

# **ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility**

Melbourne – Monday 23 March 2026

### **MEMBERS**

Dylan Wight – Chair

Chris Crewther – Deputy Chair

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Emma Kealy

Nathan Lambert

Sarah Mansfield

Evan Mulholland

Lee Tarlamis

**WITNESS** (*via videoconference and Auslan interpreter*)

Todd Wright, Chief Executive Officer, Convo Communications Australia Pty Ltd.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this public hearing for the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands each of us is gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or family members who are here today to impart their knowledge of the issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I am Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit and the Chair of the Electoral Matters Committee. The other members of the committee that are here today are the Deputy Chair Christopher Crewther, who is also the Member for Mornington; and Jacinta Ermacora, who is a Member for Western Victoria. I believe we have got Sarah Mansfield, also a Member for Western Victoria, online as well. I welcome Todd Wright, who is the CEO of Convo Communications Australia.

All evidence taken today by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by the same privilege. The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but questions must be answered fully, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings, and anything said may be picked up and captioned, even if said quietly.

You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check as soon as available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

Todd, thank you so much for appearing today, and thank you for Convo's comprehensive submission. What we usually do is just open up perhaps with a brief overview of the submission, and then we can follow up with some questions by committee members.

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** Certainly. Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today. I would like to start by a simple reflection of my own experience at the past federal election that I wanted to share that with you. I consider myself a very confident and knowledgeable voting member of the community. I understand the voting process, but for the first time in my life, I realised something that I had never realised before: I did not need to hand over my driver's licence to vote. That small moment might seem insignificant, but for me it was quite profound. It was the first time I only needed to give my name, and I was given my ballot paper, where I then went along and voted as intended. It really made me think about the idea of access – it is not just about what we cannot do or what we can do, it is really about what we are given the opportunity to do with full understanding of the process. Through our work with the Australian Electoral Commission, and recently we have worked also with the VEC for the 2022 state election, we did acknowledge significant moments within the Deaf community. Not all deaf people need Auslan interpreting support to vote, but for those who do need that, to have on-demand access to interpreters at the moment of intent really changed quite a lot. It was a profound impact for them.

We have received feedback from deaf voters. For some of them it was their first opportunity to ask questions directly to the electoral commission. By asking those questions, they have actually realised they have been voting unintentionally the wrong way their entire lives. It is not about what they cannot do, it is just a simple lack of access in the moment when they need it the most. This obviously really shifts what we are talking about here: when access is available at that moment of intent, at the point when you need it most, it does not only help but really empowers people – giving people confidence to ask questions, to understand the process and to be able to participate fully in the process. Importantly, it really gives people something fundamental: it gives people dignity, confidentiality and ownership of their own vote.

What we have really learned so far here is that accessibility within voting centres cannot be limited to only physical access; obviously that is still important, but communication access should be seen as fundamentally important and equally as important. It does not need to be complex; it is a simple and scalable solution. On-demand Auslan interpreting through QR codes, which we have had in the past, can ensure that deaf people have the right to vote, have access and support and can access that straightaway. There is no need to book ahead, there are no delays in interpreting and there is no relying on a support person to guide you through the process. It is not about adding complexity to the system, it is about removing frictions at the moment when it matters the most. It might be a small shift in design, but it is a huge and profound shift in the experience for the Deaf community. Thank you. I am looking forward to answering any of your questions if you have any.

**The CHAIR:** Brilliant. Thank you for that. Why don't we start with a question from my Deputy Chair, Christopher Crewther.

