

Victorian Electoral Commission

Out of Home Action Plan

2021 – 2023

A plan to improve the electoral engagement of people experiencing homelessness, and people in prison.





Cover image: *One Tree, Many Leaves*, Ashlee Harris.

To me it is about no matter who you are, where you come from, or even the past that everyone can make their mark and become something extraordinary.

The tree shows that we are all connected yet we are all our own person.

Foreword



I am proud to present the Victorian Electoral Commission's (VEC's) first Out of Home Action Plan 2021 – 2023. The Plan covers people experiencing homelessness and people in prison.

The VEC is committed to maximising the participation of all Victorians in the electoral process and we direct specific, targeted services towards traditionally under-represented groups to increase their enrolment and participation in elections. People in prison and those experiencing homelessness are two communities targeted in particular.

The Out of Home Action Plan is a key part of the VEC's vision of all Victorians actively participating in their democracy. The Plan builds on the VEC's existing work to deliver responsive services for people experiencing homelessness and people in prison.

The VEC acknowledges the close link between homelessness and the associated challenges of electoral participation. The United Nations Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has drawn a direct link between homelessness, poverty, and the right to vote, stating:

Lack of political rights is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Socially and politically excluded people are more likely to become poor, and the poor are more vulnerable to social exclusion and political marginalization...Active participation in political decision-making processes plays a role in expanding political freedoms and empowering people, which in turn contributes towards combating social exclusion and political marginalization.¹

It is vital that people experiencing homelessness can share in the experience of participative democracy by exercising their right to vote. Participation in the democratic process is both empowering and socially inclusive.

For people in prison and those recently released, engagement with the voting process enhances democracy and also contributes to rehabilitation. Like other marginalised groups, the degree to which prisoners are engaged in voting and electoral processes indicates the health of democracy in society.

The Plan has been developed following extensive internal and external consultations with VEC staff, the VEC's Out of Home Advisory Group and external stakeholders that work with people experiencing homelessness or people in prison.

Electoral accessibility is about removing barriers and increasing peoples' confidence to enrol and vote. I look forward to implementing this plan over the next two years, knowing that the actions will contribute to people feeling empowered and enthusiastic about engaging in Victoria's democracy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Warwick Gately". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Warwick Gately AM
Electoral Commissioner

¹ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Draft Guidelines: A Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies (2002) p.48

Acknowledgement of Country

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this nation, as the traditional custodians of the lands on which the VEC works and where we conduct our business.

We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past, present, and emerging. The Commission is committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

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About the Victorian Electoral Commission

Our vision – all Victorians actively participating in their democracy.

The purpose of the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) is to deliver high quality, accessible electoral services with innovation, integrity and independence.

The VEC is an independent and impartial statutory authority established under Victoria's *Electoral Act 2002*. It operates under the auspices of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, within the portfolio of the Minister for Government Services.

However, the VEC is not subject to the direction or control of the Minister in respect to the performance of its responsibilities and functions and the exercise of its power.



Smiling VEC reception staff member, Esther.

Our primary responsibilities include:

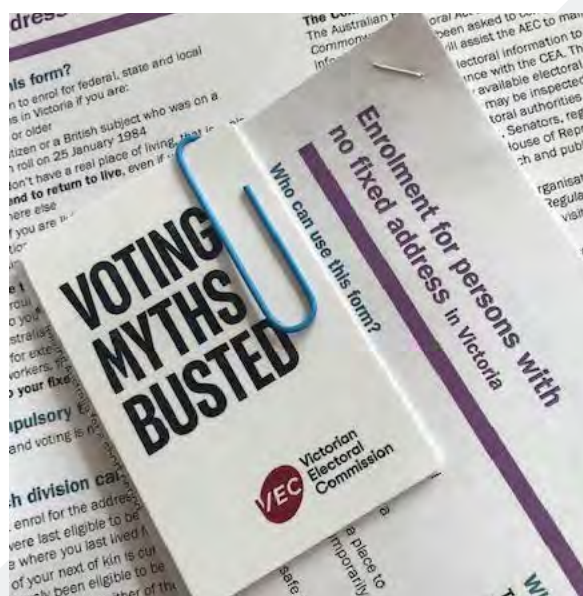
- conducting State, local government and certain statutory elections
- maintaining the register of Victorian electors
- conducting electoral boundary reviews
- administering political funding and donation disclosure laws
- conducting research in the public interest
- promoting public awareness and understanding of electoral issues.

