



VICTORIAN ALCOHOL & DRUG ASSOCIATION

State Budget Submission: Summary of recommendations

2006-07

December 2005

VAADA is a peak organisation, which aims to reduce the harms associated with alcohol and other drug (AOD) use within the Victorian community. VAADA's membership comprises agencies working in the AOD field, as well as those individuals who are involved in, or have a specific interest in, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation or research that minimises the harms caused by alcohol and other drugs.

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Overview

The issue of harms associated with alcohol and other drug (AOD) use cuts across a broad range of policy areas – including health policy, social policy and justice policy.

In the context of reform to the health system and the implementation of a new social policy framework – it is timely to reflect on how we respond to the issue of harms associated with substance use. The responsibility for undertaking such reflection should rest with the Government, the community and the AOD sector (including consumers and the peak body).

The Victorian Government has made considerable progress in creating greater flexibility within the justice system for those individuals experiencing issues with substance use and caught in a cycle of re-offending. VAADA welcomed the Government's intention to improve access to justice for disadvantaged populations.

The issue of harms associated with substance use, however, is increasingly alienated from the health and community sector and related policy. Current policy thinking doesn't capture the broad issue as it relates to the diversity of health and social needs of individuals and communities affected by substance use.

In this submission to the State Budget 06-07, the Victorian Alcohol & Drug Association (VAADA) calls on the Victorian Government to turn its focus to the health and social aspects of the harms associated with alcohol and other drugs and to strive towards a more holistic way of responding to substance misuse.

In light of this appeal to the Government, this submission makes a series of broad recommendations about the need for reflection on the health and social response to AOD harms. This submission has therefore given less attention to specific funding for programs.

VAADA recommends that the Victorian Government:

- articulates its vision for responding to the harms associated with alcohol and other drugs in the context of its health and social policy
- undertakes to determine the health costs of alcohol and other drug use to the community (similar to that recently achieved in the VicHealth report on the health costs associated with domestic violence)
- develops a strategy to provide a more holistic health response to AOD issues
- incorporates the issue of disadvantage caused through substance (mis)use in a supplement to its social policy statement – *A Fairer Victoria*

A Fairer Victoria, social policy and the AOD sector

In March 2005, the Victorian Government released an updated version of *Growing Victoria Together* – and more clearly stated its vision for Victoria to 2010 and beyond.

As part of this vision, the Government released its social policy statement, *A Fairer Victoria* – which it claims is part of its vision to create a fairer society that reduces disadvantage and respects diversity. VAADA welcomed these new directions in social policy. *A Fairer Victoria* included initiatives for children and young people, families, older Victorians, Indigenous Victorians, people with disabilities and mental health issues.

In its earlier position paper *Challenges in Addressing Disadvantage in Victoria*, the Victorian Government identified key factors that contributed to disadvantage in Victoria.

The harm associated with substance misuse was identified in that position paper as a factor contributing to disadvantage.

VAADA was concerned, therefore, that the implications of disadvantage caused through the harms associated with alcohol and other drug use were not addressed in *A Fairer Victoria*.

It is not uncommon for people experiencing issues with substance (mis)use to be disadvantaged in their access to health and social services, housing and employment and to have a higher representation in prison populations. This has significant implications for their capacity to fully participate in social and economic life.

Some of the issues include:

- Stigma and discrimination towards individuals with substance (mis)use issues who seek to participate in social and economic life
- Health issues and barriers to accessing appropriate health care
- Barriers to accessing social and community services as a consequence of discrimination
- Barriers to accessing employment and further education opportunities.

In this pre-budget statement, VAADA urges the Victorian Government to address the harms associated with alcohol & other drugs as an inter-related factor that causes disadvantage for Victorians.

VAADA recommends that the Victorian Government

- devises a community awareness campaign to challenge discrimination against those Victorians experiencing issues with substance (mis)use

VAADA recommends that the Victorian Government:

- develops a strategy to
 - ensure that those individuals with AOD issues have equal opportunity to access universal services to reduce disadvantage
 - ensure access amongst prison populations to universality of health care services (particularly with regard to health issues relating to substance dependency or misuse)
 - reduce barriers impeding Victorians overcoming substance dependency from fully participating in social and economic life (with particular attention paid to housing options, connections with social networks & community and employment, education & training opportunities)
- ensures its social policy is based on an understanding of the intersections between the harms associated with substance (mis)use and other factors contributing to disadvantage that were identified in *A Fairer Victoria*
- considers the role of the AOD sector in addressing the intersections across AOD use and other factors contributing to disadvantage.
- examines the impact of substance (mis)use on disadvantaged communities and implement a strategy to reduce related disadvantage
- adequately supports and resources partnerships between local government and local communities to address issues that arise from substance (mis)use
- explores the need for AOD services and programs in 'growth corridors' when substance (mis)use contributes to disadvantage, and subsequently:
 - determining the type of services & programs most effective based on evidence
 - developing a strategy to address AOD issues that best meet the needs of these newly emerging communities.
- develops a strategy to address issues of substance (mis)use amongst newly emerging CALD communities.

