

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility

Melbourne – Friday 27 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*)

Dr Trishima Mitra-Kahn, Chief Executive Officer, and

Saumya Kaushik, Policy Research Lead, Women with Disabilities Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open this meeting 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 meeting by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the land each of us is 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.

I am Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit, also the committee Chair. Also with us today we have the Deputy Chair Christopher Crewther, Member for Mornington, and Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria. I would also like to welcome Dr Mitra-Kahn and Ms Kaushik, who are both from Women with Disabilities Victoria.

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. 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.

I would like to invite you both to give a brief 5-minute opening statement to the committee, and that will be followed by some questions.

Trishima MITRA-KAHN: Thank you very much. I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting. I am coming to you from the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

My name is Trishima Mitra-Kahn. I am the CEO of Women with Disabilities Victoria. I use disability-first and identity-first language. I am a proud physically disabled woman. Joining me today is our Policy Research Lead Ms Saumya Kaushik, who is also an architect by training. We probably will not spend 5 minutes in our opening statement. What I might do is just give you a brief whip around our submission, and then we can take any questions from the committee.

Firstly, thank you very much for having us here today. We welcome this opportunity to meet with you. As the committee might know, nearly one in five Victorian women has a disability. This represents a significant portion of the population who experience multiple layers of discrimination based on our gender, disability, race, age or sexual orientation. For over 30 years WDV has tirelessly worked at addressing the compounding nature of the specific barriers of ableism, systemic exclusion and sexism that mainstream organisations may overlook. We are an intersectional organisation. We also address other areas of marginalisation. Women and gender-diverse people with disabilities deserve to be treated as equal citizens. We have the right to be free of violence and to access our community and necessary services. To achieve this we believe we need to exercise our democratic right to vote, which should be easy for us to do and which should be safe for us to do.

Australia is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, also called the CRPD. Under article 29, 'Participation in political and public life', state parties are obligated to provide facilities and materials that are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use. Today we would like to talk to you about how Victoria's current voting facilities and processes could better conform to the obligations under the CRPD. We believe that the committee should invest in prioritising accessibility for all voters with disabilities. Our submission responds to the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility, and in so doing we consulted our youth experts by experience advocates, who are young women and gender-diverse

people between the ages of 18 and 26, our leadership hub members and disability advocates. WDV's disability and gender advocates are all women and gender-diverse people with a diverse range of disabilities and experience. They also live right across Victoria. Throughout this submission we have used their quotes to highlight the very real need for change.

We have also provided seven recommendations to the committee. Our first recommendation is that the committee should select voting centres using a whole-of-journey approach that meets the needs of voters with disabilities, whether or not they use a mobility device. Our second recommendation: each electorate must provide a low-sensory zone at every voting centre for voters who need a quieter, low-light space. Our third recommendation: develop a voting centre best practice accessibility and inclusion guideline, co-designed with Victorian people with disabilities. Our fourth recommendation: that the VEC should provide disability access and inclusion training and the hidden disabilities sunflower program training to all permanent staff and casual election staff. Our fifth recommendation: that each electorate must have clearly identifiable accessibility officers to assist voters with disability when needed. Our sixth recommendation: promote the VEC's voting facilitation guide and other resources to engage young people with disabilities and empower them to vote in elections. Finally, our seventh and last recommendation: develop a guide to safe voting practices for disabled victim-survivors of family and domestic violence. I thank you for your time. Ms Kaushik and I can now take questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that overview. I will go to the Deputy Chair Chris Crewther first off.

Chris CREWTER: Firstly, thank you very much for your written submission and also your time giving evidence today. It is much appreciated by me and all the committee. My question is about your recommendation 7, which is developing a guide to safe voting practices for victim-survivors. I am just wondering if you can elaborate further on that and what you see that guide looking like when it comes to safe voting practices that might be recommended within that guide for victim-survivors.

Trishima MITRA-KAHN: Saumya, would you like to take that?

