



MEDIA RELEASE

10 May 2017

FEDERAL BUDGET: DRUG TESTING OF WELFARE RECIPIENTS COSTLY AND POINTLESS

The Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL), Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO), National Association of People with HIV Australia (NAPWHA) and the Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association have warned that drug testing welfare recipients will be a costly and pointless exercise, particularly without additional funding for the alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment sector.

“It has been announced that from 1 January 2018, Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance (Other) claimants in trial locations may be subject to randomised drug testing as a precondition of their welfare payment as part of the claim process. 5000 new recipients across the three yet to be announced trial sites will be randomly drug tested, with the trial operating over 2 years. While drug testing welfare recipients and quarantining welfare payments may seem like an appropriate incentive to encourage people to address drug use issues, there is actually no evidence that these types of coercive measures work,” said Melanie Walker, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of AIVL.

According to the Budget Papers:

“These measures will be aimed at stabilising the lives of people with alcohol and drug abuse problems by encouraging them to participate in rehabilitation, counselling support or other appropriate treatment as part of their Job Plan.”

“The other main problem with this concept is that while approximately 200,000 people receive AOD treatment in any one year in Australia, it is estimated that an additional 200,000 – 500,000 people seeking treatment are unable to access it.¹ The National Ice Action Strategy saw a welcome 5% increase in AOD sector funding across the nation but obviously this falls far short of enabling a doubling of treatment places to meet current levels of demand,” explained Aaron Cogle, Executive Director of NAPWHA.

“In terms of demand reduction, AOD treatment is a good investment. For every \$1 invested in AOD treatment, society gains \$7. The money allocated to be spent on expensive drug testing of welfare recipients and related measures would be better spent on increasing access to evidence based, cost effective AOD treatment around the country. We don’t actually need to round people up to coerce them into treatment – we have hundreds of thousands of people who are ready, willing and able to undertake treatment – they just can’t get in,” said Jules Kim, CEO of the Scarlet Alliance.

¹ 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)

The drug testing Budget measure is accompanied by a suite of additional welfare reform measures aimed at coercing engagement with AOD treatment, including the “removal of exemptions due to drugs or alcohol abuse” and removal of eligibility for the Disability Support Pension.

“The trouble with this whole suite of measures is the absence of capacity to meet the existing demand for treatment. There is not much point identifying an AOD problem if there is no capacity to treat it. Drug testing welfare recipients will be a costly but pointless exercise in this context - the money would be better spent on funding more treatment places for people who already know they need them,” said Darryl O’Donnell, CEO of AFAO.

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