

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the conduct of the 2006 Victorian state election and matters related thereto

Melbourne—29 August 2007

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Mr T. Keenan, Chief Executive Officer, Hanover Welfare Services; and
Dr A. Hollows, R and D Manager, Hanover Welfare Services.

The CHAIR—Welcome to the public hearings, or the hearings of the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the 2006 Victorian state election and matters related thereto. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other Australian states and territories. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. You should have received a pamphlet in relation to giving evidence at public hearings. You have read that. For the benefit of Hansard I need to ask you these questions. Please state your full name and address.

Dr HOLLOWES—Andrew Hollowes, 52 Haig Street, Southbank.

Mr KEENAN—Tony Keenan, 52 Haig Street, Southbank.

The CHAIR—Please state if you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation; if representing an organisation what your position in that organisation is.

Dr HOLLOWES—I am representing Hanover Welfare Services. I am the manager of research and policy, also adjunct professor with RMIT University.

Mr KEENAN—Tony Keenan, I am representing an organisation, Hanover Welfare Services, and I am the chief executive officer.

The CHAIR—Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. I now invite you to make a verbal submission and the committee will ask questions after you finish your submission.

Mr KEENAN—For the benefit of members who may not know Hanover, we were established in 1964. Most people in Victoria know us. In fact we have services in all of your electorates except Ms Campbell's. Our mission is to work with people experiencing homelessness and also do research and develop policy in relation to people experiencing homelessness. We were the first agency set up solely to deal with issues of homelessness in Victoria. I do not need to tell you but when we were established our clientele was solely single men over the age of 40, by and large with alcohol problems. The largest group of clients that we have now are young children, dependent children. The profile of homelessness has changed enormously over the 40 years we have been operating. The last census was conducted last year, we are waiting for the figures for that but the 2001 Census showed that there were 20,000 people in Victoria experiencing homelessness on census night.

In 2001 it had increased since 1996 which was the first year the [ABS] counted homelessness in a census collection. We are talking about 20,000 Victorians roughly on a given night. There are more Victorians who experience homelessness in one year but on a given night, 20,000 people are homeless. We had had some concern about the participation of people experiencing homelessness in voting. As we said, it is one of the fundamental rights and one of the fundamental measures of engagement and participation. We decided to test the anecdote and we conducted a survey last election at the state election to ascertain the participation of our client group. I might hand over to Andrew to take you through those figures.

Dr HOLLOWES—I understand committee members should have a copy of the presentation. I will walk through that in the next few minutes. Also we provided a little while ago a fuller proposal as well, a lot more of the details captured in the written document. As Tony mentioned what we were keen to do with our survey following last year's state election was to answer fundamentally three questions: was to see how many Hanover clients were

actually eligible to vote; of those who were eligible who did participate in the state election last year, and if people did not participate we were keen to know what were some of the practical barriers impeding their involvement.

Slides shown.

Dr HOLLOWS—What we did following the November state election is conducted a survey of census across all Hanover programs in a three-week period following the state election. We did this over a three-week period just to ensure there was sufficient time to capture enough clients. Staff will approach clients and seek the voluntary participation, there was a voluntary measure here. We estimated that at any one point in time Hanover would be working with close to 400 clients across a range of our services from the crisis centre in Southbank going through the south-eastern suburbs, down to Dandenong, as well as our services in the northern suburbs. We had 230 clients to voluntarily participate in the survey with a one-page four to five question survey. We were very mindful of keeping it short, sharp and tight. There were a lot of questions that we would have loved to have asked but of course practicalities dictated otherwise. Nonetheless we had a good response rate of 58 per cent which for this sort of exercise is quite reasonable.

