

# ***Keeping It Social***

## **The Importance of Social Connections in Community Aged Care**

**A report by the NSW Community Care Issues Forum**

**Project completed by**

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## **Introduction**

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This report was compiled by the NSW Community Care Issues Forum to highlight the importance of social interactions and connections made by older people using services under the Commonwealth Home and Community Care (HACC) Program. The Commonwealth HACC Program focuses on providing basic in-home and community-based support to frail older people to enable them to remain living at home and to prevent admission to long term residential care. This project focused on three HACC service types that provide social activities and contact to consumers, and the contribution of those social activities to the aims of the HACC Program.

### **Commonwealth HACC Program Target Population and Eligibility<sup>1</sup>**

The Commonwealth HACC Program is directed towards assisting:

- frail older people with functional limitations as a result of moderate, severe and profound disabilities; and
- the unpaid carers of these frail older people.

A person in the Commonwealth HACC Program target population is eligible to be assessed and prioritised for services.

To be eligible for Commonwealth HACC services an older person must:

- live in the community;
- have difficulty performing activities of daily living without help due to functional limitations; and
- be at risk of admission to long term residential care without assistance from Commonwealth HACC services.

Eligibility is not based solely on age, but on the level of difficulty in carrying out activities of daily living without help or supervision. Activities of daily living include personal care; dressing; preparing meals; house cleaning and maintenance; and using public transport.

### **About the NSW Community Care Issues Forum**

The NSW Community Care Issues Forum brings together a range of non-government stakeholder representatives for in-home and community based supports for older people, people with disability and their carers in NSW. Members include regional HACC Development Officers, other statewide policy and development officers, statewide consumer peaks, non-government industry bodies, and the statewide peak for local government. The Community Care Issues Forum meets six times per year to consider program-wide policy, planning, access issues and developments. The Forum has been active for over 20 years. Until November 2013 the NSW Community Care Issues Forum was known as the NSW HACC Issues Forum.

This project was conceived in response to sector concerns about recent reviews of the Commonwealth HACC Program and apparent plans for the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP), which is set to replace it after 30 June 2015. There is a growing perception that the importance of specialist social support – as opposed to the social support effects of other service

types – is not well understood, and therefore not a priority in planning by government for the future aged care system.

The aged care reforms under the *Living Longer, Living Better* plan, announced in April 2012, shift the focus of aged care to supporting people to live at home for longer. However, this can be limiting as it does not necessarily take into account the need for social participation and relationships, or risk factors for social isolation associated with increased frailty. As Council on the Ageing Victoria argues:

*The ideal of supporting older people to live at home 'for as long as possible' is often framed in terms of meeting people's needs for physical care. A fuller understanding would recognize that older people want to continue to participate in social and community life, and that social connections are important for wellbeing. Community care support needs to be designed and resourced to reflect this understanding.<sup>2</sup>*

This report aims to increase understanding of the outcomes from social opportunities in three HACC service types: social support, centre-based day care and community transport.

### **Definitions<sup>3</sup>**

**Social support** - which aims at meeting the person's need for social contact and/or accompaniment to participate in community life by providing a companion (paid worker or volunteer). This includes: banking; shopping and bill paying; friendly visiting services; letter writing for the person; telephone based monitoring services.

Social support is usually provided one-on-one, but may also be provided to more than one person, for instance where social support is provided to a frail aged couple, or to support a group of Aboriginal people attending a funeral.

**Centre-based day care** - refers to attendance/participation in structured group activities designed to develop, maintain or support the capacity for independent living and social interaction which are conducted in, or from, a centre-based setting.

[Any social support provided to the client in a group based environment at or from a fixed-based facility away from their residence is recorded as centre-based day care.]

**Community transport** - refers to assistance with transportation either directly (eg a ride in a vehicle provided or driven by an agency worker or volunteer) or indirectly (eg taxi vouchers or subsidies).

The Community Care Issues Forum believes the outcomes produced by these service types are vital elements of an aged care system that supports independence, safety and the wellness of individuals, and that they are fundamental building blocks in the wellness approach described in the National Aged Care Alliance's *Home Support Program Design Paper*.<sup>4</sup> Instrumentally, such low intensity, low cost supports clearly assist in reducing recurrent hospital admissions and delaying the need for additional and more intensive support for many clients. However, social support services are not just crucial to frail older people logistically, they are also vital for their emotional well-being and maintaining a quality of life in older age.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, older people themselves called for a greater focus on funding for supports that promote mental wellbeing as well as physical health in the Conversations of Ageing hosted across Australia in 2011 and 2012 by Council on the Ageing (COTA):