Saumya KAUSHIK: Yes. Thank you for that question. Women with Disabilities Victoria also works in the prevention space, so family violence is a core part of what we do, and that is why there was a recommendation to that point. Also, one of the disability advocates mentioned that too many people fear running into perpetrators of violence if they are voting in person. There is also a likelihood that if you are living in a household with your perpetrators you probably cannot vote freely either via postal or phone voting and also are coerced into voting the way somebody else wants you to vote if you go in person and vote. Just looking at what the Victorian or Australian guidelines are around this, they are actually non-existent, and surprisingly the US and Canada have resources around that. On further investigation I came across silent voting, which prevents your personal information from being listed there, so you can actually go in the voting centres and do the first step of registering yourself, that you are there to vote, so you can be de-identified, which is great, but it is on you. If you know it, you know it; it is not a very well published piece of information, which it should be. Organisations who are supporting victim-survivors in various aspects of their living so they are safe should also have this information on hand. Voting is mandatory, but they should not have to choose between mandatory voting and their safety.

That was the whole point about bringing this up, because 65 per cent of women with disabilities report experiencing at least one form of violence, including physical or sexual violence, intimate partner violence, emotional abuse and/or stalking. Thirty per cent of women with disabilities have experienced emotional or coercive abuse from domestic partners, nearly double the rate of women without disabilities. So it is really important that we make sure that we have guidelines supporting VEC as to how to make it safe for whatever medium they choose to vote, be it in person, via phone, mail-out, mobile centres et cetera. What those guidelines can look like is something that we can take on notice, because we do not have a sample that we can utilise just yet, but this is certainly something that we would benefit from co-designing with victim-survivors with disabilities and other experts who support them in voting or other areas of their lives.

Chris CREWTER: Thank you. Just a quick follow-up question to that: there have been some conversations, both as part of this inquiry and also over the years, about expansion of different forms of remote voting, whether it comes to extra opportunities for telephone voting or internet-based or e-voting and so forth, and some recommendations that may assist some people with a disability sometimes. But do you have concerns

for people who might be in a family violence or domestic violence situation, where they might be doing that remotely from home or wherever but their partner or whoever else – I am just trying to find the right word – a user of family violence, might be influencing the vote in that situation, and would you be worried about an expansion of e-voting because of that reason?

Trishima MITRA-KAHN: I can take that, Saumya, if that is all right. I think what we were trying to say, Chris, in our submission is that it is not a one-size-fits-all policy. We were trying to say that, much like disabled women and disabled gender-diverse people in Victoria, victim-survivors are diverse as well. For some remote voting might actually be beneficial, and for some not. Therefore we said we would really like to co-design this with the VEC to ensure we do not have a one-size-fits-all policy.

Chris CREWETHER: Thank you. That is all for now, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. I will go to Sarah Mansfield for the next question.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you so much for appearing today and for your submission. I note in your submission – and this is something we heard about from other witnesses – there were invisible disabilities and the importance of recognising that but also having really clear signage, information and obvious pathways for people with invisible disabilities to know where they can access assistance if they need it. I am just wondering whether there are any practical recommendations you have for how that could be better managed. I think within it you recommended the sunflower identification within the buildings, but often issues start with accessibility outside the voting centre or even just in terms of getting information about voting generally. I am just wondering if you have got any suggestions for how some of those things could be done better.

Trishima MITRA-KAHN: Sure. I think I will hand over to Saumya to talk about that whole-of-journey approach that we have taken in terms of the suggestions we have made. Saumya, I will hand over to you.

Saumya KAUSHIK: Thank you. I am glad you have brought that up, because that was very much spoken about in our youth experts by experience consultation. I think it begins with training and it ends with training. Staff training was hugely important for them to navigate the voting centres, whether it be at the gate while they are waiting in the queue or in the centres. Easily identifiable staff with high-vis or lanyards for the hidden disabilities sunflower program or badges or pins that say ‘I’m here to help you’ are very simple interventions that are already at airports, museums and sporting venues; there is a whole list on the hidden disabilities sunflower programs website as to who has enrolled in it. So that was a big part.

