

SELECT COMMITTEE ON COVID-19

An Inquiry Into The Government's Response To COVID-19

May 2020



Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby

About the NSW Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby

The GLRL has a proud history. We are the peak organisation representing the rights of gay and lesbian people. We advocate on behalf of the gay and lesbian community and their families, as well as joining advocacy efforts of our partners and allies across the LGBTIQ community. We work closely with bisexual, transgender and intersex organisations, and all Members of Parliament to advance the rights of our communities in NSW. The GLRL has been in continuous existence since 1988, but the origins of our organisation date back to the 1970s and the efforts to decriminalise homosexual acts and to provide phone counselling support to community members impacted by bigotry.

The GLRL has established strong ties to the community, consulting with our members and hearing their stories, many of them describing incidents of violence, discrimination and hatred. In the past 31 years, our community-based organisation has been composed of volunteers with lived experience of this bigotry. We draw on our history of bearing witness to those stories in making this submission.

A full list of our advocacy efforts is published on our website and in our annual reports.

In line with our submission, any questions are welcome and can be directed to convenors@glrl.org.au

Stay proud,

Co-Convenors,

NSW Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby,

Audrey Marsh



Jack Whitney



Executive Summary

The New South Wales Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (NSWGLRL) welcomes the opportunity to comment as part of the Inquiry into the Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We note the broad terms of reference of the Inquiry and appreciate the opportunity to highlight the unique experiences of LGBTIQ people in facing this unprecedented health crisis.

NSWGLRL surveyed our membership to determine how Covid-19 had impacted them and a summary of these findings are presented in the subsequent section of this submission. Through our consultation with membership and our body of existing research and advocacy, NSWGLRL have determined that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted LGBTIQ people particularly by amplifying existing issues facing our community.

NSWGLRL would particularly like to bring to the attention of the Inquiry:

- **There is an urgent need for the Australian Census to gather data on LGBTIQ people:** It is difficult to determine how particular public policy, health or economic challenges impact LGBTIQ people when there is no reliable data on the demographic composition of our community.
- **The interaction of COVID-19 social support policies and the existing immigration regime must be reviewed:** Many asylum seekers are not adequately supported by financial assistance provided in response to COVID-19, this includes LGBTIQ asylum seekers who hold grave concerns about their safety in their country of birth.
- **The program which allows early access to super must be ended and replaced with an expanded social security program:** We hold serious concerns about the reduction of super balances for LGBTIQ people who face existing employment challenges which disrupt their ability to accrue super.
- **LGBTIQ people face unique domestic and family violence issues and specialised services are required:** Domestic violence perpetration has reportedly spiked during this period and young LGBTIQ people have spent increased time in potentially unsafe family homes.
- **Many members of our community are fearful of police interaction as a result of violence inflicted upon LGBTIQ people:** Increases in police powers, such as those which occurred during COVID-19, must be matched with increased support for LGBTIQ people.
- **LGBTIQ people face unique mental health challenges and funding for specialised services is required:** A survey of our members revealed a significant majority are facing mental health challenges during this period.
- **Surgeries and therapies which are critical to many trans and gender diverse peoples wellbeing have been delayed:** This community requires support to manage their healthcare during this complex time for public health.

These issues are expanded upon in the subsequent sections of this submission.

Results of GLRL Survey

NSWGLRL undertook a survey of the community and our membership to determine how COVID-19 had impacted their wellbeing. This survey engaged not only gay and lesbian people, but also bisexual, transgender, gender diverse and queer respondents. Respondents were spread across age brackets, with 43% between 18-34, 28% being 35-54 and 26% aged 55 or older.

The results clearly demonstrated that LGBTIQ people surveyed had experienced **significant mental health impacts** as a result of the implications of the COVID-19 crisis:

- 65% of respondents described their mental health as 'less than good' or 'poor' after social distancing and isolation restrictions had commenced.
- Only 8% of respondents described their mental health as 'excellent' or 'very good' during COVID-19, compared to 40% prior to COVID-19.
- 25% of respondents had accessed mental health support and counselling services during the period, specifically because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Only 36% of respondents believed mental health support services were adequately resourced or prepared to manage the pandemic.

The results also showed that LGBTIQ survey respondents faced **economic challenges**. 14% of respondents lost employment during the COVID-19 crisis with the majority of job losses experienced by our members employed in financial services, community services, travel and tourism, fitness and communications.

The survey demonstrated that COVID-19 social restrictions **impacted social networks**. 61% of respondents reported that during COVID-19 their personal relationships had been impacted 'extremely often', 'very often' or 'somewhat often'.

Comments from respondents highlighted a range of additional issues which had been faced by the LGBTIQ community:

- **LGBTIQ asylum seekers are unable to access financial support:** "I am not eligible to vote; but I want to be able to access income support and medicare in situations like this. I also want LGBTIQ organisations to recognise the existence of LGBTIQ asylum seekers."
- **LGBTIQ people may feel unsafe in home environments:** "I'm unable to speak about LGBT topics at home and have to act differently on calls with friends".
- **Impacts on healthcare provision can disrupt critical gender-affirming surgeries:** "I have had major two transgender-related surgeries scheduled which have now been postponed indefinitely and may end up being cancelled."
- **Members of the LGBTIQ community were also recently impacted by bushfire:** "What is forgotten, is that some of us have also been affected by the bushfires. We currently live in an AirBNB while we are getting our home repaired. The fires hit us on 15/12/19. Since then we have had storms and floods. COVID has been another challenge."