*Links were drawn between keeping mentally stimulated and connected and mental health issues in later life. Men's Sheds were cited as examples of a service that provides both physical and mental stimulation with a subsequent positive impact on mental health. The issue of funding for such services was also identified.<sup>6</sup>*

Likewise, social support was a recurrent theme in the consultation series that Alzheimer's Australia conducted for the Australian Government on proposed aged care reforms. Social stimulation is requested time and again to benefit both carers and the people with dementia receiving care.<sup>7</sup>

This report seeks to give strength to those calls by providing the untold story of HACC social support, centre based day care and community transport through case studies and the heartfelt words of real people. The various social support services outlined in this report exemplify both physical and mental health benefits provided, as well as the socio-emotional wellbeing experienced by the frail and isolated older people they assist.

## Methodology

The evidence gathered for this report was sourced from members of the NSW Community Care Issues Forum (formerly the HACC Issues Forum) and their networks, which are mainly made up of HACC service providers. The data collected takes the form of client testimonials, feedback, surveys and service evaluations. This documented evidence in one way demonstrates the practice-based knowledge in the HACC sector about the benefits of social activities for HACC consumers.

There is considerable evidence and research about the effect of social isolation and social activity on the health and wellbeing of frail older people. There is not, however, a comparable evidence base for the role that Australian community services perform in overcoming social isolation, or the other benefits of social activities provided through the HACC Program. This report aims to address the gap in the documented evidence about social activities in HACC services.

The evidence collected is varied, drawn from industry reports, service evaluations, and includes testimonials and survey responses from HACC consumers. Evidence was also collected through participant observation at a Community Based Day Centre and through semi-structured interviews with service providers and clients. The sources have been categorised as follows:

Type of Source	Number
Service provider information	19
Client testimonials	16
Consumer survey results	13
Peer-reviewed academic journal articles	10
Academic reports	9
Industry reports	7
Volunteer observations	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>

This report showcases a broad sample of evidence about the contribution of HACC services towards overcoming social isolation. It outlines what is known by workers in the HACC sector, and can indicate what remains un-documented or unverified about the social benefits that HACC services provide.

## **Background**

The purpose of this report is to highlight the link between social interaction provided by HACC services and health and wellbeing outcomes for frail older people.

For frail older people with physical illness and mobility issues there is a risk of decline in physical and social activity. With a reduction of activity can come the feeling of loss of independence and involvement which may increase the likelihood of developing depression in older age.<sup>8</sup> Older people face risks of becoming socially isolated, experiencing loneliness and in turn a deterioration of mental health.<sup>9</sup>

Social isolation is a major factor contributing to poor health and well-being in older people.<sup>10</sup> The intrinsic link between physical and psychological health has been well-documented by scholars and health practitioners alike.<sup>11</sup> “Mind and body are inextricably linked. Without one, we are vulnerable to the ill health of the other”.<sup>12</sup>

Not only does social isolation diminish health through behavioural factors, such as greater risk of physical inactivity and smoking, it can also be directly linked with physical health issues such as high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.<sup>13</sup> This has a significant impact on health services.

A longitudinal study of older people in Australia has shown that people with social networks and relationships have a better survival rate than those who do not.<sup>14</sup> A similar study in the United States found that older people with adequate social relationships had a 50 per cent greater chance of survival.<sup>15</sup>

Social connectedness improves the health of older people and social contacts are highly valued by older Australians.<sup>16</sup> The World Health Organisation has found that a lack of adequate social support services can decrease health and well-being and lead to increased illness and higher mortality rates.<sup>17</sup> To combat the risk of social isolation, adequate facilities and opportunities must be provided for older people in order to maintain social connections and interaction.

There is evidence that, by decreasing the risk of social isolation, HACC services help to prevent increases in frailty, which is associated with social isolation.<sup>18</sup> The prevention of illness through adequate provision of social support may also reduce reliance on health services.

Older people also play a vital role in community care as volunteers, and their needs must be supported. Indeed, all of the social support services outlined in this report rely on volunteers to function. The statewide survey of 1850 HACC volunteers in 2009 for the NSW HACC Workforce

Project found that generally HACC service volunteers tend to be older, with 46% of respondents aged over 65 years.<sup>19</sup>

The positive impact volunteering has on older people's well-being has also been documented as they are able to maintain independence and contribute to society.<sup>20</sup> Research on ageing in Australia has shown the health benefits older people may receive from volunteering.<sup>21</sup>

## Social Support

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### Benefits to Health and Wellbeing

The outcomes for consumers of aged care services can be broadly categorised into two parts: instrumental and socio-emotional.<sup>22</sup> In the case of a client who receives assistance to visit her bank, for instance, the instrumental aspect might be withdrawing money to pay bills and the socio-emotional aspect is that the client is simultaneously provided with an opportunity for social contact with local community members and the volunteer who assists. Completing the instrumental tasks, or activities of daily living, addresses the basic needs of HACC consumers, while socialising and maintaining community contact contributes to a quality of life.