What we did was look at the number of 208 clients all up who were eligible to vote. The vast majority of people who participated in the survey who were Australian citizens were able to vote. We had slightly more women than men. That represents the profile in terms of the services that we provide through our agency. Some of the figures here which I will not go into in a lot detail, unless the committee wishes me to do so, we have a medium age of 32 years but we had a spread of 18 years to—the oldest respondent was 85. We had a broad age profile there. A fifty-fifty mix in terms of people with dependent-age children and, not too surprisingly, the vast majority of women had children as opposed to the male clients. The important thing to emphasise in terms of our survey, however, it was across the range of services of Hanover and we clustered them into three main service types of which one of those is transitional housing where people stay up to a period of six months or so as a stepping stone from crisis accommodation to a more permanent public or private accommodation.

We also have respondents within the crisis centres, that includes the Southbank Crisis Centre, as well as the crisis centre originally opened in Dandenong, and the other support services, plus a smaller number of clients who receive a range of other programs from Hanover or if they should apply for rental assistance and the like as well. We were quite happy in terms of the spread of client participation. If we go to the slide, which is question 2, which is what percentage of eligible clients did vote, essentially 60 per cent of eligible Hanover clients did participate in the election. We had some guesses of what that figure would look like. We were unpleasantly surprised, however, by the quantum of the figure. I would assume built into that would be the normal levels of disenchantment which is prevalent in the broader community in terms of perhaps not participating, but nonetheless 60 per cent was quite a high figure for it and was a figure of some concern.

When we actually break that down by our program types, as I mentioned before, we look at crisis accommodation, transitional housing and other support, there was certainly a fair degree of variability there. Perhaps unsurprisingly in the crisis centres up to 80 per cent of clients who participated in our survey whilst eligible to vote did not participate on the day of the state election. Nonetheless even for transitional housing and other support, the figures were still quite high. We were looking at over 50 per cent of those who were eligible still did not participate on the day.

Some of the figures which I will quickly go through—and perhaps you may want to ask some more questions at the question and answer section. There was a gender difference there. We

found that for women it was pretty well a fifty-fifty split between those who did participate and those who did not participate but there was a much starker contrast in terms of males. That may well be less a gender issue, it may well be there is some gender bias in some of our services to the extent that perhaps there are more men at any one point in time in a crisis service—single men, that is, in crisis services—where in contrast, in terms of our transitional housing, it is more likely to be women with dependent-age children but nonetheless there were some gender issues being played out there. Maybe the higher participation rate with women was maybe because they were in transitional housing, maybe beginning to re-engage, say, in terms of preschools and other sorts of social activities as well as participating in the election.

The next slide about family status, I have touched upon some of that already. There was a clear difference, of course, between males and females in terms of family status and having dependent-age children. Again perhaps no surprises there. A lot of our clients, male clients, are single men, older men, in the early mid-20s onwards age group, whereas a lot of the women who come through both our services and homeless services broadly in Victoria are more likely to have dependent-age children.

If we can quickly pass to the next line because we do ask a number of questions about, 'Yes, you were eligible to vote but what was impeding you on the day to vote? Were you disinterested? Are you not connected to the political process? Were there some other more practical reasons being played out?' In our survey there were options for multiple choice for people but the vast response—and it was only the main response that people indicated—was that, yes, they were not on the electoral roll. They have moved from interstate, they have moved from their usual address. You need to remember that a lot of our clients may have had multiple address changes over the last 12 to 18 months. People were not enrolled on the roll at the point of the election. Nonetheless, there was a number of other relevant factors being played out as well. Particularly if you are talking about individuals and families who live in crisis accommodation, clearly there are other pressing issues acting in their life at that point in time. To a lesser extent, some people did indicate lack of interest in the election; some indicated that election was being held and the like.

