

Blind Citizens Australia

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BLIND CITIZENS AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION: PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE FUNCTIONS AND ADMINISTRATION OF VOTING CENTRES (INCLUDING JOINT VOTING CENTRES) GIVING CONSIDERATION TO ISSUES OF LOCATION, ACCESSIBILITY, PARTICIPATION AND TRANSPARENCY

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Blind Citizens Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to participate in this inquiry.

Blind Citizens Australia is the peak national representative organisation of and for people who are blind or vision impaired. Our mission is to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs. As the national peak body we have over 3100 individual members, 16 branches nationwide; in metropolitan, regional and rural locations and 13 affiliate organisations that represent the interests of Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

We have over 1,000 individual members who reside in Victoria, several Victoria centred membership branches and several organisational members located in Victoria.

Blind Citizens Australia is aware of the ongoing work that the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) undertakes in its effort to improve access to the democratic process for Victorians with a disability. Blind Citizens Australia has been in consultation with the VEC, working together to provide access to an independent, secret and verifiable ballot for Victorian voters who are blind or vision impaired.

Full and equal access to the democratic process is a fundamental human right and Blind Citizens Australia encourages the Victorian Government to continue to provide the greatest level of access to the political process for all Victorians.

In reviewing the Terms of Reference, Blind Citizens Australia will focus on issues that are of particular significance to voters who are blind or vision impaired. A well balanced and

well functioning electoral system is no less important for voters who are blind or vision impaired; however the means by which the electoral process functions for people with vision impairment can sometimes require additional consideration.

Location

While we understand that polling sites are selected by the VEC on an as-needed basis, the issue of location is one that can have significant impact on the participation in the electoral process for people who are blind or vision impaired. As people who have vision impairment are reliant on public transport to access their community, it is important that polling sites in all electorates be located close to public transport systems. Additionally, orientation and wayfinding are critical means by which people who are blind or vision impaired navigate from transport to buildings and destinations. As such, it is important that polling sites be located in areas that are easily navigated to and from public transport pickup and drop-off points.

Clear and high contrast large print signage can assist people with vision impairment to navigate their way independently to polling sites and to identify where to go once in a polling site. This can be quite simple to implement and can make a marked difference to the comfort of the voter in knowing where to go. Raised tactile and Braille signage is helpful for people who are blind to navigate inside buildings, identify elevators, floors and facilities. Accessible signage should be considered when selecting suitable polling sites and after a site has been chosen.

Having readily identifiable and welcoming electoral staff located outside the entrance to polling sites can also assist

in directing all voters, not just those who are blind or vision impaired, to the polling site.

It is also imperative that all polling sites, irrespective of how accessible they may be, are clear and unobstructed at all times to allow the independent and safe movement of all voters.

Accessibility

Access to the political process, including the polling station, is not restricted to physical access. There are many barriers impeding full and equitable access to participation in the electoral process that voters who are blind or vision impaired face when endeavouring to enjoy their enfranchisement.

All election information and educational material produced by the Victorian Government or the VEC needs to be readily available in alternate formats; standard print, large print, audio, braille and e-text in order that all eligible voters can independently make their own decisions about where, how, when and for whom they cast their ballot.

It is in the interest of all civil society that Government, electoral commissions and political party websites be designed using accessibility guidelines. Standards developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) <http://www.w3.org/> allow access to all web-based information for voters who are blind or vision impaired who use screen-reading software.

Whilst we understand that political party publications do not fall under the purview of the VEC, accessible information about political parties, policy platforms and candidates is an integral aspect of political participation. It is integral that political parties are made aware of the importance of

information in alternate formats in order that all voters can be adequately informed.

As previously stated, Blind Citizens Australia applauds the Victorian Government and the VEC's efforts to provide accessible ballot options for voters who are blind or vision impaired. We believe that it is important that these alternatives continue to include; braille ballots (which will be included for the first time at the Victorian state election), Closed Circuit Television magnifiers (CCTVs), electronically assisted voting kiosks and electronically assisted telephone voting systems. Our expectation is that these alternative voting mechanisms continue to be expanded in order to provide access to the ballot for all eligible Victorian voters.

Blind Citizens Australia asserts that the future of accessible voting should include, at minimum;

- A greater commitment to the provision of electronically assisted telephone polling services and voting kiosks in addition to what has been committed to for the 2010 Victorian State Election
- 2 copies each of large print and braille instructions at sites that offer electronic assisted voting which explain how to use the system independently, which would supplement information provided by VEC staff
- the continuation of opt-in Braille ballots, and
- one CCTV at sites that have a high volume of voters who are vision impaired

At present, electronic assisted voting can is only available during the early voting period at dedicated early voting centres. Blind Citizens Australia asserts that electronic assisted voting should also be made available on Election Day to enable voters to cast their vote at the same time and

in an equivalent manner to the rest of the community, This values the inherent dignity of people with a disability, which is in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The training of VEC staff is also important. It is vital that all staff working with VEC during the early voting period and/or on Election Day are provided with basic cultural and disability awareness training to increase their understanding of the sometimes special needs of these groups. As an example, it is important for staff to provide clear and concise verbal directions and to have knowledge of basic sighted guide techniques to assist a person who is blind or vision impaired to safely navigate a polling site.

Participation

Participation in Victorian State and Local government elections is not only a right but also a responsibility held by all eligible voters; as such every effort to make the process fully accessible must be undertaken by the Victorian Government and the VEC.

Participation in the electoral process for Victorians who are blind or vision impaired can be dependent on the principles we have discussed above, however Blind Citizens Australia is aware that for many regional and rural Victorian residents participation in the community can also be restricted by access to public transport, reliable and robust telecommunication services and timely and accessible information. While these issues may be common to many regional and rural Victorians, they often play a more significant role in community participation for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Blind Citizens Australia recommends that particular consideration and effort be undertaken to promote the dismantling of the barriers that prohibit regional and rural voters who are blind or vision impaired from having full and equitable access and participation in the political process.

We also believe that there is scope to further enable the participation of marginalised groups, including people with dual sensory disabilities (such as deafblindness) who will not directly benefit from the expansion of electronically assisted voting systems. We believe that further research should be undertaken to determine whether adaptive equipment could be used in conjunction with a voting kiosk or phone system to enable greater participation across a range of disabilities.

Conclusion

In closing, we commend the work undertaken by VEC in the lead up to the 2010 Victorian Election. We recommend that this Committee adopt our above recommendations to ensure greater participation and accessibility of the voting process.