Health Policy and the issue of alcohol & other drugs

In recent years, the Victorian Government has progressed with an agenda of health reform and new strategies in health policy – with the key goals of reducing hospital admissions and increasing community based care.

These have included:

- Directions for your health system: Metropolitan Health Strategy
- Primary Care Partnerships (PCP) Strategy
- Hospital Admissions Risk Program (HARP)
- Victorian Chronic and Complex Care Program (VCCCP)
- Community Health Services: creating a healthier Victoria
- Improving the Care of Older Persons
- New directions for Victoria's Mental Health Services: the next five years

Several of these policy frameworks touch upon the issue of substance (mis)use and the need to effectively collaborate and work with the AOD sector and treatment services.

What is lacking, however, is a clear vision of an integrated strategy (within health policy) that responds to the harms associated with substance (mis)use within a health context.

In this context, VAADA urges the Government to embed issues relating to AOD harm more firmly in the context of health care responses. Strategies might include increasing the capacity to support the employment of GPs in AOD services, promoting GPs as pharmacotherapy providers and implementing a nurse practitioner model (particularly in rural and regional Victoria).

With whole-of-government strategies being a prime focus of the current Victorian Government, It is timely to consider the role of AOD services in health promotion, community education and early intervention – for example, with young people and within newly emerging CALD communities.

VAADA recommends that the Victorian Government:

- commissions research into the health costs of substance (mis)use on individuals and the community
- ensures its planning and policy strategy for future health care directions incorporates the parallel increase in demand for substance misuse treatment
- explores evidence-based approaches that potentially support reduction in demand in the acute sector when chronic alcohol and drug use is a factor in attendance at Emergency Departments
- works with relevant tertiary institutions to ensure adequate grounding in alcohol and other drugs for medical undergraduates

VAADA recommends that the Victorian Government

- determines a strategy for how the AOD service system can work collaboratively with traditional health services to provide more holistic and community based responses to those individuals needing health care who are experiencing issues with substance (mis)use
- undertakes a review of AOD programs within community health services to enable them to effectively contribute to holistic response to health care for individuals experiencing the harms associated with substance misuse
- devises a strategy to promote the role of GPs in the health care of people who misuse substances (that extends beyond awareness-raising training)
- develops an evidence-base to explore the role of AOD programs and professionals in providing continuity of health care within the community
- explores the suitability of Primary Care Partnerships (PCPs) for improving access to services for individuals experiencing issues associated with substance (mis)use
- develops a whole-of-government approach to the issue of chronic and complex care for individuals with co-morbid conditions (dual diagnosis, substance related brain injury, etc) – that includes health promotion, effective interventions and continuity of care.
- funds research into the implications of substance misuse for older people
- raises community awareness about the effects of substance use for older people
- supports and resources the development of an evidence-based treatment program that caters specifically to the needs of older people.

Sector capacity & workforce development – the AOD sector

The need for a strong evidence-based AOD sector in Victoria is vital to the health and wellbeing of Victorians experiencing the harms associated with substance use. The provision of specialist health care and support to individuals, families and communities experiencing the harms associated with substance use is significant in reducing disadvantage for Victorians.

The sector is a key source of in-depth knowledge and experience of the practices and projects that work well to enhance the health and wellbeing of people experiencing the harms associated with substance use. It also has a key role in challenging disadvantage that relates to the alcohol and other drug use.

The health of the AOD sector is vital to the effective implementation of government funded programs and policy direction. Critical to this viability is the need for ongoing evaluation of services and programs in the context of contemporary needs of Victorians.

When funding does not reflect the true costs of service provision, compromises for sector capacity occur at the expense of a section of the Victorian community that is vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Services in the AOD sector are forced to consider reducing staff numbers, tightening eligibility criteria, reducing available services and operating with long waiting lists. The consequences of these changes to services are felt most by those individuals seeking to access the services.

A range of service areas are feeling the impact of these funding constraints – with inappropriate funding models and / or funding that doesn't contain growth provisions.

These service areas include

- counselling, consultancy and continuing care programs
- specialist pharmacotherapy services
- supported accommodation
- residential rehabilitation
- residential withdrawal programs

VAADA recommends that the Victorian Government:

- undertakes a review of the costing formulas of AOD programs and services and that the assumptions that underpin programs in AOD services are reviewed (with particular attention to those that cut across different Departmental programs)
- considers and accounts for the implications of the introduction of Child Protection legislation on AOD services and workers (with regard to expectations around duty of care, legislative responsibilities, funding implications and workforce management issues)

VAADA recommends that the Victorian Government:

- adopts a system of funding AOD services that adequately accounts for (indexes) the real increase in costs
- increases funding to the AOD workforce development strategy that for the AOD sector that addresses issues of recruitment, retention and remuneration through providing innovative strategies for promoting career pathways in the sector (eg. graduate program in AOD sector) and addressing OHS issues where worker safety is an issue
- [VCOSS Recommendation] develops an alternative approach to indexation of community sector base recurrent funding in partnership with community sector peak bodies that ensures funding keeps pace with the full cost of service delivery, including wages.