

Homelessness NSW



Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters – Inquiry into the 2013 Federal Election

Applicant Details

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Which stakeholder(s) do you represent: Homeless people and homeless service providers
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Homelessness NSW is a peak body representing individuals and services with an interest in homelessness in NSW. Our mission is to work towards the prevention and elimination of homelessness.

We work collaboratively with Governments, other peak bodies, community organisations and the private sector to advocate for homeless people, those at risk of homelessness and services that support them. Homelessness NSW plays a coordination, advocacy, policy development, leadership and information dissemination role for the homelessness sector in New South Wales.

At the time of the 2011 Census it was estimated that there were 105,237 people homeless in Australia. This was an increase of nearly 16,000 people since the 2006 Census.ⁱ 6,800 of the people experiencing homelessness were 'rough sleepers'; over 17,000 were residing in boarding houses and over 21,000 in specialist supported accommodation.

It is the mark of a healthy community how it protects its most vulnerable and disenfranchised. Being homeless is a complex issue, created by the failure of a variety of service systems. Homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless are affected by common themes that include social exclusion, an ineffective service system, lack of access to housing that is affordable to people on low incomes and a lack of support and supported accommodation services.

Being homeless is being without - without shelter, without resources, without support, without recognition, without the power to influence society. Voting gives people the ability to influence the society in which they live. For people who are homeless it is not only their democratic right, it can also give them self-worth. We refer the Committee to the Research Report 6 - Electorally Engaging the Homeless: Appendix 1 where over 60% of homeless participants expressed a desire to vote.ⁱⁱ It has been argued the more people believe themselves to be disengaged from society the more likely they are susceptible to civic abstention.ⁱⁱⁱ As homelessness is as stark an indicator of societal disengagement we would suggest that a figure of over 60% wanting to participate is high.

Homelessness NSW congratulates the efforts and commitment of the AEC in enabling more people experiencing homelessness to participate in the electoral process; we are pleased that a search for the word 'homeless' on the AEC website includes information on enrolment for people experiencing homelessness. We support the current phraseology

I have no fixed residential address / I am homeless, can I enrol to vote?

If you are an Australian citizen 18 years or over, and have no real place of living, you may be eligible to enrol as a person with no fixed address.

as appropriate. We believe that this would enable either individuals or service providers to locate the correct information.

Homelessness NSW has been informed by our members that many women escaping domestic violence are unwilling to attend polling booths and would prefer to postal vote. In regional and remote areas this is particularly an issue, as in some communities there are only 1 or 2 polling places. As such, we have been pleased to see 'reasonable fear for your safety' included as a legitimate reason to use a postal vote.

Homelessness NSW understands that data is not collected on the reasons for postal or early voting. We believe that the collation of this data could be useful as part of the evidence base on the level of domestic violence, on national, state and regional levels. This data would be of value across a number of government program areas relating to domestic violence and homelessness.

Homelessness NSW supports the continued use of social media to advertise by the AEC in the lead up to elections. Anecdotal evidence shows that young people experiencing homelessness extensively use social media and continued use of social media by electoral authorities would assist and encourage engagement by this cohort.

Homelessness NSW supports the engagement of the AEC with peak bodies and services working with people experiencing homelessness to encourage participation. In the build up to the 2013 election the AEC met with Homelessness NSW members and worked with many of them on strategies to enhance participation.

Homelessness NSW believes that with the current reliance on manual voting any requirement forcing voters to have a form of identity with them to vote would disenfranchise many people experiencing homelessness. As was indicated earlier in the data on who is homeless many of these cohorts would have difficulty ensuring they had identification with them at a point in time. This would be especially relevant for rough sleepers but also problematic for people residing in boarding houses or in a specialist supported accommodation. We have also been informed by our members that due to the urgency of the situation, or a need for secrecy, some women escaping domestic violence also have a lack of identification. We believe that if full electronic voting was implemented this issue could be re-examined.

We thank you for allowing us to highlight the issues for people experiencing homelessness and the electoral system.

ⁱ [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/EB59F237159F7102CA257AB100170B61/\\$File/20490_2011.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/EB59F237159F7102CA257AB100170B61/$File/20490_2011.pdf)

ⁱⁱ http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/paper6/app01.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Hill, L. (2000), 'Compulsory voting, political shyness and welfare outcomes', *Journal of Sociology*, Vol.36, No.1. pp.35–41