**Chris CREWITHER:** Thank you. Chair. Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to hear from you today, and thank you for your time and for what you do for the Deaf and hearing-impaired community. I am keen to find out – other than a QR code, are there other measures that might need to be in place, particularly not just for election day but for pre-poll and for other forms of voting as well?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** What we found in the recent elections was that staff support in the voting centres is crucial to understanding how to direct people to use the QR codes and understanding how to support the process as well. Without that type of prior knowledge, it can lead to situations where staff members unintentionally take over and take control of the moment and do not obviously give dignity – potentially taking their device and trying to speak directly to the interpreters. That type of awareness and understanding is really important. I think I mentioned in my opening statement that not all deaf people want to have access to Auslan interpreters in the voting centre, and that is important too. A key thing to understand is it is not about forcing interpreting onto people, it is about being aware and people being aware. I think the other key issue is that awareness in the Deaf community. If they know that they can access these QR codes in the voting centres and they are easily identifiable and easy to find as they go into a voting centre, that is really important in terms of accessibility. It is making sure they are in the right place and not at the exit when you are about to leave the centre, for example – so at the point of entry, before you start speaking to voting centre staff. Those types of things are really crucial to making sure that it is a smooth system.

**Chris CREWITHER:** Have you found there has been any difference between election day versus pre-poll, mobile voting or other forms?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** Good point. Yes. We have supported the early voting, the pre-polling voting, and the QR codes are also available at those particular centres as well. There is no difference in terms of how to access them; it is just making sure that really our interpreters are available for the full time, which they are. Yes, there are variances. There are some people who have older devices or limited reception. That sometimes could crop up to be an issue. That is lessening as time goes on. People are always upgrading. Obviously, there is the issue with 3G being finished, but the upgrade of devices and the like means it is much more accessible than it has been before.

**Chris CREWITHER:** Thank you very much. I will pass to my other colleagues for some more questions, but I may have questions later if there is still time.

**The CHAIR:** Sure. Thanks, Chris. I might go to Sarah Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. I am interested in some of your comments about the awareness of the service and what your thoughts are about how we could increase awareness of this being available.

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** Absolutely, yes. What we have done in terms of the past is marketing on our social media channels. We have made Auslan videos explaining how to find the QR code and how to use the QR code, which are quite effective. We have also sent out email distributions to subscribers to our service, to our newsletter and the like. We have also partnered with different organisations like Deaf Australia and other peak bodies to make sure there is an increased awareness of this. Convo Australia was only established just over four years ago here in Australia, and having an Auslan interpreter is still a relatively new concept in terms

