SUBMISSION NO. 3

HANOVER FOR OUR HOMELESS
HOUSING · SUPPORT · RESEARCH

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The Executive Officer
Electoral Matters Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
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29 May 2007

Dear Adem Somyurek MLC,

Thanks you for the opportunity to make a written submission to the ‘Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2006 Victorian State Election’ being conducted by the Electoral Matters Committee. As a prominent provider of homeless services, it is imperative that measures are in place to ensure that some of the most disadvantaged citizens in Victoria are effectively enfranchised.

The introduction of the Victorian Charter on Human Rights and Responsibilities by the State Government reinforces the need for practical measures to ensure all Victorians – homeless and domiciled – have an equal opportunity to participate in the electoral process and to exercise their political rights.

Hanover Welfare Services, which was created in 1964, is a large independent agency with no structural links to governments, churches or institutions. It operates various services in Melbourne, including: outreach to people sleeping rough; crisis accommodation; longer term housing; and employment support.

Hanover conducted a brief census just after the November 2006 Victorian State Election to explore if Hanover’s clients were: eligible to vote at the election; to determine the proportion who actually did vote, and to identify any barriers to voting. A total of 230 Hanover clients provided details about their participation of which 21% (or 44 respondents) were aged 18-25 years.

As outlined in the attached report, of the 208 clients eligible to vote in the State Election, only 40% (n=84) actually did vote, while the majority (60%, n=124) did not. Markedly more eligible men than eligible women did not participate in the election, reflecting perhaps a wider level of disengagement and/or transience. The vast majority of clients in crisis accommodation (such as the Southbank Crisis Centre) did not vote compared with those in transitional housing or receiving other supports.

The majority of eligible clients did not vote because they were not enrolled (63%). Some clients were enrolled to vote in another state; however, once in Victoria, they needed to...
re-enroll to vote in the Victorian State Election. The remaining reasons/barriers seem to indicate a high degree of civic disengagement, manifested by a lack of ‘interest’, ‘awareness’ in the election, ‘numerous other issues’, and disillusionment.

These are matters that we have raised with the Australian Electoral Commission as we are gravely concerned about equally high levels of disenfranchisement in the forthcoming Commonwealth Election.

To encourage a higher rate of participation in the next Victorian State Election there are two key measures we like to suggest to the Electoral Matters Committee. First, we would encourage the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) to mount a pro-active media and community education campaign targeting homeless person agencies about people enrolling. This should include a focus on increasing the awareness of both clients and staff. We are aware of the productive collaboration prior to the 2006 Victorian State Election between the Victorian Electoral Commission, the Homeless Persons Legal Clinic and the Council to Homeless Persons Victoria. We welcome this collaboration by the VEC and would encourage active discussion with the VEC in planning for subsequent Victorian State Elections with homeless providers.

Second, and of particular importance, is the provision of mobile polling facilities in homeless crisis services, such as Hanover’s Crisis Centre operating in Southbank, and our newly opened crisis service in Dandenong. This process would be an extension of the use of mobile polling facilities piloted at St Mary’s in Fitzroy during the 2006 Victorian State Election.

We trust that these issues are of interest and we look forward to the deliberations of the Electoral Matters Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Tony Keenan  
CEO

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Do The Homeless Vote?

Victorian State Election Survey

Introduction:
Hanover Welfare Services conducted a brief census just after the November 2006 Victorian State Election to explore if Hanover’s clients were:

- eligible to vote at the election,
- to determine the proportion who actually did vote, and
- to identify any barriers to voting.

Previous research (by Hanover and others) suggests that people who experience homelessness are less likely to vote than the rest of the community.

Summary of Key findings:

- The majority of eligible Hanover clients (60%) did not vote in the November 2006 Victorian State election.
- The reason for not voting was overwhelmingly related to people not being enrolled; 61% of women and 63% of men were not enrolled to vote.
- Markedly more eligible men than eligible women did not participate in the election, reflecting perhaps, a wider level of male disengagement and/or transience given that most men were single or a couple without dependent children.
- People residing in short-term crisis accommodation were less likely to vote compared to those living in more stable transitional housing.
- The issue of enrolment is primarily a matter of process, which raises questions of the accessibility of the electoral process for marginalised adults.
- Other barriers to voting seem to indicate a high degree of civic disengagement and disillusionment manifested by a lack of ‘interest’ in, and lack of ‘awareness’ of the election.

