

The Executive Officer  
Electoral Matters Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

28 May 2010

Dear Committee Members

**PILCH HOMELESS PERSONS' LEGAL CLINIC SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY  
INQUIRY INTO THE FUNCTIONS AND ADMINISTRATION OF VOTING CENTRES**

The PILCH Homeless Persons Legal Clinic (**HPLC**) welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Electoral Matters Committee (**Committee**) inquiry into the functions and administration of voting centres (including joint voting centres) giving consideration to location, accessibility, participation and transparency.

**Introduction**

The Public Interest Law Clearing House (Vic) Inc (**PILCH**) is a leading Victorian, not-for-profit organisation. It is committed to furthering the public interest, improving access to justice and protecting human rights by facilitating the provision of pro bono legal services and undertaking law reform, policy work and legal education. In carrying out its mission, PILCH seeks to:

- address disadvantage and marginalisation in the community;
- effect structural change to address injustice;
- foster a strong pro bono culture in Victoria; and
- increase the pro bono capacity of the legal profession.

The HPLC is a project of PILCH. The HPLC is a specialist legal service that provides free legal assistance and advocacy to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness within a human rights framework. Legal assistance is provided by pro bono lawyers at 14 homelessness assistance services around metropolitan Melbourne and in Geelong and Bendigo to facilitate direct access by clients and to provide a service that works closely and collaboratively with other homelessness service providers.

The HPLC also undertakes significant law reform, public policy, advocacy, legal education and community development activities to promote and protect the fundamental human rights of people experiencing homelessness.

**Submission to the Committee**

In Victoria and throughout Australia, people experiencing homelessness continue to face great difficulties in exercising their right to vote. This right has been recognised by the United Nations

Human Rights Committee as a fundamental human right that lies at the core of democratic government based on the consent of the people.

The HPLC has been working for a number of years to address the numerous legislative and practical barriers that prevent people experiencing homelessness from participating in the electoral process at the local, state and federal level. We have identified a number of impediments to enrolments and voting for people experiencing homelessness, including:

- social exclusion;
- lack of information and misinformation about enrolment and voting (particularly itinerant enrolment);
- inaccessibility of enrolment information; and
- the inaccessibility of voting stations.

We refer you to the submission the HPLC prepared in response to the Federal Government's Electoral Reform Green Paper . Strengthening Australia's Democracy. This submission, *Homeless and I vote+* (dated 27 November 2009) is **attached** for your consideration.

In addition to the issues raised in this submission, some key issues and recommendations that are relevant to the Committee's terms of reference are set out below.

#### **a) Location**

At the 2006 Victorian Election a mobile polling booth was placed at St Mary's House of Welcome in Fitzroy with the aim of increasing homeless voter participation. Over the course of the day, 85 people experiencing homelessness used the polling booth and exercised their right to vote.

The HPLC recommends that additional mobile polling booths should be provided at locations which people experiencing homelessness are already engaged with and are therefore more likely to attend on election day. Sites that may be appropriate include Centrelink and Medicare offices and homelessness service providers.

#### **b) Accessibility**

The HPLC identifies the inaccessibility of voting stations as a practical barrier that prevents people experiencing homelessness from participating in the electoral process. In addition to the placement of mobile polling booths in accessible and approachable locations, the HPLC recommends that election day site managers and volunteers should be given training regarding ways to assist people experiencing homelessness on election day.

The HPLC also recommends that a consumer consultant trained or experienced in issues relating to homelessness be engaged to assist at mobile polling booths on election day.

#### **c) Participation**

With a view to increasing participation, the HPLC recommends the development and early distribution of information kits (including enrolment forms) containing clear and relevant information

for homeless people and homelessness service providers regarding enrolment and voting procedures. Medicare, Centrelink and homelessness service providers should be engaged to ensure that, wherever possible, they encourage and assist people to (a) enrol to vote, and (b) vote on election day.

The HPLC also recommends a targeted advertising campaign to raise awareness about the importance of voting and to encourage people experiencing homelessness to enrol and vote. This advertising campaign could take the form of, for example, posters displayed at high frequency contact points for homeless Victorians, including Centrelink and Medicare offices and homelessness service providers.

We also recommend the use of larger scale advertising, such as billboards, in locations and suburbs with high levels of homelessness.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry.

Please contact Lucy Adams on (03) 8636 4408 if you have any queries in relation to this submission.

Yours sincerely

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