Our general sense was that the reasons being decided by people in our survey was less about being disengaged from the process per se; it was more about practical constraints and things such as not on the electoral roll, issues about getting to a polling booth and the like. Certainly when we look at these results, we are quite heartened by the pilot that Victorian Electoral Commission ran during the election with St Mary's House of Welcome in North Fitzroy about having a mobile polling booth, because one of the strong messages that we get from some of these findings is that some of the things that can be put in place to address people's lack of participation may well be quite practical steps. The whole issue around civic disengagement, people not being interested in the process, because there are much broader issues around voter education, education about the election, education about how to vote, etcetera, and that cuts across the whole Victorian community overall. Nonetheless we feel that, in terms of people who experience homelessness, we are quite optimistic there are these practical measures put in place. We can at least increase the level of voter participation, and we will be replicating our survey following whenever the federal election is being held this year. We will use the same survey design, so we get consistency in results there. Again, we will be looking at what has been happening in terms of voter participation following the forthcoming federal election as well.

For us the main punchline is that we are gravely concerned that the majority of our eligible clients, the people who are eligible to vote, did not vote for a variety of reasons. Our concern is obviously not just at a state level, but if we portray that more broadly across Australia generally, 60 per cent of the 100,000 people who are deemed to be homeless at any one point in time means 60,000 people nationwide are not voting that is effectually one federal

electorate they miss. For us as an agency who works both in Victoria but does our research at a national level this is of great concern for us. As a concluding comment, in the context of Victoria and having the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, which Hanover Welfare greatly supports, we are concerned about some of those fundamental political rights perhaps are not being fulfilled to their potential.

The CHAIR—The 'not enrolled to vote', do you have any suggestions how we can get these people to vote? There is talk of automatic mechanisms, such as when someone renews their drivers licence or gets a drivers licence they are automatically renewed, or potentially via Centrelink. Would Hanover be in a position to be able to cope with something like that themselves?

Dr HOLLOWS—A couple of thoughts. One is around some education of our own staff, to ensure that, 'Because you do not have a permanent address or experiencing homelessness, it does not preclude you from voting,' to deal with that conception. It is quite practical measures, such as, for some of our clients going to transitional housing. It is probably similar to what happens in the private rental sector. That part of the information kit includes an enrolment form. We have been in discussions with both the Victorian Electoral Commission and the Australian Electoral Commission about some of these practical measures; things such as, leading up to an election, making sure that we have appropriate material, posters, etcetera, in all our service sites; that staff are taking the time to understand that material and are able to convey the information to the homeless as well. Certainly there are some quite practical measures which can be done to at least increase the awareness and hopefully encourage people to go onto the electoral roll.

Mr KEENAN—The provisions for itinerant enrolment are reasonably complicated. That can act as a disincentive. Now, I do not know a way around that because there has to be measures in place. Obviously, you do not want the potential for someone to stack enrolments at a certain point but it is quite complicated. From memory, the first thing is you are enrolled at the last place you are enrolled at. If that does not exist it is then where your family was enrolled at and then there is a third option. Finally, if none of these are there, you can then enrol at the address of the crisis centre. That is reasonably complex. Now, most of our staff would not know that, let alone clients. Then there are additional difficulties in terms of identification. Clients need two pieces of identification. Again, there are ways around that. I can sign off as CEO. If we get two people who have known the people for more than a month we can sign off, but the chances of someone who has been sleeping rough having their Medicare card with them—that is one of the things we will often be working with, to try and get their Medicare cards from Centrelink. Some of the practicalities—and probably they are unavoidable—do make it difficult for people to enrol.

The CHAIR—It seems the staff are pretty important in this. Would it be too much to ask the staff to be educated in this? Would it be too much of a burden on how—

Mr KEENAN—No. In fact, it is central to their role. What we did strike was that when we first raised it, the staff thought they were not allowed to. They thought it was being political. We said if they are telling people how they should vote, that is not right. To encourage them to enrol—

The CHAIR—Do not give them how-to-vote cards.

Mr KEENAN—Encouraging people how to enrol. With our transitional housing we made the comparison that if you are a private renter at your local real estate agent, most real estate agents in the pack they give you is an enrolment form. We, at the very least, should be doing that. There was some reticence and I would imagine it applies across the sector, but staff thought that if they were doing this they would get into trouble for being seen as

political.