of them being at voting centres, so it will take some time to become the norm, if you like, and become part of that normal voting experience for our Deaf community.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Is there anything that you think the VEC could be doing to improve awareness, even just at the booths themselves, the voting centres?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** Yes. We have learned a lot from the federal election in particular in terms of the placement of those QR codes. That is something we can absolutely work with the VEC on if we partner for the next state election, and we are more than happy to partner with them. In 2022 the VEC also worked with Deaf Victoria to roll out some information sessions where deaf people could come along, understand and learn. At those particular sessions they had a demonstration of the QR codes and how that worked. I think that was really helpful, and there was positive feedback from that information session. So it is definitely something that I think should be considered in future elections too, to get more of the awareness out there.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Great. Are there things that could be done to improve the staff's knowledge and awareness of the service but also to support people using it in a constructive way at the polling site?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** What we did with the AEC, the Australian Electoral Commission, was create a one-page summary of the service, how it works and any tips in terms of how to work with interpreters. I think that could go one step further by providing perhaps a brief training video with a demonstration of exactly how it works, because there is nothing like seeing it in person. I think we could develop that in future too. Like I said, it is a new concept, obviously, for the community and staff as well, so it will take time to get that familiarity with the approach. With more and more interactions, you become more and more familiar with it, and it becomes the norm for staff members as well. So yes, definitely more education would be needed.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Great. Is there anything other than access to Auslan, perhaps, via this service? Are there other measures that could be taken at polling booths, from your perspective, to make them more accessible?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** In the past, in years gone by, I know that some of the state elections, and federal elections actually, had established in-person interpreters in specific polling booths, which absolutely I see as beneficial. You have to hope that deaf people then go to that specific polling booth, which can be quite tricky. It does not really give deaf people independence to have that sort of awareness of the polling booth. It is also difficult to find information in terms of where those people are. So it also was deemed to be a bit of an inefficient use of services to have a person standing there all day and perhaps never seeing a deaf person come by that particular polling booth, which is a bit of a shame. With this service we have got staff – interpreters – working, basically, so you can access the service anywhere within Australia, meaning that it includes those regional and remote areas, which obviously is critical. They often miss out on that critical access to Auslan interpreters.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thanks so much. I will pass back to the Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Sarah. I will go to Nathan Lambert out there in Preston.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Todd, for joining us. I was excited to see, Todd, that you used to be a UNIX system administrator. There are not a lot of us with that sort of background in public policy. But I am very pleased to see you have now come across to your advocacy role. On that front, what is the most technologically challenging part of delivering the Convo service?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** We have established our platform. Our current platform has been in operation for just over two years now. It is used globally in the UK and the US as well, so it is proven technology which is sustainable, which is great, and stability is key. The idea of confidentiality and making sure we do not save any personal information in terms of that data – it is not identified, so it protects people's identity in this particular way, Convo access. I guess I would say the most technologically challenging access would be relying on that access to the service. I think maybe you will remember different services. Maybe you will be aware last year that Amazon Web Services, AWS, went down. Relying on that sort of thing – that is when things do not become foolproof. When huge technology companies have issues, that is where it can become an issue for our technology.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Out of curiosity, large language models have obviously been quite revolutionary in terms of what they can do – fascinating those of us who are used to hard-coding things. There now is this remarkable emergent ability to solve problems. Is there potentially an application there? I do not want to sound like I am making Convo redundant, but will that potentially solve this problem if we look perhaps a couple of elections into the future?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** Sign language recognition by any of those large language models and AI is a long way off. There is absolutely research in that. Google has developed technology in the area, and other companies as well, but we are not quite at the point where we can recognise a person signing and be able to interpret that at this stage. English as a language could be used for conversational purposes et cetera, but English literacy levels vary quite a lot in the Deaf community, so we cannot often rely on written or spoken English for communication within the Deaf community. Auslan literacy levels vary as well within the Deaf community, so that has been quite interesting. Interpreters are trained and qualified to basically see non-visual forms and non-standardised forms of Auslan language users and be able to adapt and modify and provide information in a visual format. That is really critical for elections, to demonstrate the concept of the voting and the ballot paper, for example – any type of visual things: is it a tick or a cross or a number et cetera? Those types of things, that visual demonstration. We prepare our interpreting team in advance to know different state or federal election numbering systems. It is important to make sure it is really clear, and we are visually clear in terms of demonstrating that, obviously within the boundaries and scope of the interpreter's role. But I definitely recognise that AI or LLMs have a place. It is still in the very early stages, though. I could see it years and years down the track potentially.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** The Convo submission was elegantly concise. It was very much focused on the exact election questions. I am just curious – the state government obviously is involved in delivering a lot of universal services. How does what we are doing at elections compare to what we are doing in hospitals or with the MCH service? Can you compare with similar examples?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** Yes. We are working quite closely with a range of different partners. We are actually trying to reach out to different government partners as well. We are really pleased to be partnering with St John's in WA – that is their ambulance service – for the past, I would like to say, two and a half years now, meaning the provision of our service in all of their vans, so any ambulance van that has a deaf patient or a deaf family member within the van has access to an Auslan interpreter on demand. Obviously those are critical diagnosis-type stages in terms of an emergency process – it could lead to incorrect diagnosis if you do not have that communication access.

We have been partnering with different financial services as well. Just recently announced one of the big four banks in a pilot phase, so in agreement with us to test our service in a couple of different branches across Australia. It is really important to have access, obviously, to that information to make sure that they are choosing the right products for themselves in terms of finance services. We know that finance area language can be quite complex, so making sure you have a clear understanding of financial services is really key for deaf people. So there are a couple of different services there.