In New South Wales, social support and centre based day care services have been at the forefront of the Enabling Approach, which seeks to support frail older people in a way that optimises the person's functional capacity and encourages independence through individual goal-setting and "doing with, rather than doing for".<sup>23</sup> This approach is also known as 'wellness':

*Wellness is a philosophy that focuses on whole of system support to maximise clients' independence and autonomy. It is based on the premise that even with frailty, chronic illness or disability, people generally have the desire and capacity to make gains in their physical, social and emotional wellbeing and to live autonomously and independently. It emphasises prevention, optimising physical function and active participation. It focuses on finding the service solutions to best support each individual's aspirations to maintain and strengthen their capacity to continue with their activities of daily living, social and community connections.<sup>24</sup>*

Social support services are essential for some frail older people who need help to complete basic daily tasks, even those who have family and friends to support them:

*"Without the social support service, service users can very quickly feel that they are a burden to their family if family time is taken up with doing chores".<sup>25</sup>*

One example of a crucial service offered under HACC Social Support is the shopping service. The need to shop for health and dietary needs is obvious, but often there are also social benefits which may be unforeseen. A survey of one shopping service found 78% of service users liked socialising with other shoppers.<sup>26</sup> This service is also vital in enabling frail older people to remain at home, as the same survey found:

*"Most clients have no other way of doing the shopping due to being unable to carry heavy shopping bags and also difficulty with public transport. Some answered saying they wouldn't be able to stay at home if they didn't have this service/ couldn't be without it."<sup>27</sup>*



### **Spotlight: The importance of Social Support Services<sup>28</sup>**

**Client perspective:** *“The services and information provided have had a significant impact on our ability to survive comfortably in our own home.... I challenge any public servant or anyone else to spend some time (a day or two) to talk to and experience what we live with on a daily basis and see how we manage all these issues in our own home environment and hopefully understand how important it is for us to continue with current and expanded services in the future, for which we will be eternally grateful.”*

**Employee perspective:** *“This community need is definitely increasing, and our observations are that if the Social/Respite Service Funding were to diminish, it would put at immediate risk, individuals in the community, whom have no family/alternative support to stay safe - living at home.”*

Social Support services also provide essential home visiting and phone calls to people who are isolated and, in many cases, housebound due to frailty or illness. Frail older people living at home alone are at significant risk of social isolation, demonstrating how beneficial social support services are.<sup>29</sup> The benefits of reducing social isolation for frail older people generally are well-documented, as well as the improvements to recipients’ well-being, life satisfaction and ability to maintain independence.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, research for this project affirmed the benefits of social support services for the health and well-being of frail older people. As one client states:

*“Social support is very important to me since moving 6 yrs ago - not knowing anyone they are my lifeline to my age group. I thank them all”.<sup>31</sup>*

And a worker:

*“What is clear is how much each person values the friendships and community connections they have made... their new social connections encourage them to keep well and active, both in mind and body”.<sup>32</sup>*

### **Life Without Social Support Services**

The sector fears the loss of these supports. As people are living longer, the number of frail older people living in their own homes is growing. Statistics also show that the more frail older people are, the higher their need for support to perform activities of daily living and to reduce harmful social isolation. Indeed, one study has found, “almost 1 in 10 elderly Australians have contact with other people less than twice a week”.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, many frail older people are facing barriers to accessing such support as their needs increase; “sixty-six percent of people aged 65–74 years were actively involved in a social or support group compared with 43% of people aged 85 and over”.<sup>34</sup>

The client and service provider feedback collected for this report has been unanimous that social support services play a crucial role in supporting the health and well-being of frail older people, and contributing to a quality of life in older age. Clients have asserted that without social support services they would be negatively impacted in a number of ways; many even commented that they would not be able to remain living at home. As one service employee observes, *“if social support services were to diminish, the impact on older people would be devastating”*.<sup>35</sup>

When asked what would happen to them without social support services, service users' responses included:

- *"The day would be long and lonely time"*
- *"Devastated, I need the respite"*
- *"I would miss the caring people who make my life much more enjoyable."*
- *"I would become anxious and lonely "*
- *"I am sure like any services you offer they would be sadly missed. Keep up your wonderful work".<sup>36</sup>*
- *"It would become impossible to live at home".<sup>37</sup>*

Clearly, the instrumental support and socio-emotional benefits that social support services provide help frail older people live at home longer. The social contact these services provide must be maintained if the wellness approach is to be effective.

