



Submission

Inquiry on the future conduct of elections operating during times of emergency situations

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

People with Disabilities (WA) Inc. (PWdWA) would like to thank the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for the opportunity to provide comment for their inquiry into how elections are conducted during times of emergency.

PWdWA is the peak disability consumer organisation representing the rights, needs and equity of all Western Australians with disabilities via individual and systemic advocacy.

PWdWA is run BY and FOR people with disabilities and, as such, strives to be the voice for all people with disabilities in Western Australia.

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People with disabilities WA (PWdWA)

Since 1981 PWdWA has been the peak disability consumer organisation representing the rights, needs, and equity of all Western Australians with a physical, intellectual, neurological, psychosocial, or sensory disability via individual and systemic advocacy. We provide access to information, and independent individual and systemic advocacy with a focus on those who are most vulnerable.

PWdWA is run by and for people with disabilities and aims to empower the voices of all people with disabilities in Western Australia.

Introduction

We will be addressing the terms of reference for this inquiry regarding the experiences of people with a disability in Western Australian and will focus on the following points:

- restrictions arising from a health pandemic;
- access to polling places during times of natural disasters;
- the introduction of safety mechanisms; and
- alternative voting methods including early, remote and postal voting.

People with a disability already face a number of barriers in regard to exercising their political rights which need to be addressed to make the election process equitable and accessible. We know that the number of fully accessible polling places is minimal and that infrastructure such as access to ACROD parking, clear pathways between parking and the polling booth are already an issue which need to be addressed. It is important to consider how emergency situations can further impact on people with a disability and ensure that responses allow people with a disability to exercise their right to vote in a way that maintains their health, safety and confidentiality.

Recommendations

We know that health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and emergency situations such as bushfires disproportionately impact on the disability community. In creating a plan on how to conduct elections during emergency situations, we recommend the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters consult with the State Government (such as the WA Disability Taskforce) and other stakeholders on what actions were taken to address the needs of people with a disability and how lessons learned can be applied to the conduct of an election.

People with a disability are generally more vulnerable to the complications of health pandemics. In addition to the government restrictions prescribed during COVID-19, many people with a disability in WA chose to self-isolate as a preventative measure due to the potentially fatal complications of contracting the virus.

The suit of restrictions that were implemented including social distancing, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and regular cleaning/sanitising of surfaces must be strictly implemented for voting during a health crisis as part of a suit of safety mechanisms.

In WA we saw issues for people with a disability accessing PPE due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Steps must be taken to ensure that any increased use of PPE for election purposes does not impact on the general supply of PPE to the disability community and that all people with a disability who chose to vote in person either on the day or through pre-polling have adequate access to PPE to ensure their health and safety. The appropriate accessibility and availability of PPE also applies to electoral staff and volunteers working at polling stations.

As people with disability may be supported by a carer, family or friend to vote there needs to be adequate room in the actual polling booth to ensure proper social distancing and confidentiality. We also recommend that easy English information is available, as well as captioned video information and that adequate space is set aside so that people who require information to be provided verbally are able to do

so privately, thus respecting their right to a secret ballot. Wherever possible more than one disability accessible polling booth should be available to minimise wait times.

Minimising the time that people need to spend registering and voting needs to be considered to support social distancing. Registering and accessing the poll booths can at times be a lengthy process and for some confusing. Waiting in long queues can be considerably difficult for some people with a disability. The queuing and registering process can also be illogical for people with neurological disabilities and for the visually impaired. We recommend that:

- there needs to be adequate access to sheltered seating for people who may struggle to stand in line waiting to enter the polling places;
- consideration to establishing priority queues with assistance provided as required by trained volunteers for people with a disability; and
- ensuring that all booths have access to electronic certified lists to expedite the recording process.

Additionally, to support social distancing there should also be sufficient entry/exits in place for people with a disability to enter or exit a polling place with room for social distancing. We highly recommend that the AEC identify fully accessible venues which are able to support social distancing that can be used as polling places and have agreements in place to have those venues available at short notice. We also recommend updated information about accessibility and social distancing be available on the AEC websites list of polling places.

We also recommend increased staff to help enforce social distancing and spot cleaning of polling booths, seating, and other high contact areas. In order to help manage social distancing we recommend that a long pre-polling period be initiated in addition to postal, telephone and online voting. We also recommend that the criteria for eligibility for phone or postal voting be amended to consider those who cannot vote in person due to risks to their health and safety, and those who are prevented from attending a polling place due to lockdowns or natural disasters.

We recommend the ability to pre-book timeslots for accessible pre-polling venues to ensure that people with a disability can register if required and complete voting with minimal wait times.

We highly recommend that the AEC undertake a number of different advertising methods to inform the disability community of alternative voting options such as postal, telephone and accessible pre-polling places. We know that many people with a disability rely on social media and the internet for their main source of information and connection. It is important that advertising looks beyond traditional tv, radio and newsprint media and connect with relevant stakeholders to try and disseminate information.

Where circumstances prevent a person from attending a polling place or pre-polling place in person, for example lockdown due to pandemics or natural disasters, there needs to be alternative options made available at short notice to everyone, not only people with a disability. This could include the use of online and telephone voting for those in affected areas. However, there must be adequate resources and strategies in place to ensure that people with a disability are aware of and can access alternative voting methods. As mentioned above, many people in the disability community use social media and internet as their primary form of communication and connection. We recommend the AEC map key stakeholders and forums for the dissemination of information to people with a disability and that it is made available in alternative formats.

An additional key consideration is to align the federal and state government election voting systems. An aligned system should assist in reducing the risk of voter confusion and support participation.