Vision Australia Submission to the Inquiry into Electronic Voting

Submitted to the Parliament of Victoria, Electoral Matters Committee.

Authorised by Ron Hooton, CEO Vision Australia

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Further information: Karen Taranto, Acting Advocacy Manager

Introduction

Eligible Australian citizens who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision, have both a constitutional and human right to cast a secret and independent vote in a manner that is equivalent to their sighted peers, in all Australian Government elections and referenda.

Accessible voting options vary across jurisdictions and Vision Australia considers options in Victoria to be well behind those in other states, with particular regard to electronic voting options.

Secret and independent voting in Australian Government elections and referenda is enabled by two aspects: technology and service delivery. Accessible technology does not automatically equate to secret and independent voting; the technology must be accompanied by service delivery strategies that allow for consultation and familiarisation, and implementation that enables an equal level of convenience and amenity, catering to both the needs and preferences of potential users.

Vision Australia continues to work with all levels of government, relevant parliamentary committees, political parties, and state and Federal electoral authorities, to promote the right of all Australians who are blind or have low vision to cast an independent, secret and verifiable vote using the most accessible options available.

Previously, we have provided input to various fora on voting in Victoria, including:

- Representation on the Victorian Electoral Commissions Equal Access Advisory Group;
- Submission to the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2014 Victorian state election;
- Appearance at the subsequent Inquiry public hearing; and
- Submission to the Victorian Auditor General Office's audit of the Victorian Electoral Commission.

Vision Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to provide comment on the terms of reference of this Inquiry, regarding:

- the forms of electronic voting currently utilised in Victoria and other jurisdictions and their effectiveness; and
- alternatives that are available that if implemented would ensure the continued integrity and security of the electronic voting system.

Further information about Vision Australia is found at the end of this submission.

Forms of electronic voting currently utilised in Victoria and their effectiveness

Vision Australia considers the form of electronic voting utilised in the most recent Victorian State Election to be ineffective, which has resulted in Victoria regressing since the 2010 Election, and falling well behind other states in providing accessible voting for people who are blind or have low vision.

At the 2014 Victorian State Election, Electronically Assisted Voting (EAV) was available at the six Accessibility Supercentres, and selected early voting centres, for the exclusive use of: voters who are blind or have low vision, voters who have English language or literacy difficulties, and those with a motor impairment. EAV was conducted using a tablet device, provided onsite, with gesture based input. The EAV system was developed and tested by the VEC, but was not widely offered for familiarisation to potential users, prior to the election period.

Without robust familiarisation opportunities, gesture based input technology is not appropriate and is ineffective for voting in State elections. Vision Australia has provided familiarisation sessions with other gesture based technologies, including the Commonwealth Bank's Albert Payment terminals. This experience has shown familiarisation is essential for users unfamiliar with gesture based inputs as they can practice until they are confident to use the technology in the real setting. Without this, users are focusing on the technology rather than the function of the technology, whether that be making electronic payments or voting.

Regardless of the negligible efforts to familiarise potential users of a tablet gesture based device, it must be emphasised that this is neither the preferred, nor the most suitable voting option, for the blindness and low vision community. The need for assistance to cast a vote and verify accuracy denies voters both their independence and the secrecy of their vote.

We also consider this model to be ineffective as only 200 voters who are blind or have low vision used EAV at the 2014 Victorian Election. We understand that those who did choose to make use of this voting option were mostly satisfied with the experience. However, there are an estimated 90,000 in Victoria who are blind or have low vision who could have made use of an accessible voting option, were both technology and service delivery improved. Confidence in technology is essential for greater uptake.

The VEC have expressed their reservation at further investing in EAV when it was utilised by such a small number of voters. However, we consider that the low uptake of EAV in the 2014 election does not indicate a lack of need and/or low demand for an easily accessible, genuinely independent, confidential, verifiable and secret vote. Rather it highlights service delivery issues encountered by people who may have otherwise chosen to make use of this voting option. This includes: the very limited availability of EAV in only a few locations and not on polling day itself, lack of familiarity and no opportunity to test the new system prior to voting, and that it was not yet well understood as a new voting method, nor has it been consistently used in different settings.