Who participated in the survey:

- A total of 230 Hanover clients provided details about their participation in the Victorian State Election held on the 25th November 2006.
- More women (57%) than men (43%) participated.
- The youngest client was aged 16 years while the oldest was aged 85. The median age for both groups was 33 years.
Figure 1: Age groups by gender (N=228)

- Figure 2 (below) shows the type of support the clients were receiving from Hanover. The majority of the clients were located in (medium-term) transitional housing (60%) while one-quarter were in (short-term) crisis accommodation. Clients receiving 'other support' such as housing information and referral, or some type of 'brief intervention' accounted for 15%.

Figure 2: Type of Hanover service (N=230)

FINDINGS

Clients eligibility to vote at the 25 November 2006 Victorian State Election:

- Of the 230 clients, a total of 208 (90%) were eligible to vote in the State Election. Of this eligible group, more 56% were women, while men made up 44% of the group.
- Eighteen clients were ineligible to vote; they either did not have citizenship or were under voting age.
Who voted in the Victorian State Election?

- Of those 208 clients eligible to vote, only 40% (84 clients) actually did vote, while 60% (124 clients) did not.
- Comparing the voting behaviour between women and men in Figure 3 (below) shows eligible women divided equally among those who did vote and those who did not (50%).

![Figure 3: Eligible clients who voted by gender (n=207)](image)

- Only 29% of eligible men voted, while the vast majority (71%) did not.
- Among the 57 women and 65 men who did not vote, the majority of women (67%) had dependent children, while the majority of men (68%) were single or a couple with no children.
- This figure may indicate that the men were less engaged in the broader community and perhaps more transient than women.
- In terms of age, the majority of eligible clients (61%) under the age of 50 did not vote.
- This was more strongly reflected among men than women. Figure 4 (below) shows that around three-quarters (72%) of eligible men, under the age of 50 years, did not vote, compared with 53% of eligible women.
Figure 5 (below) shows that the majority of eligible clients across the three program types did not vote. However, the proportion who did not vote was particularly high among clients in crisis accommodation (80% in crisis compared with 54% in transitional and 53% for 'other support').

Why didn’t people vote: reasons and barriers.

*Given that sixty percent of people eligible to vote in the last State Election did not do so, the crucial question is, why not?*

- From a list of six reasons/barriers, clients were asked to record why they did not vote. Responses were recorded for 123 clients. While it was possible to indicate multiple reasons/barriers, 73% of clients identified only one and 17% identified two.
- Overall, Figure 6 shows that the majority of eligible clients did not vote because they were not enrolled (63%). Some clients were enrolled to vote in another state; however, once in Victoria, they needed to re-enrol to vote in the Victorian State Election.
• In almost a third of cases (32%), clients reported they had 'too many other issues to deal with' while a quarter (24%) reported 'not interested in election.'

• Of those who were 'not interested in election' (n=29), around half (48%) also had 'too many other issues to deal with'.

• A relatively small proportion (15%) of eligible clients were not aware that the state election was on. In a third of cases they also reported having 'too many other issues to deal with'.

• A few clients (3%) did not vote because they were disillusioned with the process or were suspicious of the parties/politicians.

• For a handful of clients (3%), it was simply a case of missed opportunity (for example, turning up to a polling booth only to find it had closed).

• In the remaining 'other' category (2%), one client had been in custody at the time of the election, while another believed that if they did not having housing then they were not able to vote.

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**Figure 6: Reasons/barriers to voting (n=124)**

- Other
- Missed opportunity
- Disillusioned/distrust politicians
- Too many other issues to deal with
- Not interested in election
- Not aware election was on
- Not enrolled to vote

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• Focusing on the common reasons for not voting, Figure 7 shows that there were only minor differences between women and men. Not being enrolled was the most common reason cited by both women (61%) and men (63%).

• Irrespective of program type, the most common reason for not voting was because clients were not enrolled. Figure 8 shows that it was a particularly widespread reason among clients in crisis accommodation (69%) and among clients who received 'other support' (78%).

• Those who received ‘other support’ commonly cited ‘too many other issues to deal with’ (56%) as a reason/barrier for not voting.