

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

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Stefan Slucki, Board Director and National Policy Committee Chair, and

Melanie Chatfield, Policy Officer, Blind Citizens Australia.

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 are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching via the broadcast of these proceedings.

I am Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit and committee Chair. I have got Christopher Crewther, the Member for Mornington and the Deputy Chair; Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria; Nathan Lambert, Member for Preston; and Sarah Mansfield, also a Member for Western Victoria.

I welcome Stefan Slucki, who is the Board Director and National Policy Committee Chair, and also Melanie Chatfield, who is a Policy Officer, from Blind Citizens Australia.

All evidence taken 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, you 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 it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

I invite you at this point to give a brief 5-minute introduction, maybe both of the organisation and the submission, and then we will follow that up with questions from committee members until about quarter to 12.

Stefan SLUCKI: Thank you very much. Blind Citizens Australia is the peak body who represent people with blindness or who have low vision. It is a privilege to make a contribution to the inquiry. Just briefly, the way that the blind and people with low vision participate in the electoral process is by submitting postal votes or participating in telephone-assisted voting, but some people, with assistance, attend the voting centres.

Members have had an opportunity, hopefully, to read through the submission that my colleague Melanie has prepared. I will just go through five basic points there to outline them for you. The fundamental principle that we stress in all our submissions on these topics is that our vote be secret or private, independent and verifiable. Those are the goals that we aim at: secret – obviously, that is the aim; independent, cast by us without coercion; and verifiable, that we may be able to check it and make sure that it is what we actually want it to be. That sounds like a very motherhood statement to make, but in the past we have relied upon – those who cannot do that independently – the goodwill of relatives et cetera to place our ballot for us, and it has not always gone according to the way that we would want it to go.

The five aspects of participating at voting centres, and these are obvious when mentioned but need to be mentioned because they relate specifically to our demographic, include physical access – things like step-free access to the polling centre; the TGSIs, or tactile ground surface indicators, those little bumps that come up at you, preferably colour-coordinated – yellow is usually a good colour so that people who have low vision can identify them as they approach; accessible toilets, both for people who have wheelchairs – so it is not just about us, but we can access them – and also for those who have dog guides, so that they can toilet them as they participate; of course clear signage, and that is to do with colour contrast and that the signage is large enough; and physical access from the outside, so it is encouraging for people to actually enter the place.

Proximity to public transport is an important one. For people who get older, as well as people who have ambulatory or walking difficulties, the closer the better to public transport, and along with that, of course, accessibility of accessible parking – that is, without flights of stairs to come down and so on and so on – is helpful, and safe pedestrian access from the parking place to the entrances to the polling centre.

A familiar community environment: by that is meant not some place way out where people are not used to going, so preferably someplace people are familiar with. Libraries come into my thinking. It is not mentioned specifically, but they are usually well-known places because people go there obviously for books and so on.

That takes us then to the internal environment of the actual centre: adequate lighting, avoiding excessive glare – I should point out that I am totally blind, so with a lot of this stuff I am speaking on behalf of the people in our demographic; clear obstacle-free layouts within the centre – and these things are obvious when stated; minimal noise – that is a blessing to everybody; and sufficient space to allow guided assistance and use of mobility aids. Room is good, and it is my experience that in polling places where I have been guided by my sighted wife, sometimes room is at a premium, particularly in the actual booth itself – very narrow and tight. There is also clear, colour-contrasted, large-print signage – again, yellow on black, white with black; those types of colours work well. I can remember back to the days when I had some sight to make that point.

Letter d in our submission refers to accessible voting methods, and what is meant here is there are – by all means ask me about this – methods of voting, including electronic-assisted voting, that have been trialled in different places. We are talking money here, so it depends on budgetary constraints as to whether these things can be attempted. There is the ability to provide – this is more accessible financially – materials in alternate formats, such as large-print copies of the ballot papers and how-to-vote materials and so on and provide devices to enable people to complete ballot papers. That could be as simple as a magnifier for those with low vision to be able to see things more clearly.

And lastly, consistency of venue: this would not only include on the main election day but also at pre-polling places. It may be that in its wisdom the inquiry may recommend one or two places within each electoral division and say, ‘These are the places which we recommend as places which are really equipped to welcome people with disabilities,’ and I recognise – it is not in our submission – funding constraints being what they are. But consistency of venue – so that the same places which cater specifically for people with needs can be maintained between elections. That is my introduction. It may have been slightly more than 5 minutes, but if I can clarify anything, please ask me.

The CHAIR: Brilliant. Thank you. We are going to go to Christopher Crewther, the Deputy Chair, first.

Chris CREWTER: I have just taken some notes down as you have been speaking. I want to firstly thank you for the chance to hear from you today and your evidence today, particularly from your own personal experience of being a person living with blindness yourself. I just want to get a greater understanding of some of the obstacles you mentioned in the layout of voting centres and how that could be improved, particularly given you have a lot of issues with noise, particularly going in and out of voting centres. What do you think we can do better to further minimise that noise?

