

TRANSCRIPT

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into electronic voting

Melbourne — 22 August 2016

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Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee

The CHAIR — We are running ahead of schedule, so thank you very much.

Mr KEENAN — Very efficient.

The CHAIR — Yes, everyone is efficient and everyone is in advance of time. Tony, thank you very much for your willingness to come along today —

Mr KEENAN — Thanks for your interest.

The CHAIR — and to Launch Housing for your submission and you being prepared to expand on it. Can I just check that you have received the guide to giving evidence at a public hearing?

Mr KEENAN — I have, yes.

The CHAIR — Okay. So you will understand the issue of parliamentary privilege; you have done this a million times before.

Mr KEENAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Can I introduce the committee members? Obviously you are very familiar with me. I was just commenting that I think we first met in 1992 when I was first elected —

Mr KEENAN — That's right.

The CHAIR — and I did make the comment that both of us have changed.

Mr KEENAN — Yes. I think I had hair and a waistline then.

The CHAIR — Well, I still have hair but the latter has gone as well! This is our first day of public hearing for this very, very interesting reference. We are having hearings over two days. If I could ask you when you commence your evidence to indicate your full name and business address and clarify if you are appearing on behalf of an organisation or whether you are appearing in a personal capacity. Hansard is here to record your evidence and the evidence, of course, will be placed on our website and therefore will be public. Again, thank you for your willingness to come along and if I could ask you to go through those preliminaries of whether you are officially representing your organisation or not.

Mr KEENAN — My full name is Anthony William Keenan. I am the CEO of Launch Housing and I making the submission on behalf of Launch Housing, so representing the organisation. Our business address is 68 Oxford Street, Collingwood, 3066. For those of you who do not know, Launch Housing is a relatively new organisation, formed through a merger of Hanover welfare services and HomeGround Services. We have been operating a little over one year. We commenced on 1 July 2015, and we have an unambiguous mission to end homelessness. I think we were the two organisations around Melbourne with a sole mission on homelessness, so it was a fairly natural merger. Hanover in particular had an interest in participation of people experiencing homelessness in voting. We had done four surveys of clients for both federal and state elections, and that evidence showed pretty overwhelmingly that there was a high number of people not voting and that the biggest driver was not being enrolled. Our efforts and our advocacy around policy and programs has been about enrolment.

The second thing I would say is whilst we do not know the full number of people who experience homelessness in a year, we have two main data sources. We have a point-in-time count, which is the census. There has been a little bit about the census in the media. Next year we will know the 2016 figure, but in 2011 there had been a marked increase, but in particular a marked increase in Victoria.

The other thing I would say is that Victoria has historically, even pre-government funding, had more services. I think it is the history and culture of Melbourne, in particular, and Victoria as the head of philanthropy and the base of a lot of community organisations, so we had always had more services. That is shown in the national census. Of the 105 000 who were homeless on census night, across Australia

20 per cent are in homeless services, and in Victoria it is 35 per cent. Governments over the last 50 years in Victoria should be congratulated for that.

If only 20 per cent of people across Australia are in homeless services and there is 105 000 on census night, we know that about 200 000 are in homeless services over a year, so the best estimate is that there is somewhere between half a million to a million people experiencing homelessness over a year. In a country the size of Australia that is a substantial number of people. If you are having 50 per cent of a cohort not voting, that needs to be of concern.

The last thing I would say in relation to electronic voting is that we do not think it would necessarily negatively impact on people who are homeless. I think positively: I am assuming that if it was implemented it would free up resources, because I think electronic voting would probably be cheaper. If some of those resources could be directed towards participation initiatives and better participation initiatives, that would be a good thing. People interestingly often assume that people experiencing homelessness do not have access to technology. There was an app launched this year called Ask Izzy that helps people access the range of services for people experiencing homelessness. At the time the media's automatic assumption was that people would not have access.

I will leave it here, but there is research done by Sydney University that shows that in Sydney and Melbourne there is higher ownership of mobile phones amongst the homeless population than for the general population — 95 per cent own a mobile phone, whereas it is 92 per cent for the general population. Having said that, access is a big problem. How the phones came to be is also another issue.

The CHAIR — Very discreet.

Mr KEENAN — But often people will turn up — —

Ms PATTEN — Possession is nine-tenths.

Mr KEENAN — That is right. Often people will turn up with a phone. They will not have access. Particularly young people will have debt and so on that is carried with their mobile phone. For example, we are going through a process to ensure we have got wi-fi access across all of our services. People access places like the state library. For, say, our outreach teams that work sleeping rough, the sole means of connecting with people would be the mobile phones. We also have corporate support, so we are able to assist people with giving them a phone through corporate donations and fundraising. One of the things we have is what is called a client support fund where we use fundraised money for things that government will not normally fund. It enables us to get quick fixes for people. For example, we might see a lot of people from New Zealand who are homeless. The quickest fix for them, if it is safe to go back to New Zealand, if they are not escaping family violence, will be for us to purchase an air fare. Sometimes that money will also be used, particularly with young people, to get them credit on their devices. I guess that is the main thing. Do you want me to table that?

The CHAIR — Yes. It does not have to be that formal. Thank you.

Mr KEENAN — There is a spare copy, probably for the secretariat. That is that research I was referring to from Sydney uni.

