

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

**Organisation:** The Centre for Volunteering

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

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## Introduction

On August 14, 2024, the NSW Government established an Inquiry into the prevalence and effects of loneliness in NSW. The terms of reference outline eleven areas that are explored by the report. We will be focusing on those most relevant to our remit as the peak body for volunteering, specifically:

- g) the identification of existing initiatives by government and non-government organisations to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation
- i) steps that the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community
- j) steps that the community, technology/social media companies, organisations, and individuals can take to reduce impact of loneliness on individuals and the community.

We will structure our feedback around these three areas after outlining the context and support for the positive impact that volunteering has on loneliness and social isolation.

## Background for Volunteering and Loneliness

There have been several recent initiatives that explore the impact that volunteering has on loneliness, with sector-led responses occurring at the State and Federal level alongside academic research into the benefits and impacts in this area.

Volunteering Queensland made a submission in 2021 to the Queensland Government's inquiry into social isolation and loneliness, noting that volunteering has a "positive and enduring impact [on] social isolation and loneliness"<sup>1</sup>. This submission notes extensively the impact of volunteering programs and other formal volunteering initiatives as well as the potential benefits of informal volunteering, especially in light of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the ability of volunteers to engage in formal programs<sup>2</sup>. More recently, the NSW Volunteering Strategy notes that volunteering contributes to a reduction in social isolation (especially with older volunteers) and that sport in particular is an area in which volunteering can combat loneliness<sup>3</sup>. The ways in which volunteering can reduce social isolation are also mentioned by The Hon. Jodie Harrison MP, Minister with responsibility for Volunteering, in her foreword to the strategy.<sup>4</sup>

The Federal Government has also recognised the contributions that volunteering can make toward alleviating loneliness. The Ending Loneliness Together organisation within the Measuring What Matters framework mentions drawing on "skilled volunteers" in achieving its aims. Similarly, the National Strategy for Volunteering, which has been endorsed by the Federal Government, also observes that

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<sup>1</sup> *Submission to the Social Isolation and Loneliness Inquiry*, Volunteering Queensland, <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/resources/submission-to-social-isolation-and-loneliness-inquiry/>, p. i.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *NSW Volunteering Strategy 2020-2030*, NSW Government, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/community-services/volunteering/resources-for-volunteering-nsw/nsw-volunteering-strategy-2020-2030>, pp. 7, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

volunteering has positive impacts on loneliness, which was especially notable during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Academic literature also supports the idea that volunteering has positive impacts on loneliness. Williams et al. found that social motives to volunteer are associated with a tendency to have lower levels of loneliness, and posit that this is based on the impact of building social relationships via volunteering activities.<sup>6</sup> While other studies posit several reasons why volunteering has a positive impact, from self-directed experiences as a means of escape from personal trouble to a general positive effect inherent to the activity, they are agreed that volunteering does have positive impacts on loneliness.<sup>7</sup>

## Existing initiatives by Government and non-Government organisations

The Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program was developed to reduce and remove barriers to volunteering and work for people living with a disability or on a mental health recovery journey. Volunteers are matched to volunteering roles that help build the skills, experience, and confidence needed to work towards employment goals. While this program does not specifically address loneliness, several sources confirm that people with a disability experience loneliness and social isolation at higher rates than people who do not have a disability<sup>8</sup>.

The impacts of this program are reflected in the case studies documenting the success of the Inclusive Volunteering Program (IVP). For example, Steve (name changed) was a participant in the program who has non-verbal Cerebral Palsy who accessed the IVP through his NDIS provider. Steve was placed in a volunteer photographer role in a local school on the NSW Central Coast. Steve's participation in the program led to a marked increase in his confidence and self-esteem and connected him more with his local community, as was observed by staff during fortnightly check-in sessions. Steve's self-esteem and confidence improved so significantly that after three months he reported being able to continue managing his volunteering on his own without support.

## Steps that the State Government can take

### *Maintain Current Support and Value for Volunteering and Recognition of Volunteers*

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<sup>5</sup> National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033, Volunteering Australia. <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf>, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Tara Williams, Ali Lakhani, and Evelien Spelten. 2024. Exploring the relationship between loneliness and volunteering amongst Australian adults: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health* 24(269). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-17807-4>.