It is essential that accessible voting methods are available for the full voting period including the pre-polling period and Election Day. While some people will choose to cast a pre-poll vote, others genuinely want to participate at the same time as the rest of the community and may find it more convenient to do so. Early voting restrictions also deny people with a disability, who need to use these accessible voting options, the choice to wait until all policy announcements have been made before casting their vote.

Limiting EAV solely to people with a disability prevents family members from voting together, and prevents others from choosing these voting options. The results in the most recent NSW election demonstrate that where electronic voting systems are made available to broader categories of voters (e.g. people who are overseas, in remote areas, or voting outside their electorate, or people with disability), a critical mass of voters choosing this system can be achieved. This in turn provides greater opportunities for both assessing and improving the use of new technology.

Forms of electronic voting in other jurisdictions and their effectiveness

A number of other electronically assisted voting options are in operation and use in other jurisdictions, and their effectiveness, both in terms of technology, service delivery and enabling secret, independent and verifiable voting vary.

Besides options in Victoria and NSW, which will be explored in further detail in the next section of this submission, there were electronic voting options available to voters who are blind or have low vision at the most recent elections in Tasmania, Western Australia and Queensland.

All the models used in these elections allowed for secret, verifiable and independent voting in terms of technology, but varied in their service delivery model and subsequently enabling equal access to accessible voting.

Alternatives that are available that if implemented would ensure the continued integrity and security of the electronic voting system.

The NSW iVote system leads the way in accessible voting, with respect to both technology and service delivery. Last year, the iVote system was utilised by 284,000 people (compared to 47,000 in 2011). The percentage of people who are blind or have low vision using iVote has increased from 1.4% of the overall vote to 1.9%; this represents an almost eightfold rise in users from 668 in 2011 to 5,296 successfully registered votes in the 2015 election.

First used in 2011, the NSW iVote system provides access to online voting for: those with vision impairment and other disabilities, for people who live more than 20km away from a polling place, or for those who are interstate or overseas on Election Day, via a web-based platform. Voters can use a computer, smartphone or telephone system, depending on their preference. Voters may vote within the pre-polling period or on polling day itself. iVote has been established in close collaboration with stakeholders in the community sector, including Vision Australia, and as such continued to evolve based on user needs, preferences and demands.

The evidence is stark. At contemporary elections, 5,296 people who are blind or have low vision used the NSW accessible voting options compared with only 200 using EAV in Victoria.

Consistency is critical to building the level of comfort and confidence the blind and low vision community has in the EAV system overall. Therefore, a consistent national approach to EAV is preferable. Part of the success of iVote is attributable to its fit within existing mainstream processes and applications, for example internet and telephone banking. The everyday nature of the use of this technology has helped build the understanding and confidence of the population in taking up the iVote option.

Vision Australia also submits that low voter uptake, of an expensive parallel system, continues to needlessly impact negatively on public perceptions of people with vision impairment and the organisations that support them. The problem is not with people who have a disability; it is with the way in which the system is being offered to the population.

We submit there is a system that is already working – iVote – for which the service framework and implementation has been critical in ensuring its success. The Victorian Government can and must do better to improve accessible voting options in time for the next state election.

About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families. The service delivery areas include:

- independent living
- early childhood
- orientation and mobility
- employment
- accessible information (including alternate formats and library services)
- recreation
- aids and equipment
- social support
- Seeing Eye Dogs
- advocacy, and working collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has gained unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with our 27,500 clients and their families, and also through the involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of the organisation. Vision Australia is therefore well placed to provide advice to governments, business and the community on the challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant client consultative framework, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of the organisation to the Board and Management.