strengths and skills of participants. Community development is the framework for building social connections, creating a sense of belonging and builds community capacity to enable people to be responsive, resilient and self-reliant.

For example, if the goal is to reduce social isolation and loneliness you might set up a community garden however, it is important to note that although people may feel a sense of belonging by being part of something and no longer isolated, the skills required by the community development worker to help to facilitate stronger and meaningful relationships and therefore break down loneliness, is critical in the process. Whoever said, "we can be in a room full of people but be the loneliest person in the room", was right. This takes time, effort, resources, understanding, conflict resolution skills and a desire to want to make a difference in the lives of others. We have undertaken this work for more than 20 years but sadly, we simply don't have the human resources, the funding nor the contractual arrangements to do this work justice. Due to the reforms what has also occurred, is an enormous amount of administration, governance, accountability and data input, that ties people to desks and not to people.

Our achievements to reduce isolation and loneliness

I will now give some very clear brief examples of community work and provide some narrative and anecdotes of and how this framework addresses loneliness.

Firstly, we changed the way we worked from offering low keyed activities to community driven. We had a vision to 'create spaces and places where people are valued and have the opportunity to succeed'. We focussed on the need to build a stronger community where people felt safe and connected to others in their community socially, culturally, physically, financially and mentally. It is well researched and the evidence is clear, that if people are connected they have better health and wealth life outcomes.

What we had in our community

- Vandalism
- Robberies
- 2 murders
- Rubbish tip
- Graffiti on every second building, fence and shops
- A disused extreme sports park
- A 30-year old dilapidated playground

- Drugs in the parks
- Fires
- Bad reputation
- Fear
- Social Isolation and isolation

What we did

- Engaged with the broader community
- Identified needs, interests and skills
- Built and re-shaped relationships
- Built community connections and formed partnerships
- Increased participation in community life
- Strengthened community capacity and resilience
- Created a sense of belonging
- Created a culture of shared responsibility
- Empowered community to solve problems

How we did it

- Started small
- Made it achievable
- Met in local park
- Had a BBQ
- Chatted a lot
- And the ideas flowed

Projects and outcomes

We developed many projects that aimed to reduce fear and crime in order to restore a safer and more connected community.

The following list is what our organisation has achieved through engaging with community, project management, grant funding and strong partnerships.

We build community both inside and outside through the construction of major building infrastructure projects and programs that bring people together to provide safer places and the opportunity to build relationships and to build trust and supports that reduce loneliness.

Infrastructure projects

- Developed and implemented graffiti management initiatives in 15 suburbs
- Painted more than 2 murals
- Held 30 tree planting days
- 100's of clean up days were held
- The youngest participant in clean up days was 5 with the oldest 92
- Built the first community garden on the Central Coast
- Built a Men's Shed
- Built a Youth Facility
- Built an Aboriginal Garden based on Reconciliation
- Built 5 Playgrounds
- Worked with Council to design and build a new community centre
- Worked with Council and turned the disused sports park into a state level BMX park and skating facility
- Revamped and activated the local shops with murals, painting, tree planting
- Opened up an Op-Shop called Opportunity Knocks
- Lobbied for headspace funding in our area and now have a full service operating

- Coordinated a drug and alcohol free youth music festival called GOATS (Going Off At The Swamp) with 3 stages and more than 10,000 people attending of all ages. We ran this for 21 years and then, COVID killed it off

Narratives

The Men's Shed is a good example of how having a safe place addresses loneliness in older men. The Men's Shed improves the health and well-being of men and in our shed, woman and young people as well. They provide a space where they can come together, share skills, give back to community and build relationships. They work with the broader community with charities and schools and take on their roles with enthusiasm and a sense of social responsibility. They look after each other and are there every day to support each other.

Here are some of the comments:

"The shed saved my life, I don't know where I would be without it" -

"The shed gives me a reason to get up in the morning" -

"I've got no one and nothing without the shed" -

Through tears, "I was abused when I was in an orphanage as a kid and I have never talked about it before" -

Another great example is the Op-Shop

We set up the Op-Shop to revitalise the local shops because the businesses had all moved out and we had 2 shops open from 9. We now have all 9 shops open now with a vibrant shopping precinct and community who all work together and support each other.

