

MEDIA RELEASE

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MANDATORY DRUG TESTING OF WELFARE RECIPIENTS POINTLESS GIVEN ABSENCE OF TREATMENT SERVICES

The Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) has expressed frustration at the revival of Australian Government plans to impose drug testing on welfare recipients. AIVL Chief Executive Officer Melanie Walker says there is no point identifying people with alcohol and other drug problems (AOD) if there is inadequate access to drug treatment services for those who need them.

“A review by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre in 2014 found that there is substantial unmet demand within the AOD treatment sector across Australia, with an estimated 200,000-500,000 Australians each year unable to access treatment for problems associated with drug or alcohol use.¹ AIVL notes the Government’s previous commitment of an additional \$10 million in funding for treatment services across the trial locations of Canterbury-Bankstown, Logan and Mandurah. However, data from local Primary Health Networks that operate within the sites raises concerns about the ability of additional funding to enhance capacity within a significantly stretched system. Needs analysis reports highlight long waiting lists for in-patient and community-based treatment, limited services for complex cases, limited access to pharmacotherapies, little scope for early intervention of drug-related issues and lack ongoing and sufficient funding to support demand within services and retain the AOD workforce.^{2 3 4}

“Despite additional investment into drug support services in these areas, AIVL is concerned that this will not be enough to adequately enhance system capacity and will displace those who voluntarily seek support for their drug use. In this context, AIVL believes that the costs of the drug testing, as well as the additional \$10 million being invested in services, would be better used to enhance the AOD treatment sector in Australia more broadly for people who are already actively seeking to address issues related to their drug use.

“In addition to being abusive and counter-productive, this trial is proposed without evidence of widespread drug use amongst people receiving income support or any indication that punitive compliance practices work. A review of drug testing and income support programs in Florida found that only 2.6% of people receiving income support returned a positive drug test, with only 1% of all recipients meeting a threshold that required their support payments to be cut.⁵ In New Zealand, where drug testing of people on income support has operated for several years, Ministry of Social Development figures reported that in 2015, 32,000 people underwent drug testing and only 466, or 1.4%, returned positive results.⁶ It would be great to see enhanced investment in cost effective prevention, treatment and harm reduction measures - such as those outlined in the National Drug Strategy - rather than those that have been proven to be ineffective,” said Ms Walker.

AIVL is the national organisation representing people who use/have used illicit drugs and is the peak body for the state and territory peer-based drug user organisations.

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¹ National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. (2014). *New Horizons: The review of alcohol and other drug treatment services in Australia*.: [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/FD5975AFBFD7013CA258082000F5DAB/\\$File/The-Review-of-alcohol-and-other-drug-treatment-services-in-Australia.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/FD5975AFBFD7013CA258082000F5DAB/$File/The-Review-of-alcohol-and-other-drug-treatment-services-in-Australia.pdf)

² South Western Sydney Primary Health Network. (2016). *Primary Health Network Needs Assessment Reporting Template*. Available at http://www.swsphn.com.au/client_images/1898532.pdf

³ Brisbane South Primary Health Network. (2016). *Brisbane South PHN Whole of Regions Needs Assessment Refresh – November 2016*. Available at <http://bsphn.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/WORNA-refresh-2016.pdf>

⁴ Perth South Primary Health Network. (2016). *Updated Activity Work Plan 2016-2019: Drug and Alcohol Treatment*. Available at http://www.wapha.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/170920_2016-18_Perth-South-Drug-and-Alcohol-treatment-activity-work-plan.pdf

⁵ Centre for Law and Social Policy (2013). *TANF Policy Brief: Random Drug Testing of TANF Recipients is Costly, Ineffective and Hurts Families*. <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/files/520.pdf>

⁶ Collins, B. (2017). ‘Tens of thousands drug-tested, hundreds fail’, *Radio New Zealand*. <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/political/325553/tens-of-thousands-drug-tested-hundreds-fail>