### **Cultural specialists**

During the past thirty years, many HACC services have developed specialist knowledge and skills in responding to the needs of people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. These may include language barriers that make awareness of, or access to, services difficult, lack of familiarity with service systems and spiritual, cultural or religious requirements.<sup>38</sup> Specifically targeted centre based day care has proven integral for many frail older people to experience a sense of community, and to maintain connections with people with whom they identify and share things in common.

For instance, the HACC services operated by St George Migrant Resource Centre provide social support to frail older people in the South East Sydney area. When surveyed, 82% of respondents felt the service helped them connect with others; 77% said this service helped reduce feelings of social isolation. Consultation participants from Maltese, Spanish, Indian and Thai backgrounds expressed the desire for social connection and interaction through different activities, and the need for social outings and activities to be subsidised, as pensions are not sufficient to participate in all of the activities respondents desired.<sup>39</sup>

### **Spotlight: Australian Chinese Community Association of NSW Chinese New Year Celebration**

**The Service:** Two part-time social support workers were employed to provide services to both Cantonese and Mandarin-speaking older clients living in Eastern Sydney, where 51.3 per cent of older clients were living alone and many of them did not participate in the wider community very often.

**What happened:** Clients were invited to participate in the Chinese New Year Celebration Luncheon. There was lots of food, singing, dancing and plenty of laughter. Furthermore clients with mobility issues were invited to the Healthy City Living Expo at Redfern Town Hall. Community Transport was arranged. Many participants knew each other and were excitedly greeting each other when they arrived. The day included performances from dancers, exercise demonstrations, guest speakers' presentation, interactive info stalls, healthy living messages, healthy lunch and freebies.

The Expo was an opportunity to enrich local people's sense of community, disseminate community information and encourage a sense of belonging, as well as a forum to promote community participation, increase service capacity and to work collaboratively to address community needs.

### **Reaching out to men**

Another challenge to social support services has been the lower rate of men accessing HACC services compared to women<sup>40</sup>. Research has identified significant barriers for older men accessing support services which the individualised HACC Social Support model can combat<sup>41</sup>:

- Not wanting to participate in organised activities;
- Like to 'hang out' or socialise informally;
- Feminised environment;
- Prefer different activities;
- Transport and decrease mobility;
- Accessing information;
- Caring Role.

Retired men also tend to have smaller social networks, as much of their socialising when they are employed is with work colleagues. The loss of independence associated with ageing can be particularly difficult for men to cope with, as their identity is shaped through their pride of being independent; without adequate social engagement, frail older men are at a higher risk of social isolation and institutionalisation.<sup>42</sup>

### **Spotlight: Illawarra In Home Support: 'Blokes Talk' Program**

**The Service:** 'Blokes Talk' is open to men of all ages (within the Commonwealth HACC Program and NSW Community Care Support Program target group), it is predominately run by male volunteers with activities directed by the participants.

#### **Benefits of Social Support and group activities in Blokes Talk:**

- Improved health and independence
- Restore self-confidence, self-esteem and social identity
- Decreased hospitalisation and medical consultations
- Promotes re-engagement in wider community
- Cost effectiveness for quality of life outcomes.

**Client Case Study:** *Bill was on a disability pension and lived alone in a caravan in severe domestic squalor. Bill rarely left the van as he is unable to walk very far. Bill needed assistance to make his place safe for himself and others. In developing a trusting relationship, the service was able to find out what would make a difference to his life. A care plan was developed, which is when the service realized that Bill really liked company but was lonely; because of his dirty appearance, many people avoided him. Over the next year Bill cut back on his drinking and went from full strength to light beer. He refrained from smoking while the workers were there. He was having a shower and changed his clothes regularly. He loved attending the Blokes Talk men's group; when he was admitted to palliative care, he insisted on attending the next fortnightly group. When the social worker from the hospital rang to get some background on Bill from the HACC service, she commented that Bill said he considered the people at the group and the centre his family.*

Another men's group participant from the Murray Shire stated that:

*"Spending 3 or 4 hours with other men in similar situations than me is uplifting and significant to my wellbeing."<sup>43</sup>*

This man is also a carer for his wife who has multiple health conditions, and commented that the group functions as important respite for him.