We are partnering with Access Canberra for just over a year now in terms of their services – they provide government services in their different branches. I would say they are kind of retail centres, if you like, in Canberra there. And late last year they decided to extend and expand that service to include their libraries within Canberra as well. So really pleased to support that provision of service, because Canberra is quite a unique place where there is a very limited number of Auslan interpreters, so the Deaf community in Canberra really have struggled in terms of their access to Auslan interpreters. So having access through on-demand interpreting is a great benefit to the community there.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Perhaps, Chair, just one final question. Are there any lessons for us in accessibility that come from those other contexts that we can then apply to the election context?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** That is a good question. I think, like I mentioned previously, making sure that we are really working together as a team, so staff in voting centres and deaf people and interpreters all have awareness and understanding of the service provision. We have also got the benefit of working with our other teams globally in the UK and the US and learning from different contexts. But I think working together in

terms of the awareness, really we are only at the start of our journey here in Australia I think. Yes, we have got a long way to go. That is probably the best answer I can give. Still more to learn, I think.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thanks, Nathan. We will go to Jacinta Ermacora, please.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Good morning. Thanks very much, Todd, for attending, and Alyssa for the work that you do. I just want to ask about regional polling booths and some of the really small ones. What is your kind of feedback on how the VEC should manage equality of access in that sort of context?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** In the one-page summary that we have provided previously to staff at voting centres, we really encourage them to test internet access as well. Obviously reception of a mobile device – making sure that you can actually have a video call – is really important. If they have got wi-fi potentially at the schools sometimes, making sure that people get access to wi-fi. Sometimes mobile data is not something that is easily accessible for deaf people, likewise anyone else in the community. The Australian Electoral Commission actually use the QR code – I am trying to remember what it was called – with their travelling voting centres, so really rural and remote parts of Australia. And then they use satellite internet connection to make sure that they have got that, should they require it. I am not aware of any incidences where the service was actually utilised through that QR code, but the QR code was available nonetheless. I think it is essential to test, firstly, internet connection. It needs to be a consideration, making sure that there is access, because that is obviously key to accessing the service that is provided by Convo.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. I am interested also in those first few moments in the booth when the VEC are receiving or welcoming someone who may be deaf. What are the interactions that you would be ideally hoping for? I am thinking around taking the time to assess what they actually want as a service.

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** Absolutely. It is really good to have universal gestures – greeting and waving to someone – if you notice that someone is looking around and perhaps not sure, even just starting to write or pointing to something indicating where something might be. If there is a poster with the QR code with a sign that has an indication that there is an Auslan interpreter, they could perhaps scan the QR code, and if not, that is fine. Gesturing to people seems to be very effective for both hearing and deaf people alike.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. The last question: what would you like this committee to recommend on this topic?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** As I mentioned in my opening statement, I really think access to voting centres should not be limited to physical access only. I really think it is key to think about how information and communication are access. They should always be part of the fundamentals when we are thinking about access. On-demand Auslan interpreting really means that all voting centres are then covered in that type of approach. That access is so crucial.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you very much, Todd. Thanks, Alyssa.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We have got about 2 minutes. Chris, if you have one more very quick question, fire away.

**Chris CREWITHER:** Thank you. In your submission you talk about staff being trained to both avoid relying on written notes and asking family members to interpret. With current staff at those centres, do you find that is happening often and they are asking family members to interpret still, despite training in the past? What effect does that have on a person who is deaf, in terms of their own self-esteem and everything else?

**Todd WRIGHT (via interpreter):** Thank you for that question. Definitely that is an ongoing issue – it does not matter if you have established QR codes or not – the reason being it is still a very new concept and a new process. I think for many deaf people they are quite often left with no choice; they have to rely on people who they are with in terms of family. I think in terms of that shift I was talking about – actually deaf people can take ownership in this. You can have the dignity, privacy and independence in knowing your own vote and not needing to have anyone else. Obviously there is also the potential in terms of a person having a support person that could influence their vote, or perhaps it looks good or nice and they are not really thinking about the actual

politics side of things and what they are doing. That ownership of the vote is so crucial. The more we can truly have access to independence and then research in terms of policies et cetera, the more we can actually make our vote count. Really this is a first step in a long process to actually truly making your vote count. We have got a long way to go yet.

**Chris CREWETHER:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Todd. Thank you so much for the submission but also for appearing today. I am just conscious of time. We have to move to the next group of witnesses. If there is anything further you would like to submit to the committee to assist its inquiry, please feel free to do so.

**Witness withdrew.**