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Community Development and Justice Standing Committee
Via email to: lacdjsc@parliament.wa.gov.au

To the members of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee

RE: Western Australian Electoral Commission's administration and management of the 2017 general election

Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to communicate feedback on the administration and management of the 2017 general election on behalf of Blind Citizens Australia.

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is the united voice of and for Australians who are blind or vision impaired. Our mission is to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes, and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.

With respect to the terms of reference for this inquiry, my comments relate to:

- the participation of communities with traditionally low levels of enrolment or turn out, and
- the administration of remote polling services

Securing a secret, independent and verifiable vote for Australians who are blind or vision impaired has remained at the top of Blind Citizens Australia's policy agenda for many years. The right of people with disability to be able to access all aspects of the democratic process on an equal basis with others is articulated in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has outlined the steps to be taken by all levels of government to fulfill this right under outcome area 2 of the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 - Policy directive 2 of which imposes an obligation on governments to:

"remove societal barriers preventing people with disability from participating in the democratic process as equal citizens."

The iVote system, which was first trialed by the NSW Government in 2011, is considered by our members to be the only system that provides an accessible voting experience for people who are blind or vision impaired which is 100% secret, independent and verifiable. To this end, we commend and thank the Western Australian

Electoral Commission for making iVote available to electors who are blind or vision impaired during the 2017 general election.

How iVote has enhanced the participation of people who are blind or vision impaired in the democratic process

The availability of iVote significantly enhanced the participation of people who are blind or vision impaired in the electoral process during the 2017 general election. Below are just some of the comments we received from electors who are blind or vision impaired who cast their vote using the iVote service:

“It was definitely the easiest it's ever been to see the whole ballot paper.”

“While I voted above the line, this was the first time in my life that I felt it would be possible to vote below the line, because I could easily see who all the candidates were, and was not pressured by time.”

“I felt more confident that I hadn't missed any candidates and submitted a valid ballot paper as the numbering system works sequentially. If I complete the paper version of the ballot paper myself, it's hard to scan over and over and check I've done it correctly.”

“I was able to research candidates online using my preferred access method during the voting process. This opportunity is probably good for all voters, however sighted voters can more easily access this information on a mobile device and this is very challenging for me.”

“I appreciate being able to cast my vote independently and commend the WA Electoral Commission for making this possible for people with disabilities.”

“I love the way I can vote independently and without assistance. I will definitely continue to use such a system where it is an option.”

All 14 electors who are blind or vision impaired who we received feedback from told us that they would use the iVote system for future elections if it were to be made available on an ongoing basis. iVote was also an instant success when introduced in NSW and in 2011, was utilised by around 47 000 electors across New South Wales.

Previous federal elections have again demonstrated how remote voting has increased the participation of people who are blind or vision impaired in the electoral process. When the Australian Electoral Commission trialed remote telephone-assisted voting during the 2013 federal election, for example, 2832 people cast their vote using this Service. During the previous election, telephone-assisted voting could not be completed remotely and was only available in 126 locations around Australia, resulting in just 410 individuals casting their vote using the service.

In other states where remote voting is still not a viable option, the participation of people who are blind or vision impaired is far more limited. It can be very challenging and anxiety-provoking for an individual who is blind or vision impaired to locate, navigate and mobilise around a polling place that they may not be familiar with or may not have ever visited before. It cannot be assumed that voters who are blind or vision impaired will have someone to assist them to negotiate these challenges; nor should they be forced to rely on this level of assistance. Other complicating factors include barriers to

accessing polling places by public transport, poor signage and a lack of disability awareness amongst electoral officers and other voters. Because of the high levels of stress and anxiety that can result from these challenges, many people who are blind or vision impaired are left with no choice but to return a postal vote; a process which does not provide a secret, independent and verifiable vote for the vast majority of people who are blind or vision impaired.

As one elector who is blind stated:

“Last time I voted at the Polling place. This time I was not dependent on someone else for assistance, which not only made me independent, but meant I did not have to fit in with someone else’s time schedule and I could take as long as I needed and not feel rushed.”

