

INQUIRY INTO 2008 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Organisation: Homelessness NSW

Name: Ms Sue Cripps

Position: CEO

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Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Inquiry into 2008 Local Government Elections

Homelessness NSW is the peak body for the adult homelessness sector in New South Wales. We represent homeless services for single men, single women and families. We work collaboratively with Governments, other peak bodies, community organisations and the private sector to advocate for homeless people and services that support them.

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.

At the time of the 2006 Census it was estimated that there were 27, 374 people homeless in NSW¹.

According to the *SAAP Act 1994* a person is homeless if they do not have access to safe, secure and adequate housing. A person is considered not to have access to safe, secure and adequate housing if the only housing to which they have access:

- damages, or is likely to damage, their health; or
- threatens their safety; or
- marginalises them through failing to provide access to adequate personal amenities; or the economic and social supports that a home normally affords; or

¹ Chamberlain, C and Mckenzie, D, 2008 *Counting the Homeless 2006*

- places them in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing; or
- has no security of tenure-that is, they have no legal right to continued occupation of their home.
- A person is also considered homeless if he or she is living in accommodation provided by a SAAP agency or some other form of emergency accommodation.

Homelessness NSW believes that the right to adequate safe housing is a fundamental human right. This right to housing is set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and a number of other widely adhered to international declarations. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Similarly under Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the right to vote is also a declared human right.

Being homeless is being without - without shelter, without resources, without support, without recognition, without power to influence society. Voting gives people the ability to influence the society in which they live. For people who are homeless it is a not only their democratic right, it also can give them self worth. They are being listened to.

Homelessness NSW made a detailed submission to the Committee on the 2007 State Election and we will only comment where we are aware of any changes to our evidence from the inquiry.

In our submission on the 2007 State Election we highlighted that a search on the NSW Electoral Commission website for either 'homelessness' or 'homeless' you would find no response. We are pleased to note that this has been partially remedied.



Now when a search is made for 'homeless' there is some success. However when that 'hit' is followed it takes the user to *Elector with no fixed address*. Many people experiencing homelessness, especially long-term homelessness, would not necessarily see themselves as 'no fixed address', but as homeless. We would also suggest that for many other people it may be confusing to seek information on 'homelessness' and find information on 'no fixed address'.

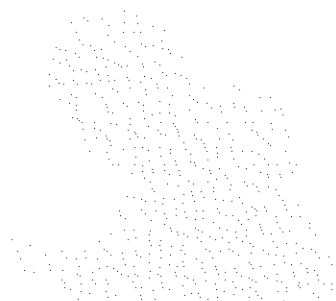
Homelessness NSW would recommend that the NSW Electoral Commission continue to update their website so people seeking information on voting when homeless find that information in a more accessible and logical format.

Homelessness NSW continues to be 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. In some communities there are only 1 or 2 polling places. There is still no capacity for people to use 'fear for physical safety' as a legitimate reason to use a postal vote. Homelessness NSW raised this in our previous submission and again would again suggest that the NSW Electoral Commission take this matter to the Electoral Council of Australia for discussion.

Homelessness NSW are pleased that there is now information on the NSW Electoral Commission website on becoming a silent voter, but we would repeat our recommendation that this information also be made available to organisations that provide services to women escaping domestic violence.

Homelessness NSW also believe that people applying for employment at the Commission, especially as polling day officials, should be asked if they are the subject of a domestic violence or any other criminal proceedings, including an apprehended violence order.

For fairly obvious reasons many people who are rough sleeping carry minimal possessions, including limited, if any, identification, accordingly Homelessness NSW continues to be concerned about any provision that forces people to produce proof of identity before voting could be discriminatory against people who sleep rough and other people who are homeless.



As our members continue to advise us that the rate of enrolment by indigenous Australians who are homeless continues to be very poor Homelessness NSW would maintain our advocacy for ongoing culturally appropriate education and training sessions to remedy this situation.

Once again thank you for allowing us to comment and should you require further information on the contents of this submission, please contact Digby Hughes, Policy & Research Officer on phone: [REDACTED] or email:

[REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sue Cripps', with a stylized, flowing script.

Sue Cripps
CEO
12 May 2009

