

7 February 2022

Dear Mr Anthony Albanese, MP

I am writing to urge you to oppose the Religious Discrimination Bill coming before Parliament.

cohealth is one of Victoria's largest community health services, providing primary health care and social support services across nine local government areas in Victoria. Our mission is to improve health and wellbeing for all, and to tackle inequality and inequity in partnership with people and their communities. We have held deep concerns about the various iterations of this legislation, including joining with 16 community health organisations and hospitals, to release a [joint statement](#) outlining our concerns about the second draft of the Religious Discrimination Bill.

cohealth supports measures to eliminate discrimination on the basis of any personal characteristic, life experiences or personal circumstances, including discrimination on the basis of having, or not having, religious belief. Experiences of discrimination have significant impacts on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

However, this Bill fails to protect everyone equally. Rather, it will privilege the rights of people holding religious views above those of others. Addressing discrimination against one group of people cannot be done by overriding the rights of, and increasing discrimination against, another group.

Clause 12, allowing for 'statements of belief', will mean that harmful statements that constitute discrimination today, will be protected by law. These could include a medical professional telling a person living with HIV that AIDS is a punishment from God, or a support worker telling a person with disability that their disability is caused by the devil.

It will mean that people who experience discrimination at work, at school, or when accessing services will be less likely to call out comments that are offensive, insulting or demeaning.

cohealth is committed to fostering a service and workplace culture of safety and inclusiveness, recognising that many groups of people already face discrimination in finding health care that is compassionate and non-judgemental. However, this Bill may prevent us from taking any action against staff who make negative comments based on their religious beliefs that conflict with cohealth values.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss our views with you, and can be contacted on Nicole.Bartholomeusz@cohealth.org.au

Yours sincerely,



Nicole Bartholomeusz
Chief Executive