



IT'S TIME TO END
HOMELESSNESS

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Mr Mark Roberts
Executive Officer
Electoral Matters Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne Vic 3002
E: emc@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Mr Roberts,

Re: Electoral Matters Committee – Inquiry into Electronic Voting

Thank you for inviting Launch Housing to provide a submission to the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Electronic Voting.

Launch Housing was established in July 2015 following a merger between Hanover Welfare Services and HomeGround Services. We have an unambiguous mission – to end homelessness in Melbourne and beyond. We provide housing and homelessness services across 14 Melbourne sites, including crisis accommodation, transitional housing, and outreach support for people sleeping rough.

This submission

Launch Housing's submission does not specially address electronic voting in Victoria, but rather focuses on the steps needed so people experiencing homelessness are given the best chance to vote, and therefore participate in the democratic process, irrespective of the method of voting.

Voting and homelessness

Research by Hanover Welfare Services from 2006 to 2010 found that not being enrolled to vote was the biggest barrier to voting for people experiencing homelessness. Following the 2006 Victorian election, 2007 Federal election, 2010 Victorian election and 2010 Federal election, Hanover surveyed its clients to examine voting and homelessness with the aim of understanding how many eligible voters casted a vote, and the barriers, if any, to voting.

Across the four surveys, an average of 91% of survey participants were eligible to vote. However, when eligible voters were asked if they voted during the election, only 44% indicated they did.

When survey participants were asked why they did not vote, an average of 58% said it was because they were not enrolled to vote. This showed that a large number of Hanover clients, and by

A merger between



extension thousands of Australians, were prevented from voting at election time because they were not enrolled to vote.

Supporting people experiencing homelessness to vote

Much has changed since Hanover commenced this research. Since 2006, the Victorian Electoral Commission has run the *Homelessness not Voteless* program, which supports people experiencing homelessness to enrol to vote and vote during the election.¹ Key activities undertaken by the Victorian Electoral Commission include:

- The Homelessness Advisory Group, which guides the work of the *Homeless not Voteless* program.²
- Community Education and Engagement Officers, who provide information about the voting rights of people experiencing homelessness, and the provision of mobile voting services.²
- Options to enrol as an elector with a No Fixed Address³ or as a Silent Elector.⁴

This work is welcomed by Launch Housing, however, challenges remain: Victoria's homelessness population is rising and as the Royal Commission into Family Violence showed, there is a strong link between family violence and homelessness. These two issues are explored below.

Homelessness in Victoria

Homelessness is increasing in Victoria and therefore so is the number of people potentially excluded from voting by the practical barrier of non-enrolment. The 2011 Census found that 22,789 Victorians were homeless, a 30.9% increase from the 2006 Census. The rise in Victoria was much greater than the national average. The 2011 Census found that that 105,237 Australians were homeless, a 17% increase from the 2006 Census.⁵

Australia's next Census will be collected in August this year, providing a much needed update on the number of people experiencing homelessness. Until then, two sources of data suggest that homelessness is increasing in Victoria:

- Data collected by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that specialist homelessness services provided support to 102,793 Victorians in 2014-15. This was more than double the number of clients receiving support in New South Wales (48,262 clients) and Queensland (44,213 clients).⁶ The number of people seeking support is so high that homelessness services are struggling to keep up with demand. In 2014-15 an average of 116 clients were unable to be assisted each day in Victoria. This is much higher than the average of other Australian jurisdictions, where an average of 30.4 clients were unable to be assisted each day.⁷
- The City of Melbourne's recently completed 'StreetCount' found there were 247 people sleeping rough in and around Melbourne's CBD in June this year. This represents a 74% increase from the previous count, conducted in 2014.⁸

Family violence and homelessness

Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence revealed that family violence is the leading reason why women seek assistance from homelessness services in Victoria. Last year, 31,421 people who sought support from specialist homelessness services did so as a direct result of family violence. This number represents 31% of all people who sought support, and of this group, 86% were women.⁹

The link between family violence and homelessness means that women escaping family violence risk being excluded from voting because of their homelessness. This is another reason why Launch Housing supports the option to enrol as a Silent Elector or as a voter with No Fixed Address.

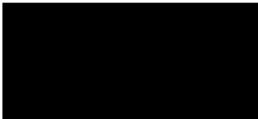
Concluding remarks

As stated at the beginning of this submission, Launch Housing does not have any specific comments relating to electronic voting beyond the observation that whatever method of voting is used, it must ensure that citizens who are homeless have the opportunity to participate in the democratic process.

As our submission shows, homelessness is rising and there is a close relationship between family violence and homelessness. Both are potential barriers to voting in Victoria.

Once again, thank you for inviting Launch Housing to make a submission to this inquiry. Please contact me if you have any questions about our submission.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Heather Holst
Acting CEO – Launch Housing

References

¹ Parliament of Victoria, *Inquiry into the conduct of the 2014 Victorian state election*, Electoral Matters Committee, 2016, pp. 104-105, Available from <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/emc/article/2568>.

² See: Victorian Electoral Commission, 'Homeless Education and Engagement Program', Available from <https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/homelessnotvoteless/>.

³ See: Victorian Electoral Commission, 'Being Homeless Doesn't Make You Vote-less', Available from <https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/Enrolment/BeingHomelessDoesntMakeYouVoteless.html>.

⁴ See: Australian Electoral Commission, 'Registration as a silent elector in Victoria', Available from http://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/pdf/forms/silent/er022sw-vic-0316.pdf.

⁵ ABS, *2049.0 – Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011*, November 2012, Available from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2049.02011?OpenDocument>.

⁶ See: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist Homelessness Services 2014-15: Clients, services, and outcomes*, Available from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/clients-services-outcomes/#t1>.

⁷ See: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist Homelessness Services 2014-15: Supplementary tables*, National, Table UNMET.4: Daily average of unmet requests for assistance, by state and territory, 2014–15, adjusted for non-response, Available from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/supplementary-tables/>.

⁸ City of Melbourne, *StreetCount highlights number of people sleeping rough*, 9 June 2016, Available from <http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/news-and-media/Pages/streetcount-highlights-number-of-people-sleeping-rough.aspx>.

⁹ State of Victoria, *Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations*, Parl Paper No 132, (2014–16), Vol 2 'A Safe Home', 2016, p. 38.