



Submission

Religious Freedom Bills – Second Exposure Draft

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Sent by email to

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**Every person counts**

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## **Introduction**

In this submission South East Community Links expresses its general concern regarding the proposal to pass into law the Religious Freedom Bills.

We propose that the proposed Bills not proceed in their current form.

## **Summary**

South East Community Links is an independent organisation, providing support services to the general community in the south east of Melbourne. About 70 percent of our community speaks a language other than English at home.

Our vision is *every person counts every system fair*. In our view, words in the Bills undermine our vision and service value.

We are concerned that the separation of church and state is a vital principle on which our community is founded and operates.

We support this separation and see the Bills as further erosion of this vital principle.

## **South East Community Links – every person counts every system fair**

South East Community Links and its founding organisations (Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau, Dandenong Community Advisory Bureau and the Southern Ethnic Advisory and Advocacy Council) have been operating for more than fifty years in the south east of Melbourne. Our organisation employs people of many faiths and different identities. We operate a strong volunteer program with volunteers coming from many different cultural and language backgrounds

Our services include emergency relief, case management for people who experience multiple problems, child support for parents who are separating and have child custodial responsibilities, microfinance loans, financial counselling, settlement services, youth services.

As our vision states, South East Community Links operates on the principle that every person counts. It is important that we uphold this vision as our work is often complex and very challenging. This vision means that everyone who turns to South East Community Links for support knows that they will be assisted at our agency.

In our view, some religious statements described in the Bill, particularly about homosexual and transgender people, suggest a different message to ‘every person counts’. This value of all persons in our organisation is an all inclusive message because many of our clients are disadvantaged and disengaged because they are not included.



In our view, the Bills encroach up the secular state and the principle that the rule of law and public policy guide what occurs in areas outside the church. This understanding would be in keeping with how most Australians separate their religious beliefs and other allegiances, including an allegiance to the rule of law, in our view.

We are not aware of any religious organisation that was founded on the principle of gender equality, an essential value of secular Australia. This is why the secular state must be able to operate without the allowances provided for in the current Bills. We see gender equality and equality in general coming into conflict with the provisions allowed in the Bills.

In our view, a person's faith is a vital and all encompassing part of their identity. As a society we are better for modern religious views that help guide the ethics, morality and spirituality of religious and non religious people. However, we engage with all faiths better them when they are bounded by the most successful method of governing nations and jurisdictions; that is secular society.

