

MEDIA RELEASE

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Victoria – a true negative on drug testing welfare recipients

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) welcomes the Victorian Government's expressed intention to not participate in the pilot drug testing regime targeting welfare recipients proposed by the Federal Government last month.

We note that, at best, this policy will have no impact; however, it is more likely that it will produce a number of adverse outcomes for the community.

There is widespread concern across the AOD sector that this policy will create unnecessary demand on an already stretched and overburdened alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment sector by funnelling individuals who provide a positive result - but are not dependent on drugs - into the treatment system.

Ms Sharon (Molly) O'Reilly, acting EO of VAADA, states, 'the Victorian AOD treatment sector is already significantly overburdened and this policy will only increase the burden, through capturing individuals who use drugs but are not experiencing substance dependence. This limits access to those people who are in urgent need for treatment and have been waiting, in some cases for months to get into treatment programs. In light of this, the announcement from the Victorian Government with regard to this policy is most welcome'.

Ms O'Reilly continues, 'we are receiving constant feedback from the community that they cannot access the treatment system; this feedback corresponds with VAADA's data, which indicate that Victoria's funded residential rehabilitation capacity is the second lowest in Australia. Any endeavour to increase unnecessary demand will take up a place for someone with a legitimate AOD issue. Forcing someone into AOD treatment who is not experiencing dependency is counterproductive and wasteful exercise in net widening'.

The deterrent factor implicit in the design of this pilot policy is also flawed, as it is based on the assumption that those experiencing AOD dependency who are on welfare can simply stop using and it does not account for the associated complexities of people on welfare who experience AOD issues consistently face.

Ms O'Reilly goes on to say, 'addressing AOD dependency is not a simple process whereby an individual can be coerced into abstinence through a financial penalty. We need to ensure that treatment is available when people need and want it, which is unlikely to align with positive drug testing results. This policy of drug testing welfare recipients, and its' various associated coercive elements, fails to account for the myriad challenges associated with substance dependence.'

'We have found that these types of policies which contribute to further stigmatisation of individuals experiencing AOD dependency and create additional barriers to seeking help, while further increasing drug related harms.'

VAADA is the peak body that represents over 80 Alcohol and other Drug services across Victoria. On a daily basis these services are dealing with the effects of harmful alcohol and other drug consumption.

For more information or to arrange an interview please contact Sharon (Molly) O'Reilly on 0416027747 for comment or if unavailable, David Taylor on 0413 914 206.