Stefan SLUCKI: The noise? In terms of the obstacles, it has been a while since I have individually gone to a polling centre because since the introduction of telephone-assisted voting I have taken that up very energetically. The last time I was in a centre was back, I think, when I was in Adelaide at the 2013 federal election. That was the last time I entered a polling place. But it was crowded. There were people shoving how-to-vote cards in my face, and I had made my mind up. I had my braille list because, as I say, I am totally blind, so I make my mind up beforehand. I have missed out, in my answer, Chris, that there were people in the way. It was a narrow space in that particular place, and it would have been very, very difficult – you would have to have really made a big effort – if you were in a wheelchair, for instance, or even with a dog guide, to get into the place. So space is a problem. As I say, with the narrow booth, which my wife and I at that time were there side by side in, there was just enough room to get us both into the actual booth, the division between the classic plywood – not plywood, sorry, the space where you actually record your vote. We kept our voices down in terms of – I am a below-the-line voter when filling in the ballot paper, so just issues like that made it difficult. So perhaps making private spaces available for people – some people have hearing difficulties – to be able to be more discreet about how they record their vote rather than standing up in that very, very narrow space would be helpful, to have extra room. I did not ask whether there were rooms available that we could go to. That would

be a help. So there is a lot of noise around with people. I hope that sort of gives a partial answer anyway to what you are asking.

Chris CREWITHER: The question I have is for campaigners and political parties particularly coming into the voting booth. Would it be helpful for political parties to provide more information that would help people who are blind or who have varying visual difficulties, like, for example, larger text information that could be given out or the use of Braille on materials such as how-to-vote cards? Are these the sorts of things that would be helpful to provide information about political parties, candidates, how to vote and so forth?

Stefan SLUCKI: Yes. It is in our submission too. I did not specify that. Thank you for asking that question. Yes. I am a political tragic myself, so I go looking for information beforehand, and I must say in the last federal election, it was very difficult. I know we are talking state here; the state election was better. But yes, you have to really go looking for details of candidate names and how to contact them right across the parties. I understand that fear of intimidation and privacy issues come into it, but we are asking in our submission for everything that is issued by individual candidates and parties to be made available. Vision Australia does a great job in producing the material in alternate formats to be made available for production. It could be that as the candidature is lodged by the deadline date they be required to make that information available that is available to the public, so that it can be made accessible. For those who really want to find out, you can. But it puts the onus on you to go and do that, which is okay, but it would really be helpful, because a lot of our demographic are people who are getting frailer and growing older in years and are not perhaps as tech savvy as some. So yes, that would be really helpful.

In terms of the how-to-votes and so on, some of that is produced towards the end of the campaigns, and we have got to be realistic as to what can be done in the heat of the campaign. But yes, ideally it would be useful to have that done as well, but I am not sure how practical that would be. It would be good, yes, but certainly the fundamental stuff is important, and it is not always available.

Chris CREWITHER: Thank you. Just going to your submission again, you talk about technology-assisted voting, and you mentioned systems such as iVote, which was trialled in New South Wales between 2011 and 2021, allowing voters the convenience of voting from their own home on a device of their choosing. Can you expand more on what you would like to see in this space in Victoria? Also, in the past, issues have been raised with online voting or voting from mobile phones because of domestic violence or coercion concerns, where people may not have the same independence they might have in a physical ballot box. If you could maybe address those two issues, that would be great.

Stefan SLUCKI: The iVote system was particularly trialled in New South Wales. I am not across the details of that. In our national policy committee we had significant discussion about this, and there is a difference of views. Our demographic has a range of technical abilities right across the board. Hence we are advocating for the extension of the availability of postal votes in large-print format for those who need that, because that would enhance their independence, because the reason why people apply for postal votes is because they are frail, aged and cannot physically get to a voting centre. I know that is a side issue from this inquiry, but it is a reality for people. That would enhance their independence if that could be made available for them, and that is relatively straightforward. Telephone voting has been kind of the middle path for people. It does enhance privacy and independence to an extent, and that is an option which a lot of us have chosen. For some people online voting really floats their boat, particularly with the onset in recent years of AI. I must say it is a new area for me. There are some on our committee who are really singing its praises and thinking it is the way to go, but I recognise that there are some cybersecurity concerns about it. Some people have great concern, but if those issues can be addressed, yes, it has to be the gold standard. The one that I love best as a good independent computer user is the model of having a PC set up where I could go in and type my ballot responses, just as I would normally use a screen reader to do. That would be relatively straightforward to organise in a particular place, and then I could just press 'Print' and that ballot paper would come out. I would be in complete control of that – with the assistance of a polling officer next to me, yes. I could change my mind if I wanted to halfway through the process and fill out all the stuff. It would be quite accessible. That would be the gold standard, but it would obviously only be able to be set up in specific places within each electorate. That would I reckon still be the optimum, but it was at that time considered rather costly, and it was not taken up by a lot of people. But that was what was at that time – that time being 2010, I think – the way to go. But if digital can be made secure, then I am sure that the younger part of our demographic would jump at it because it means security in one's own home. It ticks a lot of boxes, but it could also be accessed in a polling centre.