Dr HOLLOWES—What I see is two hurdles. It is getting people onto the electoral roll, but then on the day of the election getting people to a polling booth. As I said, we were encouraged by the process last year by the Victorian Electoral Commission by having a mobile polling booth, because it is probably the appropriate way in terms of the larger crisis centres—the very large crisis centres in Melbourne and also perhaps our smaller centre down in Dandenong—where you have a polling booth on site for the day staffed by VEC officials and the like. As I said, we have been in discussion with the AEC about this—

The CHAIR—You are referring to the pre-poll on Thomas Street in Dandenong?

Ms CAMPBELL—No, the mobile at Mercy—

Mr KEENAN—Similar to the Mercy perhaps.

The CHAIR—Good, be right next to Hanover there was a pre-poll.

Dr HOLLOWES—Yes. It seemed to be a case of looking at, say, for the next state election, expanding that provision around the mobile polling booth which was trialed last election. We are looking at other provisions of getting people to do pre-polling and the like. In our minds it is the two hurdles. It is the enrolment phase, which is fine, and there is also the actual participation on the day.

Mr HALL—What was the take-up for the mobile polling booth?

Dr HOLLOWES—I do not know the figures off the top of my head but, by my understanding, by all accounts it worked well and the VEC and the agency involved were quite encouraged by that. It probably worked because it was there, it was visible, you can alert clients to it, staff are aware of it as well. If someone does not want to do it, that is fine, that is their choice obviously as a citizen, but at least it was there. It might sound odd for us but sometimes on the day it is too hard—if you have other stuff in your life—to remember, yes. You need to go down to wherever you vote on the day, and people are standing in a queue and stuff like that. Again, we are confident that some quite practical measures in the crisis centres can hopefully increase the level of participation on the day.

Mr KEENAN—It is only a handful of places too. There are some obvious places. There are three large crisis centres: there is ours, Flagstaff and Ozanam House. Then there is the hub, if you like, in Grey Street. That is Sacred Heart Mission and the Salvo's Crisis Centre where a lot of people will congregate. That is where particularly people who might be living in rooming houses go for meals and showers, or people who are sleeping rough. Mary's House of Welcome—and that, pretty much, is the level of effort and expense that you would need to put into making a significant difference for those people, where we are seeing 80 per cent not participating. People think mobile polling booths are the same cost as rolling it out and—like we do in the nursing homes. It is a small number. My manager at Dandenong will kill me for this, but you might not—our the crisis accommodation centre at Dandenong, which has 35 people, it might not warrant it and you might look at other measures, but you could do some pretty targeted measures.

Mr HALL—Do you know how many people voted at the mobile polling centre?

Mr KEENAN—No. I do not know if that data is there. Is that data in?

Dr HOLLOWES—I think it is but I do not know.

Mr HALL—It would be very useful.

Ms CAMPBELL—We could get the VEC to provide us with the St Mary's House of Welcome—could you please take on notice the key sites you have mentioned and in round figures for each site's capacity. Most nights the crisis centres would be at capacity.

Dr HOLLOWES—Yes.

Ms CAMPBELL—I would work on that basis. Thank you.

Mr SCOTT—I note the problem with people who are attempting to vote who cannot because they are not on the electoral roll is much more significant than some people would realise. The VEC provided figures of 66,000 people who attempted declaration votes who believed they were eligible but proved not to be. Obviously there is a particular issue around those who are homeless where there is additional complications to it. In a number of other jurisdictions—in the United States and I know in Canada—you can, in fact, enrol and vote at the same time on the day. Do you think that would be of assistance to homeless people?

Mr KEENAN—Absolutely. Huge. Particularly those at the margins and who are more vulnerable. We have not touched on people who are sleeping rough, which is about 14 per cent of homeless people, and that is people who sleep in parks or on streets or are not connected into the services. Now, there were some people who slept rough who participated in our survey. We have two Outreach workers who work in your electorate, your area, and we were able to assist some of those to vote.