<sup>7</sup> Stukas et al. 2016. Motivations to volunteer and their association with volunteers' well-being. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. 45(1), pp. 112-32; Yeung et al. 2017. Volunteering and health benefits in general adults: cumulative effects and forms. *BMC Public Health*. 18(1).

<sup>8</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). 2024. *People with disability in Australia*, viewed 24 October 2024, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia>; Emerson, E., Fortune, N., Llewellyn, G., & Stancliffe, R. 2021. Loneliness, social support, social isolation and wellbeing among working age adults with and without disability: Cross-sectional study. *Disability and health journal*, 14(1), 100965. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2020.100965>; Bishop, G.M. et al. 2024 Disability-related inequalities in the prevalence of loneliness across the lifespan: trends from Australia, 2003 to 2020. *BMC Public Health* 24( 621). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-17936-w>.

We commend the support that the NSW Government, and particularly the Department of Communities and Justice, have shown towards Volunteering sector through the NSW Volunteering Strategy and NSW Volunteering Charter, its support of the NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards, and the work of The Centre for Volunteering.

### *Take steps to expedite access to volunteering*

A common barrier to volunteering and participation is red tape, such as the different requirements for police checks and working with children/vulnerable people checks.<sup>9</sup> This bureaucracy particularly impacts populations that are already somewhat isolated, such as older persons and rural and regional communities.<sup>10</sup> We recommend that these processes are streamlined, kept consistent across jurisdictions, and made as easy as possible for volunteers so that isolated populations are able to find community and support through volunteering.

### *Promote volunteering as a means for social engagement and community building*

The Government should continue to promote volunteering as a means to alleviate loneliness and social isolation. This would be especially useful with populations such as youth volunteers, as our research has noted a need to reimagine the way that young people view volunteering, to shift the perception away from volunteering being seen as working for free, to recognising its benefits.<sup>11</sup> This will ensure that the strong participation rates of people aged 15-25 continue, while also reminding other groups of the benefits of volunteering.

## Steps that the community can take

### *Share the value and benefits of volunteering at a community level*

The community can promote the impact that volunteers have in bringing together different groups of people and in building strong, resilient communities.

### *Recognise and remove barriers to volunteering at a community level*

Our recent focus groups revealed that there are some barriers to participation that occur at a local community level which inhibit volunteering. For example, our research into sports volunteering uncovered issues such as abuse of volunteers from community members (such as sledging volunteer referees at football matches), while our research into the volunteering experience of women identified issues of accessibility and safety.<sup>12</sup> Communities can address these barriers by promoting solutions to better facilitate connection and social cohesion through volunteering.

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<sup>9</sup> Muller et al. 2023. *NSW State of Volunteering Report 2023*. The Centre for Volunteering. <https://www.volunteering.com.au/2023-state-of-volunteering-report/>

<sup>10</sup> Muller, P. and Muller, L. 2024. *Rural and Regional Volunteering*. The Centre for Volunteering. <https://volunteering.freshdesk.com/helpdesk/attachments/51180793085>; Muller P. and Muller L. 2024. *Older Persons and Volunteering*. The Centre for Volunteering. <https://volunteering.freshdesk.com/helpdesk/attachments/51180032978>

<sup>11</sup> Muller, P. and Muller, L. 2024. *Volunteering and Youth*. The Centre for Volunteering. <https://volunteering.freshdesk.com/helpdesk/attachments/51180032980>

<sup>12</sup> Muller, P. and Muller L. 2024. *Volunteering in Sport*. The Centre for Volunteering. <https://volunteering.freshdesk.com/helpdesk/attachments/51180032977>. Muller P. and Muller L. 2024. *Women in Volunteering*. The Centre for Volunteering. <https://volunteering.freshdesk.com/helpdesk/attachments/51180032979>

## Conclusion

Volunteering is a valuable means of addressing loneliness and social isolation in NSW.

## Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of the Centre for Volunteering.

Chief Executive Officer

## About the Centre for Volunteering

The Centre for Volunteering (The Centre) is the peak body for volunteering in NSW, supporting and connecting people and organisations to enrich the community. We are a not-for-profit organisation with over 50 years' experience providing leadership on volunteering in NSW. This involves playing a key role in advocacy, support services and sector development.

## The Centre for Volunteering Contacts

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