Chris CREWETHER: Thank you, Stefan. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. We are going to go to Sarah Connolly. No, we are not. We are going to go to Sarah Mansfield, who is a bit further west than Sarah Connolly.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

Stefan SLUCKI: She is a member here where I am.

The CHAIR: There you go.

Stefan SLUCKI: Sarah Connolly, yes.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you so much for appearing today and for your evidence. I am interested in some of the feedback you have provided around the physical access at voting centres and things like ground surface indicators, signage and step-free access. I suspect this is feedback that has been provided before. Have you noticed any improvements over time at any of the centres, and have there been examples of voting centres where this has been done quite well?

Stefan SLUCKI: Sarah, I wish I could provide that. I cannot, for two reasons: (a) because, as I say, I have taken advantage of telephone-assisted voting, and for quite a few years I have lived out of state. I am presenting on behalf of our organisation, but I am afraid I cannot provide success stories. I wish I could. But those are, as I say, motherhood statements in any inquiry about any public space.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, absolutely. In terms of training for staff, do you think there is more that could be done to make staff at voting centres more aware of different needs and more accessible?

Stefan SLUCKI: Probably. I think it would not take a lot of time, because the staff, I would imagine, are made up of permanent staff within the electoral commission and also temporary staff that are taken on for the purposes of election periods. It would probably be, I can imagine, a 30-minute training session. I think probably so. It is just a reminder to keep that in front of them, because there are some people obviously who, as permanent staff, would know those things. My personal experience, having come back to Melbourne from interstate, is that so many people are so familiar with how to guide a blind person. They have obviously received the training in it as members of the general public or they have picked up on it. It would not take much, but I think a little refresher would not hurt.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, and I guess that is particularly important given that we are seeing a lot more early voting options, a lot more hours of early voting being open and a lot more staff required for that.

Stefan SLUCKI: And the demographic is increasing because the population is ageing. If people are being encouraged to access these centres, then yes, it is a virtuous circle in that sense.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Great. Thank you, Chair. I think that is me.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Sarah. We will go to Nathan Lambert. We have probably got time for one more question.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Stefan. If I have just got the one question, I might jump to something that we have discussed with some of the other witnesses today, and that is the benefits and the general positive feedback on the low-sensory trial that the VEC has been undertaking. You might be aware that means less crowded spaces that are quieter and some changes to lighting but particularly changes in the way that the staff behave. I am interested in your view on that debate, because part of that debate is how the political candidates and campaigners behave whilst the low-sensory option is being provided. You describe yourself as a political tragic, so you are probably someone who wants to get the how-to-votes and wants to have those discussions with campaigners. Is there a trade-off there or a pro and con, insofar as campaigners risk adding to the challenges for vision-impaired voters if they are trying to come in and access that low-sensory session?

Stefan SLUCKI: Well, put it this way – I am not going off script exactly, except with this particular aspect – I have said what I have said, which is part of the submission. On a personal note, I think it would be fair to say – and this is not part of the BCA submission – my view has long been that, be it pre-poll or be it on the

actual day of the election, in terms of the handing out of how-to-votes and so on, it would be far better for those to be displayed, for those who can visually see them, in the place of voting, rather than having people energetically standing there and spruiking their wares outside. I have been involved where there have been people who have been sledging one another, perhaps in a friendly way or perhaps not always in such a friendly way, and I am not a great advocate for that. I think make your point and write your stuff down, and people can view it on the walls of the polling booth. For me, I think your argument has been made in the run-up to the date of decision. I am a great believer in doing your research beforehand, whoever you are as an elector. Now that is a personal view, that is not representing BCA. But I think having spoken to a lot of other members of our demographic, they would be in sympathy. They do their research. Those who decide on the day can decide on the day by looking at the material at their leisure in the polling booth. That would be the way I would answer that.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Stefan. Maybe if we have got one minute, Chair, just really quickly, I have a point of clarification. You talked earlier about using the PC with the screen reader –

Stefan SLUCKI: Yes.

Nathan LAMBERT: Just for my benefit, was that what the VEC called their electronic voting kiosks?

Stefan SLUCKI: Yes. There would be variants of that. That would be a bit of an old-world solution. There would be some people who would say you could use a touchscreen device in there – which would be hard for a totally blind person to use. But yes, that would be the electronic voting kiosk.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you. I think we are on time, so I will wind things up there.

The CHAIR: We certainly are. Sorry, we will have to leave it there unfortunately. Thank you, Stefan and Melanie, for appearing in front of us today. If there is anything else you would like to add to the inquiry, please just email it through.

Witnesses withdrew.