

# **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**

Simon Matuzelski, Manager, Impact and Innovation, and

Emily Piggott, Senior Adviser, Research and Advocacy, Centre for Innovative Justice;

Morgan O'Sullivan, Principal Policy Lead, and

Stella Trounce, Senior Policy Officer, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service;

Reece Blackett, Academic, Faculty of Law (*via videoconference*), University of Technology Sydney;

Ricky M, Lived Experience Contributor;

Fran, Member, Voices for Change; and

Monique Hurley, Associate Legal Director, Human Rights Law Centre.

**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 on this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I am Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit, also the committee Chair. I will go through one by one who I have got here. I have got Simon, Emily, Reece, Fran, Ricky M, Morgan, Stella and Monique. Have I missed anybody? No. I am not going to go through individually all the different organisations because we have only got half an hour and I actually would like to hear some evidence. I have also got Chris Crewther, Member for Mornington, also the Deputy Chair; Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria; Nathan Lambert, Member for Preston; and Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

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 say the same thing, even 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.

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What we might do is go through 5 minutes in total, maybe just a very brief introduction, and the organisation the witness comes from, and then we can open it up to the committee for some questions, which may be directed to a particular witness or may be directed to the group as a whole. Let me start with you, Monique, if that is okay.

**Monique HURLEY:** Do you want to –

**Morgan O'SULLIVAN:** We do have a statement that we have collectively prepared that also lets you know who is with us today.

**The CHAIR:** Sweet, let us do that. Cool.

**Morgan O'SULLIVAN:** Brilliant. I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people as the custodians of the land that we are all meeting on today, and their elders past and present. We would also like to acknowledge

that this is unceded land that we are gathering on today, and it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak today as well, and particularly for the opportunity to highlight the voices of our lived experience contributors Ricky and Fran, who have come along today with us. My name is Morgan. I am a Principal Policy Lead at the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service. I have worked at VALS for seven years in various roles across our different legal teams, in our civil and human rights, criminal law and our community engagement team, and now in a policy role. VALS is an Aboriginal community controlled organisation providing culturally safe legal and community justice services to Aboriginal people across Victoria. Our practice areas include criminal law, civil and human rights law, Aboriginal families practice, a youth practice, police and prison accountability, and we also advocate for community through our policy and advocacy work, informed by our practice experience.

I am joined today by everyone who you have met so far, but perhaps I will throw across to CIJ, HRLC and Reece, who we worked on the submission with. Then after we can throw to Ricky and Fran for a brief introduction, and then we could also cover some other things.

**Monique HURLEY:** Hi. I am Monique Hurley. I am an Associate Legal Director at the Human Rights Law Centre. It was a real privilege to collaborate on this piece of work with the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, the Centre for Innovative Justice, Voices for Change and Ricky. At the Human Rights Law Centre we use a combination of strategic legal action, law reform and policy solutions to advance human rights. In particular in my role I work alongside Aboriginal legal services to call out racial injustice in the criminal legal system and also alongside people with lived experience of incarceration to hold the government to account for mistreatment behind bars.

**Simon MATUZELSKI:** Hi. My name is Simon Matuzelski. I am a Manager at the RMIT Centre for Innovative Justice. My colleague is Emily. Would you like to introduce yourself?

**Emily PIGGOTT:** Thank you, Simon. I am Emily Piggott, Senior Adviser at the Centre for Innovative Justice.

**Simon MATUZELSKI:** It was a massive privilege for us to work on this submission alongside all the contributors, including people with lived experience, who contributed to this. Our objective at the Centre for Innovative Justice is to develop, drive and expand the capacity of the justice system to meet and adapt to the needs of its diverse users, including people with disability. We really focus on taking a person-centred approach to our work. We have worked closely with people with lived experience of disability and incarceration to support them to directly contribute to this submission and to the work that we do in general. Again, thank you for having us here.

**Reece BLACKETT:** Thanks, Simon. Just to finish it off, I am a sessional Academic at UTS as well as a lawyer, and I also do NDIS appeals on a pro bono basis. I primarily look at the intersection between disability and democracy from a public and constitutional law lens, which is what I brought to the piece. It was a privilege to work with everyone with such a diverse and amazing skill set.

**Morgan O'SULLIVAN:** I am wondering, Ricky and Fran, if you want to introduce yourselves now or if we can wait until after.

**The CHAIR:** Maybe a quick introduction, and then we can ask some questions.

**RICKY M:** My name is Ricky. I have lived experience inside the prison system, not just doing time but supporting others, particularly people with disabilities, vulnerable people and Indigenous people, and I have worked as a peer listener at a number of locations.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**FRAN:** Hi. My name is Fran, and I am a Member of Voices for Change. It is great being here today. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** You are welcome.