### **In summary**

Social support services contribute not only to maintaining the health and wellbeing of frail older people who use these services, but to a quality of life in older age. Social support prevents anxiety, loneliness and social isolation, as well as supporting good nutrition. Without social support, frail older people relying on these services would be at significant risk of being unable to remain living in their homes. Specialist social support services have been developed to target particular population groups with specific needs, including specific cultural and linguistic communities and men, to address the specific risks of social isolation for these groups.

## **Centre Based Day Care**

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Centre Based Day Care (CBDC) is a HACC service type that takes place in a centre-based setting, run by centre staff and volunteers who conduct a range of group activities for frail older people designed to develop, maintain and support social interaction and independent living.<sup>44</sup>

The term Centre Based Day Care is not ideal, as it has negative connotations for service users and providers.<sup>45</sup> 'Day Care' insinuates dependence, rather than active participation and seems to position frail older people as a burden rather than as valuable community members. A number of CBDC providers who provided information for this project indicated that they used other terms to describe their service to consumers, including 'social clubs', 'men's group' and various types of 'activity centres'.

CBDC supports frail older people to live at home for longer as they support them socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually through a range of educational and recreational programs.<sup>46</sup> CBDC reduces the risk of social isolation through opportunities for frail older people to have social interaction with their peers, connect to their local community and get out of the house to participate in social activities, as well as maintain their health and wellbeing. Specific funding is also made available in NSW for culturally specific centre based day care programs tailored to meet specific language, cultural and support needs, and Dementia-specific groups.

Many CBDCs engage in health promotion through practical information about staying safe and well at home, presented by allied health professionals, and through gentle exercise. Studies in the USA and Canada have also shown CBDC to be preventative of depression.<sup>47</sup>

Greenwood Cottage in Sydney's southern suburbs<sup>48</sup> also provides opportunities to participate in social outings, exercise classes, entertainment from local performers and intergenerational engagement with younger people through visits from primary school pupils.

### Spotlight: The Benevolent Society's Greenwood Cottage, Bexley<sup>49</sup>



Greenwood Cottage in Bexley has 5 volunteers daily and 3 paid staff members who run various activities for older people with mild dementia. The Greenwood Cottage co-ordinator prefers to refer to this CBDC as a 'social club' as she finds it helps encourage older people to engage in the service.

There are around 15 clients per day who are provided with a hot lunch and different activities. The daily programs vary and target different people to suit their needs; some days there is a mixed group, others there is a predominantly women's or men's group and there are also a couple of non-English speaking clients. These clients are aided by the efforts of 2 bilingual volunteers who speak English and Cantonese.

**Activities and services include:** Museum visits, day trips, tai chi, falls prevention classes, craft-making, 'brain teasers', visits from performers, dancing, bingo, knitting, special events for Christmas and other celebrations, safety in the home awareness talks and visits from a school group.

#### **Consumer perspectives:**

M – lives at home alone, started going to Greenwood Cottage 3 months ago, very glad she became involved in the centre, enjoys 'having a laugh' with other clients, participates in lots of activities, favourite thing about Greenwood Cottage is 'the company'.

V – 90 year old client has been attending Greenwood Cottage for 9 years, loves dancing, going to museums and getting out of the house.

**Employee Perspective:** *"Most clients rely on family or friends and if they don't have them they are completely isolated. CBDC helps them live at home longer. If you have the social aspect, everything else at home falls into place."*

The joy of group members is apparent during the day when centres operate, such as where an Italian speaking consumer with dementia exclaimed “Mi ricordo quello!” (“I remember that!”) when presented with items that triggered childhood memories. The worker at the service commented:

*“It was a joy to see someone so usually depressed by her dementia become so animated and alive and connected with what was going on! I was moved almost to tears.”<sup>50</sup>*

CBDC can also contribute to the health and wellbeing of carers, providing them with much needed respite.<sup>51</sup> Carers of persons with dementia in the Albury, Corowa and Hume Shire regions shared their experiences:

*“It gives me some ‘me’ time, I can relax and get on with my day without worrying”*

*“We do not see old friends anymore, he cannot be bothered, became a recluse, but he really enjoys the coffee group and it gives me a chance to get out as well.”<sup>52</sup>*

Marist College Kogarah ran an event that gave Hospitality students the opportunity to volunteer to cook client’s meals. The co-ordinator of the event described it as:

*“Developing connections between older and younger members of the community can have tremendous benefits for both the young and old... The morning tea was a great success and enjoyed by the students as much as their elderly guests.”<sup>53</sup>*

