

## **Administration of the 2011 NSW election and related matters**

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**Homelessness NSW**



Submission to Joint Standing  
Committee on Electoral  
Matters - Administration of  
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related matters

## Applicant Details

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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 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 2006 Census it was estimated that there were 27,374 people homeless in NSW<sup>1</sup>.

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.

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. Unfortunately many people experiencing homelessness are denied the right to vote.

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.

Homelessness NSW congratulate the efforts and commitment of the NSW Electoral Commission in enabling more people experiencing homelessness to participate in the electoral process. Since the 2007 election there has been some improvements; however there is more to do to ensure the democratic rights of people experiencing homelessness are recognised.

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. Unfortunately this is still the case. There is some information available under *Enrol to vote - Special Category Enrolment*. This 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

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<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain, C and McKenzie, D, 2008 *Counting the Homeless 2006*

address', but as homeless. We also believe that locating this information is unnecessarily complicated and is not as easily locatable as it should be.

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

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. There is no capacity for people to use 'fear for physical safety' as a legitimate reason to use a postal vote. Homelessness NSW has raised this in previous submissions and again would recommend that the NSW Electoral Commission take this matter to the Electoral Council of Australia for discussion.

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. This is currently not the case, and it is possible for a victim of domestic and/or family violence to be traced via the information available to electoral officials.

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

Homelessness NSW supports the continued use of social media to advertise by the NSW Electoral Commission 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 should assist engagement by these people.

Similarly Homelessness NSW would support the continued use of iVote as an engagement strategy to allow, particularly, young people experiencing homelessness to participate in the electoral process.

Homelessness NSW would appreciate the opportunity of working with the NSW Electoral Commission in developing a strategy ensuring that the needs of people experiencing homelessness are ensured.

## **Recommendations**

1. The NSW Electoral Commission ensures that easily accessible information is available on their website to ensure people experiencing homelessness can locate it.
2. The NSW Electoral Commission takes the matter of 'fear for physical safety' as grounds for a postal vote to the Electoral Council of Australia for discussion.
3. The NSW Electoral Commission ensures that people applying for temporary employment are not subject to domestic violence proceeding, including an apprehended violence order.