The other thing that we said was while obviously casual staff would be assisting people at the early voting centres and on election day, the permanent staff, who work tirelessly much before the election starts, within the commission should also be trained in disability inclusion and the hidden disabilities sunflower program because that is where the decisions are made, and their having a wholesale understanding of what disability inclusion looks like really makes a big difference to a person with a disability experiencing how easy or difficult it is to actually go and cast their vote on voting day. They do have the choice of voting in person, and a lot of us prefer voting in person because it is seen that we are seen and we are out there as a member of our community casting our vote. Training is a very big part of that, and training competence, as mentioned in the submission, in the social model of disability – so starting right from the basics as to why we need to think about this at the outset – is hugely important. Have I answered everything? I feel I missed probably part of the question.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. In terms of voting experience – and you may or may not have information on this – is there any difference that you have heard about between, say, regional and metro voting centres in terms of accessibility and supports? Does it vary in some other way, depending on the location, that you have heard of?

Saumya KAUSHIK: One thing that we heard was the map gets activated sometime before the election – the interactive map on the website that gives you a bit more of a clearer picture of the voting centre and how you get there et cetera. We are aware that there are discrepancies between metro voting centres, regional and rural. We did not hear exactly from our experts about remote or regional voting centre access issues, but the general commentary was around: yes, they are supposed to be near public transport, but walking from that nearest bus stop for a person who has fatigue, uses a walking stick or is living with chronic pain et cetera – something that is absolutely fine for maybe a wheelchair user is not necessarily the same for a person who experiences fatigue.

Or they might look different, but they do have to do it because it is probably too late now to enrol for a postal vote. Those sorts of things did come up. That is why our recommendation about that whole-of-person journey approach is very critical, because the voting centre absolutely can be made accessible via the smaller interventions, but to get to that point might be very big task for a person with disabilities to cast their vote, and that just adds to a lot of fatigue and exhaustion afterwards. They really have to do a lot of mental prep to get there. So there is a lot of advanced planning, preparation: how will you get there – by bus, car, friends, whether your support worker is going to be accompanying you or not, because they have to vote themselves as well. So there is a lot of planning involved for them, and that was what we heard consistently. Apart from that, a lot of wayfinding signages, which is very simple but often lacking in physical spaces, can make a big difference to a person who wants to not interact with others or seek help and wants to self-navigate.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. That is what I was also going to ask about, because particularly when you are outside of a voting centre, often there can be queues. There are often lots of volunteers and everything, providing information and potentially helping to direct people as well to the voting centre. But do you think more could be done to make it clear – say you cannot stand for a long time – outside of the booth: some information to say ‘You can actually go ahead of the line if you need extra help’?

Saumya KAUSHIK: Yes. That was something that was brought up, but there is a dilemma that people do not know, who are standing in that longer line, and are not aware as to why this person is getting ahead of the line. There is that dilemma or fear that they might be called out, and it might not feel safe. Traditionally, people with disability which is ongoing do fear those discriminations, and this will just add another layer of discrimination which can be avoided. So if there is a dedicated line where it is absolutely clear, well known, that this is what it will look like, this is the person you can go and talk to, that will make a very dignified way of voting.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

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

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Saumya and Trishima, for appearing today and for your written submission. I just want to pick up on recommendation 2 in your submission, which touched on low-sensory voting. I am not sure if you caught the appearance of the VEC at our hearing on Monday, but we had quite a long discussion with them about what I think is a very important point, and that is the question about whether the low-sensory voting option is designed for our neurodiverse community. I think – and I do not want to verbal them – the VEC’s view us that it is for Victorians who are neurodivergent and that they do not want to risk expanding the remit, if you like; they want to really keep it focused on that community. But I noticed that in your submission, as was the case with a number of the witnesses we have heard in this hearing, there was actually a view that that voting option is really broadly supported and that many other Victorians with a disability also benefit from the low-sensory voting option. I am wondering if you could just expand on whether that is your view, that it is more widely applicable, and if so, how.