**Morgan O'SULLIVAN:** We do have some further things, if we could just add them briefly to outline our submission.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Morgan O’SULLIVAN:** Brilliant. As you know, the focus of this inquiry is voting accessibility for people with disabilities. People with disability are significantly over-represented in the growing Victorian prison population, and people with disability face considerable barriers in voting. This is why our joint submission focuses on how voting accessibility can be uplifted for all people with disability, including those who are incarcerated and in custody.

The current approach in Victoria creates a democratic deficit, whereby the people most directly affected by prison policy and law and order politics are structurally silenced in the political decisions that affect them, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our submission provides actionable legislative and policy solutions that would ensure the right to vote and participate in democratic processes are upheld for all people. We make recommendations that address several systemic and legal barriers experienced by people with a disability in prison. They include our recommendations that the Victorian government repeal voting exclusions for people with a sentence of five or more years and address other forms of disenfranchisement for people in prison and the VEC ensure that information, including accessible, easy-read information, is made available to all people in prison and our recommendations for amendments to the *Electoral Act* that enshrine principles of equity, respect, co-design, supported decision-making, inclusion of safeguards and cultural safety.

The right to vote is fundamental when it comes to people playing a role in influencing the decisions made by governments and holding them to account. This is important, now more than ever, with this year being an election year and the Victorian government’s tough-on-crime agenda that directly results in alarming increases to prison populations. The right to vote must be realised for everyone, and this means that the voting process must not only be accessible but must be meaningful for people in prison. Disenfranchisement of people in prison, including people with disability, has direct, tangible impacts on their lives through the conditions of their confinement and the political and social environment that they face post release. The impacts of disenfranchisement are significantly felt by people with disability who are also incarcerated. Barriers to voting in prison, whether indirectly through the voting process or directly through legislative restrictions, prevent people from exercising their basic democratic rights.

As we have touched on, we have engaged with Ricky and Fran and a couple of others in doing this work, and our submission was strongly informed by people with lived experience of incarceration and disability. We worked with three contributors through Voices for Change, as Fran mentioned. We worked with Fran, Matt and Michael through Voices for Change. Voices for Change is a lived experience advocacy group for people with acquired brain injuries who are in contact with the criminal legal system. We also worked with two individual contributors, Ricky and Rob. People with lived experience are the experts. They know what works and what does not work, and they know what needs to change. That is why today we would like to take the opportunity to hand over to both Ricky and Fran so that we can hear from them.

Listening to people with lived experience is how we make sure that the systems are designed to meet the needs of those who are impacted, resulting in better outcomes for everyone. Our lived experience contributors were consistently clear that voting matters to them, people with a disability who are in prison should have the right to vote, people in prison generally should have the right to vote and voting should be made more accessible. We would like to take a moment to thank Ricky and Fran and the other contributors who were part of our submission and really informed our thinking. We could not have done this without them, and it has been a real privilege for us all to work alongside them in this work. We really encourage the committee members to listen deeply to their experiences today and the experiences that they so meaningfully shared with us that informed our submission. I hope that their voices can inform meaningful change. We have a couple of us here from the organisations who can answer any legal or policy questions, and Reece is online, but I would like to hand over to Ricky and Fran now.

**RICKY M:** Thank you. Do you want to go first?

**Morgan O’SULLIVAN:** Do you have any questions that you would like to –

**The CHAIR:** I was going to say: are you happy for committee members just to ask questions?

**RICKY M:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Brilliant. I am going to go to the Deputy Chair Christopher Crewther first.

**Chris CREWETHER:** Thank you, Chair. My questions are for Ricky and Fran and for any others that might have lived experience on the panel. For Ricky and Fran, if you could change one key thing to better voting and voting centre accessibility, what would it be?

**RICKY M:** Prepare before elections well in advance. Have the peer listeners in the prison system send the message out to the prisoners and just have general preparation, because the way it currently works is the people from the electoral commission come on the day, nothing is organised, there are no rooms and nobody knows what is going on. Generally, I used to take it upon myself to go and book a room, set up the tables and make it happen. They did say, ‘When you go, Ricky, how are we going to survive?’ because there was no preparation. It was all last-minute stuff, and nobody knew what was going on.

**Chris CREWETHER:** Thank you. And Fran?

**FRAN:** Yes. Thank you. I think there is so much about the major parties that run for election. I think that every prisoner should have the right to know about every party that is running and what they stand for. Some people in prison have never voted. They do not know what this means. Give them a proper outlook and explain everything. Also, I think it is important to explain that a lot of people are angry, maybe, in there and against the system, but if they realise that they have a voice and they are now included to have a voice at the table, this is what is going to flow on into the community and make things stronger for all.