The Op-Shop runs itself with volunteers and here are some of their comments:

"I love the shop and I get to talk to people all day"-

"Some people are lonely, and just come in for a chat and stay for hours"-

"I am happy to drive an hour to the shop because I have made new friends and the shop has been the best thing for me" –

Some of the diverse activities and programs we offer that connects people to place and to each other to support people through life's challenges include

Programs

- Opportunities to volunteer
- Work Development Orders
- Community Service Orders
- Parenting groups
- Playgroups
- Family violence courses
- Suicide prevention programs
- Youth services
- Counselling
- Gambling Counselling
- Financial Counselling
- Legal Aid
- Many events
- Aboriginal celebrations
- Cultural activities
- Employment programs
- OOSH Services
- Food services support
- Utility services support
- Pharmacy and petrol supports
- Housing supports

- Alcoholics Anonymous
- Narcotics Anonymous
- Healthy lunchboxes
- DV bags
- Homeless bags
- Showers
- Washing facilities
- Tax Help
- JP Services
- Social Workers
- Centrelink Support
- Governance opportunities
- Student and work experience opportunities

I could write all day and tell many stories but will finish with comments from Community Service workers. They have been sent by the courts to undertake a Community Service Order' as a penalty for any transgression. What they find at the Centre is purpose.

"You will never understand what this place has meant to me, I am happier than I have ever been in my entire life" – (clean and now a volunteer)

"I have found my groove and know what I can do. I didn't know I could cook and seeing others and helping them has made me a better person and I am very grateful – (is now working and clean)

"When I came here I was so angry and aggressive, you've taught me heaps" – (completed her Community Services Diploma and now works in disabilities.

In addition, we recognise and understand the importance of working with other organisations and services both government and non-government to develop and facilitate programs and activities that support people's overall social, physical, cultural, financial, and mental health and well-being, especially for senior's, people who are disadvantaged, people with a disability, young people and people who are socially isolated. Therefore, some of our partners are, Central Coast Local Health District; Central Coast Council, Office of Sport, headspace, Bara Barang Aboriginal services, Carer's NSW, Corrections NSW, Wesley Mission, 5 Primary and Public Schools and NDIS providers. We have had enormous success with 100's of programs and to this end, the spaces and places we have built are sustainable and autonomous for decades to come and the experiences is what they will remember.

I would like to reiterate that all the community building work was done before 2019, before the DCJ reforms, before the new contracts placed Neighbourhood Centres in the Child Protection space. The programs are running though.

What can government do?

The most important step the NSW Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community, is to provide a universal core funding model to Neighbourhood and Community Centres in NSW.

As stated, we are currently funded under a Targeted Early Intervention model within the Child Protection framework with the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ). However, I believe there is very little understanding within this department of the benefits of social connections and building stronger, safer communities which in turn, support families and therefore reduces the number of children entering into Out of Home Care. Furthermore, I welcome the Parliamentary Inquiry because I believe that social isolation and loneliness exacerbates problems and breaks down the fabric of our communities. Therefore, we need the 'glue' to stick it back again.

As loneliness and social isolation increases due to the pandemic, disasters, a stagnant economy, the cost of living crisis and the ever rising use of technology, there are more people living in isolation, in fear and buried in their own thoughts, especially young people and older people.

To this end, despite the enormous impact we have in reducing social isolation, we currently receive no core funding from the NSW Government. I believe we are the last state in Australia that this is the case and so we are reliant on volunteers to work with the most vulnerable members of our community.

This is simply not good enough and as a Social Scientist, our work is as important as any other social infrastructure service such as schools, libraries, hospitals and even cemeteries. It Queensland, in response to recommendations from the 2021 Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness, and in recognition of the central role Neighbourhood Centre's play in reducing social isolation and loneliness, funding was granted. And with foresight and a willingness to change, NSW can do the same.

The peak body for NSW the Local Community Services Association (LCSA), outlines its core funding model below, based on 2.5FTE minimum staff required for a safe working model. Our centre, as a LCSA member fully supports and endorses this model.

Core funding element	Cost per LCSA member organisation p.a.	Cost for 175 LCSA members p.a.
EO (SCHADS 8.1, 32h/wk)	\$120,901	\$21,157,719
Community Development Worker (SCHADS 5.1)	\$111,984	\$19,597,177
Admin worker (SCHADS 3.1, 15h/wk)	\$33,503	\$5,863,016
Operational contribution	\$50,000	\$8,750,000
Total	\$316,388	\$55,367,912

Conclusion

Neighbourhood Centres are the core of community; they are the first place people go when they are in need or in crisis. As a place-based, locally-led organisation, we have made an enormous impact to reduce the impacts of loneliness at the individual and community level and we need to continue this great work for the benefit of all people.

The funding model proposed, allows us the flexibility and longevity required to continue to keep the doors open and respond to community needs. Without this funding the future of Neighbourhood Centres and the idea of strong and resilient communities where people are connected and not socially isolated, is critically at risk. This funding as a last ditch effort to bring back our community life is crucial.

I will finish with some words from who came here as a Tax Help volunteer and who is now continuing to volunteer and training as an Accountant.

With a quivering voice, "after not working for 5 years due to debilitating health problems, I never thought I would find a place that accepted me. I now feel like I belong and have purpose in my life and that is because of the people at the Centre and their wisdom".

END