How well was iVote promoted?

All 14 electors who provided us with feedback on their experience of iVote stated that they were well-informed about the availability of iVote, and had been provided with information about how to cast their vote over the telephone or internet. This was attributed in part to information that was provided by Blind Citizens WA; with several respondents stating that they would not have been aware of iVote or how to use it had it not been for the information that was provided by Blind Citizens WA. This emphasises the importance of disseminating information via peer support and advocacy groups, however it is also important that information about options for electors with disability are promoted through other mainstream channels. As one respondent stated:

“promotion of this access needs more publicity for those not part of a blindness organisation but who need this access to vote confidentially.”

How could iVote be improved for future state elections?

When asked about problems experienced when casting their vote over the phone or internet, respondents provided the following feedback:

“Some of the instructions were click this and that, which isn’t how a screen reader user uses their computer. I was unclear which method would enter the number you had to hit the box twice and in sequence rather than by party or by column, which had some logic but I had to re-do some selections once I worked it how it is supposed to be done.”

“I was using a screen reader, and found the instructions a little visual, (for example: “double click the box”). Screen readers don’t identify boxes as such.”

“When voting in the upper house, I decided to vote below the line and put numbers 1 to 48 in order. At some point I had got a bit mixed up with the Independents. This meant that I had clicked on one in the mid twenty’s and again at about 31. The system should prevent you from selecting someone who has already been allocated a preference in the upper house. As a result, once I got to the end I had 49 numbers and the system simply told me that it was an invalid vote and said goodbye. It probably took me about 20 minutes, so, I then rang back and just voted above the line.”

Based on this feedback, we strongly recommend that instructions to assist people to vote online be developed in close consultation with people who are blind or vision impaired who use screen reading software.

In relation to the telephone assisted service that was available during the 2017 general election, we note that the NSW Electoral Commission has made two different options available to iVote electors who wish to cast their vote over the phone. These are:

1. The option of casting their vote using an automated system that incorporates pre-recorded key prompts
2. The option of casting their vote with the assistance of a human operator

Many electors who are blind or vision impaired have stated that they prefer the automated system, as it guarantees them a vote that is 100% secret, independent and verifiable. One of our Western Australian members who voted over the phone during the 2017 general election stated:

“I really like this option as I didn’t feel completely confident that my telephone voting using humans at the other end (referring to the process of casting a vote at the last federal election) might not have been altered in some way, either making my vote different or a donkey one.”

We do, however, recognise that an automated system may not fully meet the needs of all electors with disability. For example, some older people with disability and people with cognitive impairment. For this reason, the Western Australian Electoral Commission may wish to consider providing a human-assisted telephone option in addition to an automated service for the next general election.

Extending iVote to other Western Australian Residents

We assert that many electors without disability could also benefit from having access to a method of remote voting for future elections. We draw the Committee’s attention to the Australian Electoral Commission’s 2002 report: ‘Evolution not Revolution’, which recommended that:

“The Federal, State and Territory Parliaments should amend their Electoral Acts to enable a trial of e-voting to be implemented at Federal, State and Territory elections for:

- Antarctic electors
- Electors in other remote locations
- Electors with a disability
- Overseas electors and
- as an option for the return of postal votes”

The NSW Electoral Commission has already embraced the benefits that a universally designed system like iVote can offer for the broader population. During the 2015 state election, iVote was made available to:

- All voters with disability
- Voters who lived more than 20 KM from a polling centre
- Electors who were overseas or interstate on election day

Not only did this approach align with the recommendations put forward by the Australian Electoral Commission in 2002, but it also resulted in remote voting being taken up by

more than 283 000 New South Wales residents who may have otherwise experienced significant barriers to casting a vote.

Thank you once again for providing me with an opportunity to represent the views and interests of electors who are blind or vision impaired in relation to the administration and management of the 2017 general election. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the issues raised throughout this letter further. Should you wish to follow up with us on any of these matters, please contact our Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, Lauren Henley. Lauren can be contacted by phone on (03) 9654 1400, or on email at 8

Yours Sincerely,

Emma Bennison
Executive Officer