**Chris CREWETHER:** Thank you. My second question is for anyone on the panel. The submission makes 18 recommendations. In particular, it talks about:

... the VEC to have a mobile voting booth in each prison ...

How do you see that working? What do you think the benefits would be of that, and what do you think there might need to be for mobile voting to cater for people with a disability, in particular, who may be incarcerated?

**FRAN:** I think any person with disability that needs this, if they were to do a mobile vote or whatever, that they get somebody assigned to them that can explain everything, help them and make sure that they are putting down what they believe, not just the easiest way to do it or they do not understand et cetera.

**RICKY M:** I believe it would work myself, because it would give it a bit of presence and let people know that there is actually an election on. Because when you just are going to book an education room and put a few cardboard boxes in there on the day that they come, the general population of the prison just go about their business. You get half a dozen go in there and vote. It might be more, but generally, it is the too-hard basket. The other thing I believe too in that would be to have somebody go around and set up like a little minor committee in the prison beforehand. Inform the prisoners that there is an election coming up and the importance of voting, because a lot of the cohort that need to vote – the people with disabilities and the Indigenous and even the lower socio-economic group – they are the ones most affected by decisions made at Parliament, but they are also the least likely to vote.

**Chris CREWETHER:** Thank you. Thank you, Fran and Ricky. Back to you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Chris. We will go to Sarah Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you so much for your submission and for appearing today. In your submission, you have identified that there are limited opportunities in a lot of prisons to actually vote and potentially do you think there is a lack of understanding amongst staff working in prisons about the rights of people to vote?

**RICKY M:** I think it is a bit of all of the above, because some of the staff do not care, some are too busy, some are too lazy and some think prisoners should not have the right to vote. So it is a bit of a combination of those. That is why they would say, ‘Ricky, the electoral people are here, what can you organise?’ And I would have to go and do things myself to make it happen, otherwise it was going to be an embarrassment.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes. What more could the electoral commissions do to proactively engage in those environments to make sure that people do have the opportunity to exercise their right to vote?

**RICKY M:** I have written up a bit of a submission for the group here for us to talk off-air, but I think preparing the peer listener group, who I have been a big part of. A large number of prisons prepare them to assist people a month or two out from the election on the importance of voting for people that do not understand – the people with disabilities or ABIs or whatever – to really help them prepare and make it an event rather than just something that happens on the day.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes, so a bit of a lead-in?

**RICKY M:** So they are informed, that is all, pretty basically.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** So there needs to be a bit of work done in the lead-up to the election, rather than it just being an issue on the day?

**RICKY M:** Yes, because as it is at the moment, it is just nearly potluck that the electoral people come on the day and it just all happens in a couple of hours. People do not even know that they are coming on that day, generally – the prisoner population – so they might be doing other things or whatever, but I think that the importance of voting needs to be really provided to the prisoners.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes.

**Emily PIGGOTT:** If it is possible, could we please have the first question repeated?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, so Fran can provide an answer just to your first question.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** I think it was around staff at prisons being aware that people have the right to vote.

**FRAN:** Yes. As we know there are massive populations in prison. The politicians should get out there, should speak about things that they want to change or do and should let it be known and give them the information that they might not know about. Having them involved and being a part of all of this, then it would not seem so tokenistic.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Absolutely – so for candidates and parties to actually go out there and engage as well as perhaps the electoral commission.

**FRAN:** Absolutely.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes. Great, thank you. Chair, I will hand back to you.

**The CHAIR:** Sure. Thanks, Sarah. We will go to Nathan Lambert, please.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Thanks, Chair. Just following up on Sarah's questions for Ricky and Fran: perhaps if you could just speak a little more, I am just interested to know – I get the impression from what you are saying that there is not a lot of excitement or attention paid to the fact that the election is on, within prisons. Do you regularly encounter political discussions? Do you feel that the problem there is that people are just not aware of how they can vote or do you think more broadly they are just not particularly interested in participating?

**RICKY M:** It is a bit of both, and I think the more we can encourage prisoners of the importance to vote, it lifts their knowledge a little bit, because some people just say, 'Oh, no, it's not worth it,' but I think this creates a unique opportunity. By equipping peer listeners with the right knowledge, tools and support, we can create a peer-led model that helps educate prisoners about their voting rights, supports people with disabilities to understand the process, assist with access to voting materials and information and encourage participation in a respectful and culturally appropriate way.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Fran, did you have anything to add?