Our values are:

- independence - acting with impartiality and integrity
- accountability - transparent reporting and effective stewardship of resources
- innovation - shaping our future through creativity and leadership
- respect - consideration of self, others and the environment
- collaboration - working as a team with partners and communities.

The VEC has 4 active community advisory groups: the Aboriginal Advisory Group, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Advisory Group, Electoral Access Advisory Group (EAAG) and Out of Home Advisory Group.

The Out of Home Advisory Group consists of members of homelessness and corrections service providers, State and Federal government departmental representatives and persons with lived experience. The Out of Home Advisory Group provides the VEC with community advice, feedback, and ideas for achieving better elector engagement.



Purpose

The VEC Out of Home Action Plan 2021-2023 (the Plan) is the first of its kind. The objective of the plan is to:

- improve access to information about enrolment and voting
- increase the participation of people experiencing homelessness and people in prison.

The plan will ensure that VEC services are inclusive and will describe how the VEC will deliver electoral engagement initiatives to people experiencing homelessness and people in prison.

High and inclusive levels of electoral participation have benefits for individuals, particularly those who are marginalised. Voting is an important form of social inclusion: it can create social meaning and may also be a source of benefits relating to feeling empowered and connected.

Given the complex social needs that many people experiencing homelessness contend with, their exclusion from political participation is deeply structural. Homelessness is not a category that exists in isolation but intersects with a broad range of other indicators (such as disability, mental health, youth, family violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations). This is also true of Victoria's diverse prison population. Therefore, this plan operates alongside a range of other initiatives including the Multicultural Inclusion Plan, Youth Action Plan, Disability Access and Inclusion Plan and the Aboriginal Inclusion Plan (in development).

VEC Diversity and Inclusion Framework

The VEC Diversity and Inclusion Framework was launched in June 2020 and builds on the VEC Diversity and Inclusion Statement (2017).

These documents build confidence and trust by recognising and celebrating diversity both within our organisation and the communities we serve. We recognise that our differences span across gender, race, ability, age, sexual orientation, income, faith, socio-economic background and living situation. We need to represent the richness of all people, all backgrounds, and all perspectives, and recognise the overlapping nature of these communities. The VEC is committed to diversity and inclusion in our workplaces with the people we employ and those we

work with, and at the ballot box with the people we serve. The VEC Diversity and Inclusion Framework outlines our Guiding Principles for Diversity and Inclusion as:

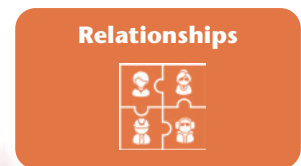
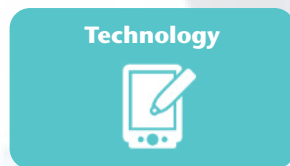
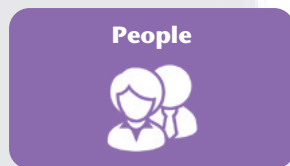
- recruit – our workforce reflects the diversity of the community we serve
- include – our culture fosters accessibility and inclusion
- develop – we provide opportunity for our people to grow
- lead – our leaders feel secure and are empowered to be creative/innovative
- enable – we build the capability of individuals, support workers, teachers and community to facilitate electoral participation and candidature
- access – our relationships with communities help us to learn about opportunities and challenges.

Strategy 2023

The VEC works to remove all possible barriers to participation and strives to ensure all eligible Victorians are engaged with the democratic process.

The VEC's Strategy 2023 provides an overarching 5-year goal for the VEC to be change-ready and ensure there are people, systems and relationships in place to make the most of opportunities.

The Strategy has 4 focus areas for overall implementation including: people; technology; decision making; and relationships. Extensive internal consultation on the Out of Home Action Plan ensures strategic alignment with Strategy 2023. Our aim is to learn from others outside the VEC about opportunities and challenges. By seeking advice and knowledge from all our networks when planning how to improve our services, we ensure we change with the times and public expectations.