Another key issue raised in the detailed comments in the NSWGLRL survey was **community concern about the rapid increase in police powers**. The continued

fractured relationship between the LGBTIQ community and police results in justified concern from our community about how they may be treated if the likelihood of police interaction increases. Comments from respondents about this issue included:

- “[There should be] no implementing expansive police powers that history tells us will be abused to oppress and harass minorities”.
- “[There must be] oversight of the use of police powers. Current numbers indicate that minority groups and low socio-economic groups are more likely to receive fines, despite this not correlating with virus 'hot spots'.”.
- “I don't want police to have the power to make on the spot decisions about fines etc. We do not want to live in a police state.”

Economic Issues

As noted, 14% of LGBTIQ people surveyed by GLRL had lost employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. These job losses for respondents included employment in financial services, community services, travel and tourism, fitness and communications. Additional detail about the economic impact on LGBTIQ people is sorely missing and cannot be extrapolated from Census data, hence the importance of collecting data about our community in the Australian Census.

KEY ISSUE 1

The collection of data regarding LGBTIQ people in the Australian Census is urgently needed so our community can present detailed demographic analysis about the issues that affect us.

LGBTIQ asylum seekers also face particular challenges, notably in accessing financial assistance, particularly for those on temporary protection visas and bridging visas. For many, who have genuinely held fears about returning to their country of birth due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, this financial impact would only serve to increase their stress.

KEY ISSUE 2

The impact of immigration policy, including for LGBTIQ asylum seekers, and the interaction with financial and employment support programs must be reviewed to ensure no person is left vulnerable during this public health crisis.

Like other stakeholders, we also hold significant concerns about the early access of all Australians of their super. This would only serve to compound economic issues for people, especially those who are accessing super early in their career. LGBTIQ people face unique barriers to education and employment (World Economic Forum, 2015) and NSWGLRL are concerned about reducing super for members of the LGBTIQ community who continue to face economic hardship.

KEY ISSUE 3

The program which allows people to access their super early should be replaced by an enhanced and extended social security program.

Safety Issues

There has been significant reporting regarding the increase in domestic and family violence perpetration that has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. This increase is likely attributed to economic stress, mental health concerns and the changed home environment arising from social isolation. LGBTIQ domestic violence services require tailored and targeted services (Messinger, 2020).

KEY ISSUE 4

Responses to the increase in domestic violence perpetration must include consideration of LGBTIQ services.

Many young people have returned to their family home during this period due to financial strain or have spent more time at home as schools and employment have shifted to at home arrangements. For young LGBTIQ people this can present real challenges, as they may not live in supportive or safe environments. This issue is worsened as social networks have shrunk and more time is necessarily spent with family.

KEY ISSUE 5

A review should be undertaken into the impact of COVID-19 on instances of family violence against young LGBTIQ people and additional funding provided to services that support young LGBTIQ people.

Many LGBTIQ people hold significant concerns over interacting with police. This fractured relationship continues to concern our community as police powers rapidly increased during COVID-19. It is critical that increases in police presence and activity be matched with the community support required, for instance Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officers in the NSW Police Force. NSWGLRL also asks the Inquiry to address the concerns raised by other civil liberties and human rights organisations who are best placed to make comment in regards to increases in police powers.

KEY ISSUE 6

Any increase in police activity must be matched by community support services for LGBTIQ people, many of whom hold justified fears about interacting with police.

Health Issues

LGBTIQ people face disparities in health - particularly mental health, sexual health and substance abuse (AIHW, 2018). The GLRL survey revealed a significant mental health impact for our community, including many members who accessed mental health and counselling services as a direct result of COVID-19. Members of the LGBTIQ community require easy access to safe and appropriate mental health and counselling services.

KEY ISSUE 7

Mental health and counselling services that are accessible and safe for LGBTIQ people must be urgently funded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transgender and gender diverse people have unique healthcare needs which are often further complicated as a result of stigma (Zwickl et al, 2019). There is an urgent need for better training for medical professionals and more accessible services, especially as procedures such as gender-affirming surgeries are critical to the wellbeing of many trans and gender diverse people (Zwickl et al, 2019). The GLRL survey revealed that changes to hospital procedures have seen gender-affirming surgeries for some delayed and there are additional reports about difficulty in accessing hormone replacement therapy (Guardian, 22 May 2020).

KEY ISSUE 8

Additional support must be provided to trans and gender diverse people who have had critical surgeries and therapies delayed during COVID-19.

Conclusion

NSWGLRL appreciates the opportunity to provide the unique insights of our members during the COVID-19 pandemic. While we have not addressed the full spectrum of issues that have arisen for all Australians, we hope to have presented the issues most unique to LGBTIQ people.

We urge the Inquiry to seriously consider the issues raised by civil society and human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and the Human Rights Law Centre, who provide a broader look at the impact of COVID-19.

In line with our submission, any questions are welcome and can be directed to convenors@glrl.org.au

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