**FRAN:** I also agree with everything, but I was thinking back to when I was at school. I thought I would run for the social representative council, and it was a big election thing. I did a big performance, dance et cetera. I did get in, but with all my promises, I knew that I could not follow through with any of it – it was just to win. I felt quite bad about that, so I had an idea to get a complaints box and anybody could put in any questions, any complaints, anything that they thought was wrong with whatever. I think if there was something like that in

prison where it could be anonymous or whatever and the Victorian voting commission or whoever would calibrate all of this and have it somewhere, then prisoners would be able to find out all these questions and things that they would never have got answered.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** That is a great idea and perhaps something we can speak separately to this inquiry to the corrections teams about. If I can, just a final question: you will know of course that there is a threshold for people being eligible to vote in prison or not. It is actually different of course for federal and state elections, depending on, I think, the statutory length of their sentence. Is there any awareness in the work you have done or in your lived experience? Are some prisoners aware that they have the right to vote and that others do not?

**RICKY M:** I used to advise them because I was ineligible to vote. That was a frustrating part: I am over there organising the voting and the electoral system and so on, but I could not vote. It was frustrating for me because I am interested in politics, and one thing you do in prison is watch the telly, watch the politicians and watch policy development, stuff like that. I was part of policy development with corrections for the Indigenous side of stuff. But yes, it is frustrating. There is knowledge around that, but more particularly at voting time blokes would ask questions about that.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Thank you. Chair, I am happy to go back to you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I have just got a question myself, which can be answered by either Ricky or Fran or both. The peer listener group that you have spoken about that you think may be an appropriate body or group within the prison setting to do some of the education and awareness around when an election is and the importance of voting et cetera – can you just elaborate a little bit on perhaps the best way to provide some of that information to that group initially or some training, for lack of a better word, whether that is in person, on site or whether that could be an online module or something of that nature?

**RICKY M:** I have been doing a bit of work in that space. I met with the deputy commissioner a few months back and spoke with them, and they want me to go and assist in that area. But a peer-led approach ensures that the information is delivered in a way that is trusted, accessible and grounded in real experience. It also creates meaningful roles and responsibilities within the prison environment, contributing to personal development and positive engagement. From my experience I believe this model has the potential to improve participation, empower individuals and ensure that the voices of those often unheard, including people with disabilities or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders, are supported to be part of the democratic process. This is a practical, scalable approach that builds on what is already working in the prison system.

We basically have peer listeners at all prisons. It is a bit of a trusted position, and you have got to liaise between the prisoner and management. You are walking a fine line sometimes, but you are trusted. The prisoners trust the peer listeners and trust that information that is provided, so if they can put out that information about an election, it is generally taken on board.

**The CHAIR:** Would the best way to do that be onsite visits from VEC representatives or do you think you could do it in a way where it is an online training model or it is material-based and the listeners could pick that up themselves?

**RICKY M:** Possibly a bit of both, but the prison visit one seems more genuine, because when you are looking at a screen the blokes feel they cannot trust you and they do not know who you are. I have worked at a lot of prisons in a lot of different areas, and you build that little bit of a bond when you walk into a room, and they can tell if you are trusted or not. You know, you build that bond and they will listen to you or not. But online there seems to be a bit of distance.

**FRAN:** I think it is just more personal as well. With online things some people love speaking a lot and some people get left out, all that sort of thing. So I think face to face is the way to go.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Jacinta, have you got one more quick question?

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Yes, I will try and be quick.

**The CHAIR:** We have only got a couple of minutes, but I think we have got time for one.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Well, there is actually more than one question. The first one might be a yes or no answer, actually. Has anybody counted how many people within the prison system have not voted but were eligible to? And the total number if the law was changed as well? I am just wanting to know how documented it is. Maybe that is a recommendation you would suggest that this inquiry makes?

**The CHAIR:** It also may be a question for our next set of witnesses from the VEC.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Okay, next question then. I will move on quickly. Thank you so much for the work you have done in putting this submission in and coming along today. Recommendation 13 is:

The Inquiry recommend that Commissioner's Requirement 4.3.2 should be amended to specify that accessible Easy Read information must be provided to all people in prison to support their voting during an election.

Do you believe that the candidates and parties should also create accessible versions of their platforms, their policies and their how-to-vote cards?

**FRAN:** Absolutely, yes. For some that do not know how to read and write, having easy English, having pictures, having it really clear and accessible for everyone, I think is a great idea.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. That would be a very good recommendation. Ricky, do you agree with that?

**RICKY M:** Yes, I agree, because there are people that might not have a disability as such but are just in that lower socio-economic group that cannot read and have different other issues, so a simplified version would be a big help.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Including acquired disability as well, presumably?

**RICKY M:** Yes.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Am I too late for another question?

**The CHAIR:** You are, sorry. Thank you so much for appearing today. Thank you for the joint submission too. Thank you in particular, Fran and Ricky. That was really, really helpful. Jacinta, you are more than welcome to provide a written question to the group, and they may be able to respond in writing. Does that sound all right? Fantastic. Thank you.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** I will send that to the secretary.

**Witnesses withdrew.**