Mr SCOTT—To follow up, would it be possible to provide to the committee a statistical breakdown of the 20,000 estimate? I know it would be very difficult to have exact figures but some guide where you have done some statistical work on the different types of participation for people in different circumstances.

Mr KEENAN—In voting?

Mr SCOTT—Yes, in voting. I know it is going to be a very rough estimate and extrapolating small data sets is very difficult, but it would provide some assistance to the committee.

Mr KEENAN—Yes, we can do that.

Mr THOMPSON—Dr Hollowes, on the second-last page it has question 3: 'What were the barriers to voting?' It then has a diagram running across horizontally with various figures. The sample there is the aggregate of the numbers at the end of each chart, because under 'Not enrolled to vote' it has 63, and that is a numerical number rather than a percentage.

Dr HOLLOWES—That is correct.

Mr THOMPSON—I was curious. On the following page it had, 'Most common reason for not voting,' people not enrolled was a percentage of 63 per cent. Is that serendipitous as to how people not enrolled is a percentage of 63 per cent?

Dr HOLLOWES—No, my correction. The chart on question 3 is by a percentage. Sixty-three per cent divided by—

Mr THOMPSON—If the chart on question 3 was by percentage, one would normally then expect the other ones to add up to 100 per cent there, unless people—

Dr HOLLOWES—Yes. There was an option for some multiple answers. As we portray a little bit more in the fuller document, there was the option for multiple answers, though in the vast majority of cases people gave only one answer, and that main answer was, 'I am not enrolled to vote.'

The CHAIR—Looking at this chart again, 'What were the barriers to voting?' my assessment of this is that the only bit of slack we can pick up, the only improvements we can make are 'not enrolled to vote' and perhaps 'not aware elections were on'. The other ones seem to be related more to disillusionment and the election not being a priority. I guess we cannot change that but the other two we can target. Would you disagree with that?

Dr HOLLOWES—No, I would not. I would assume that there is a working assumption by the VEC and others that there will always be a certain percentage of eligible voters who are not connected in any shape or form with the electoral process. Maybe there are ways and means of how that can be tackled. We were a little bit surprised by the small number of people who were disillusioned and distrusted politicians.

The CHAIR—Yes, me too.

Ms CAMPBELL—I was too.

The CHAIR—I was very surprised.

Dr HOLLOWES—As I said, with all the usual caveats around the nature of the survey and sample size and the like, we would have expected perhaps a larger figure there around people not interested in politics at all. When you do speak to many of our clients you do get a strong sense that, despite people who are experiencing homelessness, quite a major event in their life, nonetheless they still see themselves as citizens and still see themselves as having an active interest in the political process as well. Once we do the follow-up survey following the federal election, we are hoping to, as a pilot, do a small number of more in-depth follow-up interviews, and hopefully we can tease out some more of the themes which are—we are aware that what is in these diagrams is perhaps all a bit cryptic in places but, by doing a few more follow-up interviews, hopefully we can tease out a little bit more the substance as well.

Mr THOMPSON—Are you doing any work at the moment towards the federal election to lift the percentages so people are engaged?

Mr KEENAN—Yes. The Joint Federal Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Matters identified people who are homeless and people with literacy issues as the top priority. They are doing some active work with them. We have floated the idea of mobile polling booths. That is still in discussion. It is more likely to perhaps get a run as a pilot in a couple of major cities rather than being rolled out. We are working with the Australian Electoral Commission staff. One of our major concerns, obviously, is the changes to the act which we believe will disadvantage people who are homeless because there is a very short turnaround time to enrol. We are doing a lot of work at the moment but that is very difficult when we have such itinerant—and our crisis centre has turn-through all the time. We can work with people in transitional housing, but it is much more difficult for people who are more vulnerable to get enrolled in time to vote. That is one of our major concerns with changes to the Federal Electoral Act.

The CHAIR—Thank you for that. I will remind you that you will receive transcripts of today in a couple of weeks time. Typing errors may be corrected but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.

Hearing suspended.