



Homelessness Australia

Creating a framework for ending homelessness

Submission to the Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election.

Contact:
Simon Smith
Executive Officer
02 6247 7744
0418 452 830

Introduction

Homelessness Australia is the national peak body for the homelessness sector. We welcome this opportunity to comment on the 2007 Federal election. Our submission has been prepared against the Inquiry's first term of reference,

That the following matters be referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for inquiry and report:

1. All aspects of the 2007 Federal election and matters related thereto,

As may be expected, people experiencing homelessness face a number of barriers to participating in the electoral process due to their relatively disadvantaged position in society. It is understandable that voting may not be seen as a priority given the issues involved in being homeless. These can include lacking safety and security, being disconnected from one's support and social network and finding it extremely difficult to participate in the community, including in employment. However, participating in the electoral process can help a person become connected with mainstream society, reconnect with the community, and have their voice and concerns heard through their choice of issues and political representation.

Our major concern is to ensure that people experiencing homelessness have every opportunity to vote at elections. We acknowledge the work that the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) currently does to promote the right of people who are homeless to be able to vote. However, there are a number of aspects relating to the 2007 Federal election where the ability of people who are homeless to vote could have been better supported.

As the national peak body, we would like to use this submission to draw the committee's attention to our following concerns and suggestions for improvement of the electoral process.

Changes to the Electoral Enrollment Deadlines

Since the 2004 federal election, new deadlines have been introduced that changed the amount of time available for a person to enroll or make changes to their details on the electoral roll.

It had previously been the case that voters were given a 7 day grace period from the date the election writ was issued. Now, people must enroll by 8pm on the same day the writs are issued if they are enrolling for the first time or are re-enrolling after having been removed from the electoral roll. You can enroll up to three working days later if you are turning 18 between the day the election writs

are issued and the day of the election, or if you are to become an Australian citizen between those dates.

People who are experiencing homelessness are less able to access mainstream media relative to the rest of the population. The ability to be aware of the timing of the close of the electoral roll would be impaired.

In addition, people who are homeless are intrinsically disadvantaged in terms of being able to ensure their enrollment details are up to date before the close of the rolls. They may find it difficult to meet the costs of transport to attend an AEC office, and often will not have a postal address at which to receive enrolment forms.

The small grace period is also an added issue for homeless young people, who may not have voted in elections previously. Young people make up a significant minority of the homeless population.

Recommendation 1

Homelessness Australia recommends that at a minimum there should be a return to a 7 day grace period for enrollment, as was the case during the 2004 Federal Election, if not an extension of the grace period as greatly as possible.

Engagement of homeless Australians in the electoral process

Many people dealing with homelessness already find themselves disconnected from the mainstream community and the electoral process.

Any activities that may increase the awareness of the ability and right to vote for people who are homelessness would be welcome. There are also practical measures that can be followed to increase the accessibility of the voting process to homeless people that would be seen as a positive step forward.

Recommendation 2

More extensive education and training for electoral site managers and volunteers on how they can assist homeless people in exercising their right to vote.

Recommendation 3

Polling places are set up in areas that are easily accessible and highly visible to people who are homeless. Mobile polling booths should be able to routinely visit

those places that are regularly attended by homeless persons (i.e. Centrelink, emergency accommodation and SAAP services, etc).

Criteria on who may register as a person with “no fixed address” needs to be expanded

The rules on who may enroll using the “no fixed address” criteria are also overly stringent and unrealistic. Many homeless people may move between short term accommodations, yet you may only enroll with “no fixed address” if you have not been living in any address for more than one month.

If you are homeless or at risk of homelessness and enroll as a normal voter, you may then be fined if you fail to vote. Although this fine is seen as a “slap on the wrists”, for homeless persons, fines of \$20 or \$50 are quite significant for people with limited income, as well as a result in a continued distrust of the justice system and electoral processes. Though there are provisions made that allow reasonable excuses for failing to vote, those reasons are not publicly listed or available, except for the provision of religious reasons.

Finally, if you manage to successfully register on the electoral roll with “no fixed address”, and then fail to vote in an election, you are subsequently removed, ensuring you have to go through the entire process again if you wish to vote in future elections. This may be in spite of the fact that your circumstances have not significantly changed in any way. This only increases the resentment and cynicism, the general feeling of victimisation, and the feeling of the futility amongst the homeless population.

Recommendation 4

A reason of “homelessness” should be seen as sufficient to register an individual with “no fixed address”

Recommendation 5

A reason of “homelessness” should be seen as sufficient reason for failing to vote on Election Day. A list of valid reasons should be publicly stated and available

Recommendation 6

Individuals who successfully register with “no fixed address” should not be removed from the electoral roll if they fail to vote in an election

Provisions for those escaping from Domestic Violence

Persons escaping from Domestic Violence may be unwilling to attend polling places due to the risk of being identified, found by their attackers, or being at risk of further harm. This issue is of particular concern in rural or remote areas where there may be only one reasonably accessible location available for polling.

Recommendation 7

Domestic violence or fear of personal safety should be a valid reason for requesting a postal vote