Evidence collected for this report suggests that the most important thing to frail older people about CBDC is social connectedness. A client satisfaction survey by ‘The Cottage’ in Sutherland showed 100% of those who provided feedback liked attending The Cottage “mainly for social reasons”.<sup>54</sup> In a study conducted by another CBDC in Sutherland comments from clients about why they enjoy the service included:

*“Good to get out of the house. I see other people who have difficulties like mine”*

*“Like meeting others, talking with the girls”*

*“Good company, activities, relaxing”<sup>55</sup>*

Observations from a volunteer who runs dance therapy in Northern Sydney notes the social benefits clients receive from this activity, “it was virtually unanimous that they enjoyed being together, being with other people”.<sup>56</sup> A client also commented that one of the activities provided made her feel “alive again”.

The social benefits of CBDC are overwhelmingly positive. Just like any age group, frail older people need social engagement to feel an overall sense of well-being. “What people want is a social life” (Project Manager, Uniting Care Ageing NSW and ACT).<sup>57</sup> CBDC are one of the most vital ways of addressing the challenge of social isolation in frail older people providing a convivial atmosphere and qualified staff who assist clients to retain their independence.

Through participant observation and data analysis on the social outcomes of CBDC it appears that for many of the clients, CBDC is the only source of social contact. A Neighbour Aid social support worker said:

*“Some of our clients have no family at all. They have a solicitor to be contacted if anything happens to them. These are the ones that rely mostly on our service and we are sometimes the only service they see [sic]”.*<sup>58</sup>

CBDC manifests itself as a place to meet with other members of the local community that provides opportunities to participate in social and wellbeing activities.

For many CBDC clients, the activities provided may be their only opportunity to get out of the house and into the community as feedback from service providers shows:

*“Clients often say it has been a long time since they went on a trip to somewhere even a small trip is a great boost to their morale and they love the sights and the company”.*<sup>59</sup>

*“A few years ago we had some funds left over so we organised for 30 clients to go to the Mary Poppins musical in Sydney. A coach was organised and It was a huge day and also very cold, but the clients loved it as many of them had not been to the city for a long time and were amazed at the changes that had taken place”.*<sup>60</sup>

## **In summary**

Centre Based Day Care services contribute to the health and wellbeing of frail older consumers in a variety of ways. By providing a friendly and convivial atmosphere for peers in their age group, CBDC services fill an important gap in opportunities for older people to socialise. They also provide opportunities for health promotion and nutrition, by providing meals in a social setting and through arranging guest speakers and exercise. Social support services have a respite effect for carers of older people. For many CBDC clients, activities at the centre are the only opportunity they have to socialise with others.

This highlights the importance of ensuring that group activities can continue under an aged care system which is more focused towards consumer direction and individualised funding.



## **Community Transport**

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HACC funded community transport is provided to frail older people to access medical care, essential services such as shopping or banking, keeping connected with their families and community and honouring work or social commitments.<sup>61</sup> Many frail older people are unable to utilise public or private transport services for various reasons including health conditions, frailty, inability to continue driving, and lack of available and appropriate public transport. Community transport is an essential service in their everyday lives for accessing the community and essential services.

Currently in NSW, Community Transport is predominantly funded through the HACC Program in order to maintain social inclusion for frail older people. However, many reports indicate that non-emergency medical appointments are consuming the bulk of Community Transport resources, as Community Transport providers lack resources specifically for health and medical transport,<sup>62</sup> leaving frail older people few opportunities to use community transport for social and personal reasons.<sup>63</sup>

This project focused on transport because it is a critical barrier to social engagement for older people, and is often the main factor leading to social isolation. Community transport providers recognise this, and often focus on social activities as part of their service, in partnership with other socially-focused HACC services such as centre-based day care and social support as well as integrated as part of the transport service.

Whilst not all community transport providers aim to organise social events, many achieve social outcomes through the connections they provide.

Community transport connects consumers with shopping services to buy food and other essential household items. Yet this service is not only logistical; it simultaneously provides consumers with opportunities to meet up with friends or meet new people.

