The Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council (VMIAC) was formed in 1981 during the International Year of Disabled Persons in protest at the lack of recognition of Psychosocial Disability * within this year of support and celebration for disabled people and to highlight the social exclusion, discrimination and loss of rights experienced by people living with a mental illness.

VMIAC was incorporated in 1986 and has long been recognised as the peak non-government organisation for people with lived experience of mental health or emotional issues in Victoria. VMIAC is a member-based organisation with approximately 1,680 consumer and associate members. VMIAC provides representation on behalf of Victorian mental health consumers at all levels of government and across the Victorian health sector. Since its inception VMIAC has proudly, been completely staffed and governed by people with a lived experience of mental health issues and or emotional distress.

VMIAC is writing regarding the proposed new Religious Freedom reforms released by the government for consultation on Thursday 29 August 2019:

• Religious Discrimination Bill 2019
• Religious Discrimination (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2019
• Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Freedom of Religion) Bill 2019

VMIAC is deeply concerned about these proposed reforms. We are specifically concerned on the potential impact these reforms will have on the mental health and wellbeing of our membership and the potential for an increasing experience of stigma and discrimination that our members already face. Specifically, we are concerned about Section 8(5)-(6) – conscientious objection in health care.

VMAIC believes that these sections will
• Create a society where people risk being refused appropriate and timely universal health care and other services such as a referral if services are refused to them
• make it easier to offend, humiliate, intimidate, insult or ridicule population groups, such as people diagnosed with a mental illness, women, people with disabilities, people of colour, Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, LGBTIQ+ communities, including children and young people and those of differing religions.

VMAIC is deeply concerned about the implementation of these proposed changes as well as the short, medium and long-term impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of people at the highest risk of being negatively impacted by them. Awareness among the community of any right to refuse them a health service based on a health
practitioner’s own religious views, will have a significant impact on many people already vulnerable to service barriers, and
who have experienced histories of discrimination. VMAIC believe this will increase the likelihood of people being reluctant
to seek assistance in services.

For these reasons and others VMAIC is unable to support the passage of the Religious freedom reform bills through parliament.