The CHAIR — Do you have any ideas about specific things that the Victorian Electoral Commission could do to make it easier for homeless people to vote? Obviously you have been generous in saying that the VEC has made a number of improvements in recent years, some of which have been enabled legislatively and others they are doing, but are there some specifics that you could suggest that you could have the VEC do?

Mr KEENAN — Yes, and I would like to put on record the difference in approach between the VEC and the AEC. The VEC has done a wonderful job and there have been a lot of initiatives. We have actually seen some concrete improvement, particularly a slight increase in enrolments. There have been things like mobile polling booths. I would imagine electronic voting would make that easy, particularly for those

residential services, but also in terms of access. You could have VEC staff with computers based at not just residential locations but also at places like the Sacred Heart Mission, where they have 450 people at lunch, Ozanam House and St Mary's House of Welcome. That would be quite a good access spot. I know there are polling booths there, but you could probably do that even better with electronic voting. If electronic voting came in, obviously there would be the access issues around technology for those who might not have it — not so much about the hardware.

Ms PATTEN — Just on that I was thinking that you see at citizenship ceremonies and things that the AEC or the VEC sits up the back and enrolls everyone to vote once they have become citizens, but when you fill in that form, you have to have a place of residence — an address. Can you have a 'no address'?

Mr KEENAN — Yes.

Ms PATTEN — So there is a 'no address'?

Mr KEENAN — Yes, and some of our clients assume that they cannot enrol because they do not have an address.

Ms PATTEN — Yes.

Mr KEENAN — No, there is quite an established process. I think it is your last known address, and if not, from memory, it is about four steps. At the absolute last step it would be our service. Obviously you would not want, for a whole heap of reasons, people enrolling at a homeless service. At the youth foyers they do because that is their place of residence for two years, but at a crisis centre that would be a last resort. But there are mechanisms to enable people.

That is the other thing that happens: a lot of people, particularly people who have been rough sleeping, do not have any identity. The first thing our staff do with a lot of people that come in is get them ID. If they are particularly unwell, that can be a difficulty. But that lack of identification will be their barrier to Centrelink and to all of the services, so that is really vital. The one thing we have done with the VEC, which is particularly good, is that we run transitional housing in your electorate. As people get signed up for tenancies we are making sure that they have an enrolment form.

Ms PATTEN — Okay, as part of the pack.

Mr KEENAN — As part of that.

The CHAIR — Have you noticed any difference between technology take-up amongst the homeless between younger people and older people, or does that study, perhaps?

Mr KEENAN — The study would go to that. What I would notice is that all of our clients are pretty connected. When we put computers in at Southbank we had to double them and then double them again, and they are used a lot. Young people are incredibly connected to it. At our youth foyer the first protest action from the young people was that the speeds were not fast enough for gaming. We did point out that we did not necessarily need to — not gambling! They are very connected.

Ms BLANDTHORN — You referred to the high levels of people who are not enrolled. Given there is already online enrolment available, has that assisted in enrolling people in increased the numbers, do you think, or are people not taking advantage of that?

Mr KEENAN — I would suspect the latter, but no hard evidence; it is not something we have looked at. It should make it easier. But I think the barriers to enrolment — there are a small number who will not want to enrol. There is a fear of fines. Often when people come to us who are homeless they will have a whole range of debt and fines, often transport fines and so on, so their fear of enrolling to vote and then not voting is that it will just be another fine. That is a barrier that we need to work on.

For some it is the lack of ID. To the survey the most common response to why they were not enrolled was that there were too many other things to deal with. That was the most common.

Mr DIXON — What percentage of them would have never been enrolled? I presume the majority are just not up to date and have been enrolled.

Mr KEENAN — There would be a cohort, particularly those who, say, have been chronically homeless for a number of years, who have probably never been enrolled. But I think most would have been enrolled at some stage, which means that that threshold about not having an address — there would be a last known address for most of them.

Ms PATTEN — It does not really relate to this inquiry, but I was interested in your point about the fear of fines. Is that significant?

Mr KEENAN — Yes, because the reality for a lot of people is that you come in and a caseworker is working with someone, so what are the issues, the barriers? Often it will be health-related stuff, so the first thing you are doing, if they have not got ID, is getting ID. But then you will go through some of the other things, and it will be traffic fines or more often public transport and often a mobile phone debt, particularly with young people. So, yes, it is a real thing.

Ms PATTEN — Can you think of any solutions in that?

Mr KEENAN — Once we are involved we can get those things sorted. There is PILCH, the homeless persons' legal clinic. There are different ways — either a payment scheme, or sometimes the fines can be forgiven or cleared. Once there is a means of acting on it, we can get quite a bit of that resolved.

The CHAIR — Is the VEC compassionate on issues like fining?

Mr KEENAN — Very much, yes.

The CHAIR — That is an interesting piece of information. Thank you for your frankness. Again, thank you, Tony, for coming along and participating in this process. It is much appreciated. You will get your Hansard transcript in two weeks. I think you have done this a million times before: you can amend errors, but you cannot change — particularly that last answer.

Mr KEENAN — Can I clarify that? It does not mean that we phone up and they say, 'Right, it's no fine', but the approach towards how they are dealt with is compassionate, yes.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.