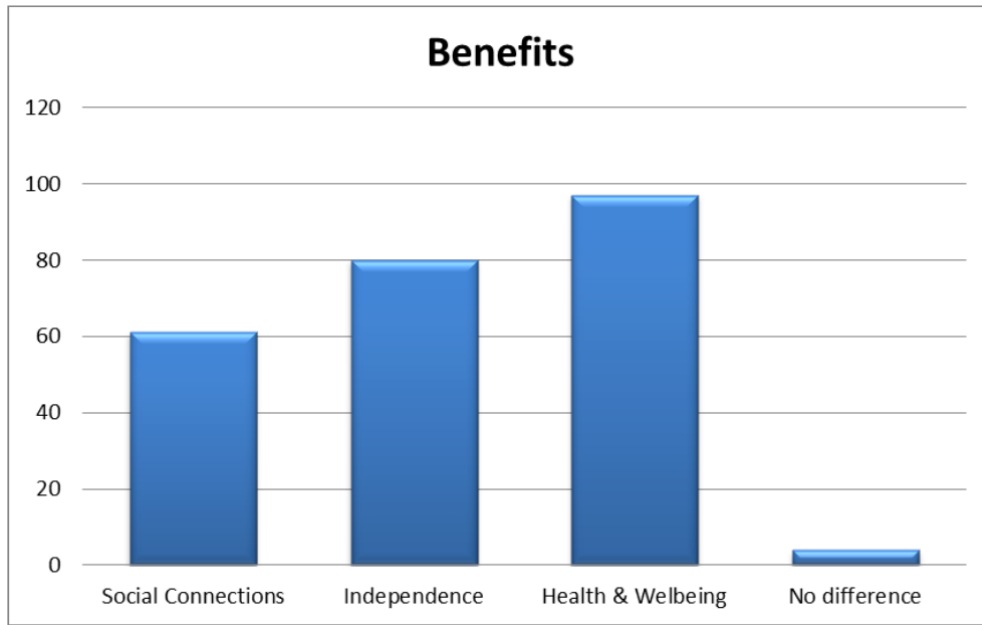
Results supporting this were conducted through a survey on the shopping service run by Newtown Neighbourhood Centre on whether social needs were being met:

- 45% have made new friends on the bus;
- 36% of clients said they had bumped into friends/family who do not use the bus; and
- 23% met up with others after doing their shopping to have a coffee.<sup>64</sup>

In a project conducted by NCOSS the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre Community Transport bus was found to have a significant impact on social inclusion for frail older people as well as supporting their independence by connecting clients to general services and activities e.g. at the local pool.<sup>65</sup>

Respondents to the Northern Rivers Community Transport (NRCT) survey provided feedback on the benefits of the service which include enhanced independence, health and wellbeing and assistance in maintaining social connections with one respondent saying,

“I consider you my lifeline, thank you very much” and another stating that without NRCT “it would be hard for me to stay in my home.”



NRCT Survey Results: benefits of community transport

When asked how they would access services without community transport respondents said they would have to rely on family to drive them; this diminished the independence of frail older people and can have a negative impact on their sense of self and overall wellbeing.<sup>66</sup>

For some frail older people, community transport may be the only link to the greater community. This is especially so for those who live in rural areas. Some places may be 100kms from the nearest shops or hospitals and connecting frail older people to regional centres is crucial.<sup>67</sup>

### **Embedding social activity in transport**

Many community transport providers recognise the importance of social engagement for frail older people and focus on social activities as part of the transport service.

South East Sydney Community Transport (SESCT) organises monthly ‘catch-ups’ for their clients in order to build a sense of community and foster social inclusion. This includes conversation tables conducted in English, Cantonese, Mandarin and Russian. SESCT organises culturally specific social outings such as a monthly Russian dinner party. SESCT actively seeks to bridge the gaps that public transport does not cover by seeking feedback from consumers.<sup>68</sup>

### **Spotlight: Community Transport Port Stephens (CTPS)**

**Services:** Regular timetabled bus trips connecting regional areas surrounding Port Stephens with town centres including Newcastle. Trips include medical appointments, shopping services, outings and day trips.

CTPS not only provides transport to social activities but also organises social events. These include trips out to lunch, to the beach or overnight excursions e.g. to the Blue Mountains. 'Mystery Tours' are also organised by CTPS, arranging motels, sightseeing, activities and meals in various locations for two to three night stays.

CTPS also works in conjunction with other social support services to organise special events including a masquerade ball for Seniors Week, partnering with other local services and a special Christmas event, 'Bingo With Bells On'.<sup>69</sup>



CTPS Day Trip Participants

Blacktown Community Transport (BCT) offers a range of social support services including regular shopping services, different outings including shorter trips for those who may find a whole day too long. BCT has also started an initiative called 'Friends Bus' after recognising that many frail older people are not able to socialise with their friends who live in different areas. BCT clients can get together a group of friends, suggest a place to meet or have lunch and the bus will transport all of them, enabling them to maintain connections with important friend and peer groups.

### **Community Transport through Centre Based Day Care**

Centre-based day care services utilise community transport to enable frail older people to access the centres. The provision of transport varies between different CBDC services, some provide their own bus while others partner with external community transport providers.