Trishima MITRA-KAHN: Before I let Saumya lead this, I think that is a really good question, Nathan, and I think it is more widely accessible. So yes, it is for the neurodivergent community, but I also think about my sample size of one – my anecdotal data, which is myself. For someone like me who lives with mental health issues, low noise, low-sensory overload – that really, really equips me to lead a thriving life. So I reckon, yes, on the face of it, there is a whole community of people, not necessarily those from our fabulous neurodivergent community, who could actually benefit from that – also victim-survivors, as we spoke about. Sometimes all you need is for the noise to drown out. So we would agree with you that, yes, for a number of communities it could be beneficial. I do not know, Saumya, if you want to add a little more to that or if that covered it.

Saumya KAUSHIK: Yes, I actually do. We have said low-sensory and quiet space, and the reason is that we were in conversation with our youth experts, and one of them identifies as being blind and not politically aware and is just doing it because it is mandatory and they do not want to get fined. They take a lot longer to actually sit with their support worker to work out the long ballot paper and understand what they are ticking, because while their support worker can tick, it is still somebody who is doing it on their behalf. They need that space where they think that they can actually slow down, take their time and cast their vote and feel confident that they have done the right thing, because they might be learning a lot of new things about the candidates that are listed – what their policies are et cetera – at that time, because for them it is probably just a chore that they

need to do. That is a very specific example, but low sensory, yes, for the neurodiverse community. But I think a lot of other people will benefit from a low-sensory quiet space because it will give them the opportunity to really slow down and cast their vote and feel empowered, and the next time they will take more interest because they felt supported to do that. I am talking from a young person's perspective, so they have a lot longer to actually vote. Our election cycle is pretty short – three years – so it comes around very quickly. So yes, just in terms of empowering them to know their rights and who to vote for and to feel well supported, I think it needs to be expanded not just to the neurodiverse community but to others as well.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you. If I could ask a follow-up question to that: if we take it that perhaps it does have that broader inclusive purpose, we then have a challenge that the committee has discussed, which is what you do about campaigners and candidates out the front of the venue. I appreciated in your submission you included some direct quotes that you had got through your survey process, and I noticed that a number of them touched on that component and that for all that you might do with quiet and with more lighting inside, that does not necessarily help people if outside of the venue it is very hectic and so forth. Do you have any views on whether we should restrict candidates and campaigners in what they should do outside a low-sensory voting option?

Trishima MITRA-KAHN: I might jump in here, Nathan, and say we are probably not best placed to answer that question. We have a view on what happens inside during the electoral process, but I do not think we can answer the question about campaigns and candidates.

Nathan LAMBERT: No worries at all. I might, if I can then, Chair, just ask one other question and then another follow-up. I am just wondering then if perhaps a third component of delivering that low-sensory and inclusive voting option is the training of the staff who are there. I know you touched on that in your answer to Dr Mansfield's question, but I am just wondering if you have any views on whether there should be any additional training for the staff who are there at the time on the low-sensory voting option.

Trishima MITRA-KAHN: Saumya, would you like to answer that?

Saumya KAUSHIK: It is a big yes. I think while we have physical accessibility all ticked off, it really would come down to the officers on the day managing the crowd and handling other people's expectations as well. So having trained staff in those low-sensory areas would absolutely be beneficial. Also, the other thing that we heard from our experts was that, yes, having a priority line would be a really good thing and them being made aware that there is a priority line that they can access before they actually go into the voting centres but also maybe a separate line, so the low-sensory zone is a separate area and that is where they enter from so they are actually away from the longer queues, which are for people without disabilities and families. That was something that was also said. It is like essentially on the same side having two separate voting centres and having appropriately trained staff there who are easily identified, where a person with a disability does not have to say 'I need help' but the staff makes it known that 'I am here to help you. I am equipped. I've been trained, and please ask me questions.' So there is no assumption that this person is a person with disability and they need help, because we want this to be a very dignified way of voting.

Nathan LAMBERT: Totally. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Nathan. Unfortunately, that is all the time we have. Thank you so much for the submission, thank you for appearing today and thank you for being flexible with the time as well so we could jump on and hear your insights. If you have got anything else to add to the inquiry, please feel free to send through an email to the committee.

Committee adjourned.