The VEC's Out of Home Action Plan 2021 – 2023

The Plan will outline actions within 2 separate focus areas being:

1. people experiencing homelessness
2. people in prison.

These 2 focus areas fall under the VEC portfolio titled Out of Home. This plan was developed in consultation with separate sectors and the actions are unique to each group. Therefore this plan will address these focus areas separately. Part A refers to actions relating to people experiencing homelessness and Part B relates to people in prison.

Definitions of the term homelessness can vary. The VEC recognises that homelessness is not an experience defined only by rough sleeping: it is a spectrum that includes insecure and transitory housing, couch surfing, overcrowding, through to shelters and emergency accommodation.

People in prison, more than any other group, are marginalised from mainstream society. Victorian people in prison who are serving terms of less than 5 years are entitled to enrol and vote in State and local council elections, and all people who have completed their sentences are obliged to enrol and vote.

It must also be recognised that given the significant over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prisons, any disenfranchisement of the detained population disproportionately affects this group.

Key priority areas and actions

The Plans actions are grouped into key priority areas:

- access
- community
- employment
- changing attitudes

Part A People experiencing homelessness

Access

Review barriers to completing the No Fixed Address enrolment form in consultation with homelessness services and provide recommendations for addressing the barriers.

Continue implementation and promotion of the 1800 free call phone number for enrolment and voting support to those experiencing homelessness.

Plan, implement and evaluate a 2022 State election myth busting campaign to address misinformation about electoral engagement for people experiencing homelessness. This will incorporate learnings from the 2020 local council elections myth busting campaign and expand reach via print/media channels to homelessness sector employees.

Provide specialist mobile voting services for the 2022 State election to homelessness services in Victoria. This action may be impacted by coronavirus (COVID-19) service changes.

Part A (continued)

Community

Expand sponsorship and collaboration opportunities within the Out of Home sector to provide greater reach for VEC communications to people experiencing homelessness.

Attend industry forums, conferences, and exhibitions to increase VEC visibility and expand stakeholder reach.

Review the Out of Home Advisory Group to ensure membership is comprehensive, diverse, and active.

Employment

Recruit, train, and support a minimum of 2 Democracy Ambassadors (DAs) with lived experience or connection to the Out of Home sector for the 2022 State election.

Changing attitudes

Implement a VEC corporate volunteer program to enable opportunities with Out of Home sector organisations.

Review language to ensure that all VEC resources are in step with current Out of Home sector language. This includes reviews of the style guide, website, and resources.

Develop a communication plan for Out of Home internal promotion activities to increase visibility and knowledge of the sector to VEC staff.

Part B People in prison

Access

Review past prisoner electoral engagement programs. Develop an updated program to offer to all receptive prisons within Victoria.

Collate, review, and map all data the VEC receives on prison populations to inform VEC electoral engagement programs for prisoners and ex-offenders.

Publish Victorian Prison Guide - Elections and Voting and distribute via Corrections Victoria to all Victorian prisons.

Community

Formation of Prison Electoral Network consisting of 6 members who meet twice per year to enable ongoing consultations and feedback on VEC prisoner electoral engagement initiatives.

Review of Prison Peer Education Program to assess feasibility and address COVID-19 related impacts.

Changing attitudes

Engagement of consultant with lived experience of the prison environment to inform, support and provide feedback on VEC prison sector deliverables.

Reporting and governance

The Electoral Commissioner and the VEC Executive Management Group are responsible for ensuring the actions of the Out of Home Action Plan 2021 – 2023 are achieved.

The VEC will maintain a progress report for the Out of Home Action Plan and invite feedback twice a year from the Out of Home Advisory Group.

An annual progress summary will be reported in the VEC Annual Report.

Feedback

If you have any feedback or suggestions about this Plan, you can:

Email us at info@vec.vic.gov.au

Call us on (03) 8620 1100



If you require interpreter services, you can contact us on 9209 0112.



If you are deaf, hard of hearing or need communication support, you can contact us on 133 677 or through the National Relay Service 1800 555 600.



Write to us at:
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