



PILCH

Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic

## **AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION - 2007 FEDERAL ELECTION ACTION PLAN FOR ENABLING AND EMPOWERING HOMELESS PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS**

### **Information about Homelessness and Voting**

On 10 October 2005, the Federal Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters tabled its *Report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto*. As you may be aware, the Report made the following findings in relation to homelessness and voting:

- The right to vote is a fundamental human right that is not exercisable by some people due to disadvantage and social circumstances.
- At the time of the 2004 Federal Election, up to 76 per cent of the 64,000 homeless people who were eligible to vote did not do so.
- At least 64 per cent of homeless people want to vote, but do not due to the complexity of the enrolment and voting process.
- Further impediments to enrolments and voting for homeless people include: social exclusion; lack of information and misinformation about enrolment and voting (particularly itinerant enrolment); inaccessibility of enrolment information; and the inaccessibility of voting stations.

### **Our Campaign**

The PILCH Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic (**Clinic**) and the Council to Homeless Persons (**CHP**) have been working together 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. Integral to this work has been a focus on public awareness and education strategies to better enable and empower homeless people to exercise their right to vote.

In the lead up to the 2006 Victorian Election, the Clinic and CHP worked closely with the Victorian Electoral Commission (**VEC**) on public awareness and education strategies as well as some more practical mechanisms to assist homeless people to participate in the electoral process. This consultation and partnership with the VEC resulted in the implementation of several important initiatives in the lead up to the Victorian Election. We note that our collaboration with the VEC has continued past the Election and we are currently working on a number of joint projects.

Set out below is a list of recommended actions for the Australian Electoral Commission (**AEC**) to implement in the lead up to and for the 2007 Federal Election.

### **Recommended Actions**

The Clinic and CHP urge the AEC to commit to the following public awareness and education strategies in the lead up to the 2007 Federal Election. We recommend that the AEC consults with the VEC and draws on the expertise that it has already developed in this area. More importantly, we would also like to emphasise the need for the AEC to engage genuinely and

directly with people experiencing homelessness as well as with the homelessness sector more broadly in relation to these issues.

### ***Enrolment***

- Early production and distribution of an information kit containing relevant and accessible information for homeless people and homelessness service providers regarding enrolment and voting procedures for no fixed address and ordinary electors. This information kit should include an explanation of the various steps in relation to enrolment and voting, as well as an explanation of the recent changes to the Commonwealth Electoral Act regarding proof of identity and closure of the electoral roll. It is crucial that this information kit is developed as early as possible this year. We attach a number of brochures and fact sheets that were produced by the VEC and by our organisations in the lead up to the 2006 Victorian Election for you information.
- Engagement with homelessness service providers and provision of information, education and resources to equip them to inform people experiencing homelessness about the importance of voting, eligibility for enrolment and procedures for enrolment and, where possible, assist them to enrol. For example, on 22 February this year, with the assistance of the VEC, St Mary's House of Welcome in Fitzroy hosted an Enrolment Day at which 56 people enrolled to vote.
- Planned and coordinated early distribution of an information kit (including relevant enrolment forms) to high frequency contact points, such as Centrelink and Medicare. The AEC should also engage with Centrelink and Medicare staff to ensure that, where possible, they encourage and assist people to enrol to vote.
- Early implementation of 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 that would be displayed in areas and in services that homeless people tend to frequent (including Centrelink and Medicare). We also suggest that the AEC considers placing some larger scale advertising, such as billboards, in locations and suburbs that homeless people frequent. We would be happy to assist you to settle appropriate locations in Victoria.

### ***Voting***

- Early roll-out of training for electoral site managers and volunteers addressing the needs of and issues that affect people experiencing homelessness and how electoral workers might assist people from that group on Election Day.
- Provision of information, education and resources to homelessness assistance services to equip them to inform people experiencing homelessness about the process for voting, to accompany people experiencing homelessness to voting stations, and to provide people experiencing homelessness with assistance to cast their ballots.
- Ensuring that voting stations are established at locations that are easily accessible to, and appropriate to, people experiencing homelessness. We would be happy to assist you to settle appropriate locations in Victoria.
- Early planning for the installation of mobile polling booths at frequented by people experiencing homelessness sites (including Centrelink and homelessness service providers). Where possible, this should involve the employment of consumer consultants to assist at mobile polling booths on Election Day. At the Victorian Election last year, a mobile polling booth was placed at St Mary's House of Welcome in Fitzroy. Over the course of the day 85 homeless people used the polling boot at St Mary's House of Welcome to exercise their right

to vote. We would be happy to assist you to settle appropriate locations and service providers for mobile polling booths in Victoria.

#### **Questions for the AEC - Amendments to the Electoral Act**

We note that the amendments to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act* regarding proof of identity requirements and the closing of the electoral roll will significantly impair the ability of people experiencing homelessness (amongst many other groups) to participate in the electoral process. Set out below are three points on which we seek clarification.

- Please clarify the amendments and the dates on which these will take effect, particularly those around proof of identity requirements.
- How do you propose to deal with these changes and in particular how do you propose to communicate these changes to people experiencing homelessness?
- What strategies and programs do you have in place to ensure that homeless people are not further disenfranchised by these amendments?

#### **Where to from here?**

We urge the AEC to implement the action plan set out above in the lead up to the 2007 Federal Election. It is crucial that the steps in relation to the enrolment are implemented as quickly as possible given the recent legislative amendments regarding closure of the electoral roll and proof of identity requirements that will only compound the difficulties experienced by homeless people already face when attempting to engage with the electoral process.

Furthermore, we urge the AEC to ensure that this work is not a one-off initiative but rather forms part of an ongoing commitment on the part of the AEC to enabling and empowering homeless people to enrol to vote, exercise their right to vote and meaningfully participate in the democratic process.

#### **For more information, please contact:**

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