



12 November 2018

Dear Candidate

VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION 2018

We would like to introduce you to Youthlaw and enclose our election platform.

Youthlaw is a free, state wide specialist legal service for young people under 25 years of age.

Youthlaw is based in Melbourne CBD and is co-located with youth services at Frontyard Youth Services working together to address the physical, emotional and social needs of homeless and disadvantaged young people aged 12 to 25 years. We also operate state wide delivering our services through local youth & community services to regional and rural young people.

Every year we provide legal assistance to over 2,000 young people and parents, friends, co-workers and teachers.

The young people we assist face hardships such as abuse, neglect, being exposed to domestic violence and lack of family support. Most have disengaged from school and are living in unstable and precarious accommodation & home environments. About a fifth have been in the child protection system. The rest are less visible to the community and authorities. They are struggling with poor mental health, substance abuse, isolation and homelessness.

Our approach is to work closely with other services that provide the range of support services needed for these young people to take control of their lives.

The legal assistance we provide makes a difference, assisting young people to use the legal system to protect themselves from abuse and unfair treatment reducing the impact of a serious criminal record and deal with spiralling debt, mounting fines and legal proceedings.

Legal issues cause stress and ill-health, stop young people moving on in their lives, deepen their engagement with the criminal justice system & leave them exposed to abuse.

Our platform outlines realistic directions and outcomes that will substantially assist a significant and growing number of vulnerable young people across Victoria and develop a youth justice system that is effective and accountable.

Our key concerns:

1. Youth & adult prison numbers have increased substantially over the past 10 years. This is despite a significant downward trend in crime overall in all western industrialised countries including Australia. The return rate to prison is very high. Prison is ineffective and very costly. Building more prisons is clearly unsustainable. A solution is redirecting investment in prisons to where the evidence shows it makes a difference. Justice reinvestment is an internationally proven approach that reduces crime, builds community capacity, and saves taxpayer's money.

We urge all parties to publicly commit to justice reinvestment and/or government targets (eg. the South Australian Government strategy 'Reducing re-offending by 10% by 2020').

2. The past 2 years have seen significant focus on law and order to deal with a small but high offending cohort in Victoria. This has resulted in harsh laws including reverse onus bail, mandatory sentencing, youth control orders and limited & restrictive parole. Many of these laws transgress basic human rights. These laws will have unintended impacts & net widen bringing more young Victorians in contact with the criminal justice system. We call on all candidates to commit to scrutiny of all legislation that impact on young people & to uphold the human rights of all young people before the law.
3. In September this year the cross-party IBAC parliamentary committee released its findings and recommendations from its inquiry into the Victorian Police Complaints system. A key recommendation is that a division within IBAC be established and given powers to independently and fully investigate all serious police misconduct. This will make an enormous difference to the integrity of the police complaints system. Citizens will have confidence to make complaints knowing they will be investigated with the utmost integrity. We call on all candidates to publicly support increased independent investigation of police complaints and the implementation of the IBAC committee's recommendations.
4. It is estimated that currently 60% of young people in youth detention are from communities that are significantly disadvantaged, dislocated and often excluded. Over the past 2 years there has been a significant increase in Maori & Pacific Islander and East African youth and there continues to be a concerning overrepresentation of Koori youth. There is a need to address the disadvantage and exclusion these communities are experiencing. It is also imperative that our leaders are vocal in their condemnation of growing racial abuse directed at these communities.
5. There continues to be an unacceptable overrepresentation of young people in youth detention with a background of being in child protection. It is an indictment on our society that efforts to protect & nurture these children have resulted in their incarceration. The past few years have seen some welcome improvements and investment in early intervention and the child protection system, however much more needs to be done.
6. There is a very significant lack of post detention supports and services for young people & young adults. This past year 53% of young people entering youth detention presented with mental health issues and 30% with a history of self-harm or suicidal ideation. There are few long term mental health services particularly for those with serious diagnosed conditions. There is a desperate need for more closely supervised supported transitional accommodation and access to drug rehabilitation facilities.
7. Most vulnerable and at risk young people in Victoria do not come to the notice of child protection & other authorities. These young people, often struggling with family violence, homelessness, mental ill-health and substance abuse, turn to the youth & community service sector. There is high demand and the service sector is often only able to provide short-term crisis support. Young people need services that can fully support them for the period they require, are free and readily available to them & their families. We urge all candidates to publicly support increased funding for these services, particularly those assisting with homelessness, mental health, substance abuse and the trauma of childhood abuse and family violence.

We would be most happy to meet with you or provide further information either during or after the election

We wish you every success in the upcoming election and look forward to working with you in the future

Yours Sincerely

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

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