

MEDIA RELEASE



Switchboard Victoria strongly opposes any future public debate on the current Religious Discrimination Bill

MELBOURNE, Victoria. February 11, 2022 - Switchboard Victoria holds deep concern for the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people as our lives are once again thrust into the centre of political debate and intense media reporting.

Whilst the Morrison Government is reported to have set aside this dangerous and divisive Bill temporarily, the distress and damage caused over the past weeks, and the strain placed on support services already under pressure, cannot be underestimated. Switchboard stresses that any further discourse on this Bill must be met with adequate funding for LGBTIQ+ support service providers to increase capacity to respond to the ongoing and heightened distress in our communities during COVID.

These political debates have incited hate, vitriol, and heightened poor mental health, including suicidality within our communities. We have seen and continue to see these negative impacts reflected through Switchboard's Rainbow Door helpline during this time.

A focus on the exclusion of some of our most vulnerable community members throughout this debate—primarily transgender and gender diverse (TGD) young people—is deeply irresponsible. We cannot underestimate the damage and trauma that public debate over a person's right to live freely and safely as themselves can cause in the long term. As a population, TGD individuals are more likely to experience violence, homelessness, and rejection. One of the core drivers of suicidality among these communities is rejection, while the most protective behaviour is acceptance. We need to see our leaders' model the inclusive, supportive and cohesive environments that we all want to see reflected in broader society.

Switchboard strongly opposes this dangerous Bill and the damage it has and continues to create. Whilst we would support a bill that would genuinely protect people from religious discrimination, this cannot be at the expense of causing harm and distress against another community. The freedom to discriminate against an individual based on who they are is unacceptable and has no place in our legal system, or in any future public debate.

With the uncertainty of what the future of the Religious Discrimination Bill will be, Switchboard holds grave concerns in further heightened distress in our LGBTIQ+ communities and calls for any further discourse on this Bill to be considerate of all who are affected and met with adequate funding for LGBTIQ+ support service providers.

Comment can be attributed to Joe Ball, CEO of Switchboard Victoria:

"Unsurprisingly, what we are learning is that ongoing debates around the Bill are creating an authorising environment, not only discrimination but also for overt instances of hate. Throughout this time, social media has been and continues to be rife with hate speech targeting the LGBTIQ+ community, and our Rainbow Door service has reported incidences of physical violence against LGBTIQ+ community members this month."

Suicide Prevention Australia is the national peak body for suicide prevention., representing over 400 members in the suicide prevention sector. Suicide Prevention Australia is concerned that levels of distress may rise among LGBTIQ+ communities as a result of harmful public discourse over this Bill. These communities already experience higher rates of poor mental health and suicidality than the general population.

Comment can be attributed to Nieves Murray, CEO of Suicide Prevention Australia

"Diversity and inclusion are the cornerstone of a compassionate society. Public debate about issues affecting groups we know are at-risk can be incredibly distressing and have long-term impacts. We must join together to support LGBTIQ+ communities. You do not have to go this alone."

If you are experiencing distress and would like to talk with someone on the phone or online, then please call QLife on 1800 184 527 or go to qlife.org.au/resources/chat

About Switchboard:

Switchboard Victoria is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation that provides Australia-wide, peer-led suicide prevention programs, services and initiatives for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, intersex, queer, asexual (LGBTIQ+) communities and their allies, friends, support workers and families. More information about Switchboard services can be found here: switchboard.org.au

About Suicide Prevention Australia

Suicide Prevention Australia is the national peak body for the suicide prevention sector. With over 400 members, we represent the largest, and many of the smallest organisations working in suicide prevention. More information about Suicide Prevention Australia can be found here: <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/>

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