The Benevolent Society's Greenwood Cottage has its own self-funded bus that picks up clients from their door, takes them to the Centre and then drops them home again, as well as organising day trips that enable clients to keep socially active.<sup>70</sup>

Interviews conducted with staff and participants of Greenwood Cottage revealed the importance of the community transport component:

*"Without the bus, it would be impossible to run the centre" – Staff member*

*“If I wasn’t picked up from home I would have to catch two public buses to be here and it’s just too hard” –client in her 90s<sup>71</sup>*

Sutherland Shire Community Transport offers a range of services including medical and social transport, out of hours transport, shopping buses, social outings and a pick-up and drop-off service to CBDCs in the area<sup>72</sup>. Frail older people who have used this service issued positive feedback:

*“It’s a wonderful service and I enjoy the company. I’m on the bus to go to Engadine Caring Centre every Monday and I enjoy the activities and outing and the volunteers who give up their day to come to help out at the centre. It’s very important for me to have the bus service as I can now do the things I want to do” – Marie*

*“It’s a pleasure and makes me happy to get out of the house, to go on social outings and to go to the Caring Centre. Knowing there is community transport available allows me to do the things I want to do” - Jessie<sup>73</sup>*

Without Community Transport frail older people may be at risk of missing out on the benefits of attending CBDC activities and the sense of community they provide.

### **Multiple Service Outlets**

One of the features of the HACC Program has been collaboration among services to deliver innovative models of support, often for frail older people with specific needs. As frail older people experience multiple barriers to maintaining social activities, transport, centre based day care, meals on wheels and social support providers have collaborated to jointly provide a variety of services and maximise the value of social activity.

In some areas a single HACC provider delivers multiple HACC service types – these are known as Multiple Service Outlets (MSOs). This is often the case in regional and remote areas, but a number also operate in metropolitan NSW. MSOs use the opportunity for synergy to address multiple factors leading to social isolation.

Hills Community Care, which operates a centre-based day care service as well as a community transport service among others, has specific funding for social support as part of its transport service. The most popular component of the Hills Community Care community transport is the social outings it provides.<sup>74</sup>

An MSO in Murray Shire also provides social activities and transport. Consumer comments on the service include:

*“The interaction between us all helps to alleviate the isolation and loneliness experienced by these men.” –Men’s Group participant*

*“This wonderful service has helped me to do important things (no confidence on my own)”*

*“Has given me a new outlook on life.”*

Many consumers also commented that, being in a regional area and isolated, they would be deeply lonely without the service.<sup>75</sup>

### **In summary**

Community transport provides transport to frail older people for a variety of purposes. This report highlights the importance of transport for the social and emotional wellbeing of HACC consumers. Community transport services provide a vital connection to the community and other services. Often, simply accessing the community is the most important way of preventing social isolation for some consumers. In other circumstances, it is important for the transport service to also offer other opportunities for social interaction, through organised outings and events. Community transport services often partner with other HACC services to ensure that transport barriers to social participation can be overcome for frail older people. It is essential that these aspects of community transport services are maintained into the future.

## **Conclusion**

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This report highlights the value of social connections in community aged care, particularly the connections provided and developed under the varied and many aspects of the Social Support, CBDC and Community Transport service types under the Commonwealth HACC Program. People are inherently social, and having relationships is an important part of human wellbeing. As people age, their social connections tend to be altered by death or loss of one or more significant persons, reduced mobility, physical frailty, ill health or relocation. Supporting people to retain existing networks or create new networks with assistance is critical to the health and wellbeing of frail older people, as demonstrated in this report.

This report also highlights how enabling a person to connect with peers and other members of their local community both young and old contributes to social capital in communities. Increased understanding and social acceptance result from frail older people being able to access and participate in the broader community.

For many older people, a break from the caring role, a break from being alone at home, or the possibility of new friends and new adventures prompt acceptance of support services. Such outcomes link to the Wellness and Enabling Approach, which aims to optimise the person's functional capacity and independence to remain at home and connected with community as they deem relevant to them. The evidence in this report demonstrates how the social aspect of any activity adds to improved health and general wellbeing for frail older people and their carers.

It is essential that the specialised social aspects of services in the Commonwealth HACC Program are maintained and enhanced under the Commonwealth Home Support Program, which will replace HACC from 1 July 2015. These services have built up a body of expertise in supporting frail older people to maintain and develop social connections. This collective knowledge is an important resource to inform aged care reforms that will truly address the challenges of an ageing population.

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