

MEDIA RELEASE

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Alcohol and other drug system under pressure – more support now

Victoria's alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment system cannot meet community demand for treatment. COVID-19 has only made this worse.

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) today releases their election statement calling for fair and equitable access to AOD treatment across Victoria.

The statement, referencing Victorian AOD treatment agency waitlist data, reveals that the daily waitlist for treatment has increased during the pandemic by 71.4% from September 2020 (2385 people) to December 2021 (4088 people).

Prior to the pandemic, demand for treatment had experienced unprecedented levels of growth with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare highlighting an 87.5% increase in closed treatment episodes from 2014/15 to 2019/20.

We know, from looking at other crises, such as bushfire and floods, that harmful AOD use increases in crisis effected areas.

There has been a surge in alcohol related demand since the pandemic, no doubt fuelled by anxiety as well as long months in near isolation. 70% of Victorian AOD treatment agencies have seen an increase in the prevalence and severity of alcohol related presentations.

In response to the pandemic, Victoria's already stretched residential treatment system constricted to meet social distancing requirements, further blowing out wait times. This further exacerbated Victoria's lack of capacity in residential rehabilitation, as the state has the second lowest per capita rate of beds per 10,000 head of population in Australia.

Mr Sam Biondo, EO of VAADA, says 'we have seen unprecedented increases in demand since the pandemic with average wait times blowing out for some treatment types by over 25%. This means extra weeks for those in desperate need of help in a queue, which for many dangerously increases the rate of attrition.'

'These challenges are occurring within an environment where, from the recent Victorian budget, 100 workers will be defunded later this year. According to agency analysis of demand for treatment from the community, Victoria needs an additional 250 workers, not a cut of 100 workers.'

'We need increased residential rehabilitation and detoxification capacity; in January, due to Omicron, at least 2 detox units closed their doors due to infection, close contacts and limited access to RAT tests; that event largely brought throughput to the residential sector to a halt.'

'We need investment in additional workforce training and broader planning for tomorrow's workforce, with recruitment and retention of skilled workers increasingly difficult, especially in regional areas of Victoria. The progression of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health system

will see increased employment in the mental health sector, which while welcome, could cannibalise the AOD treatment sector workforce, further exacerbating recruitment issues'.

'The threat of maintaining a viable and skilled AOD workforce has never been more dire'.

To access VAADA's election statement and companion summary, see:

Summary: https://www.vaada.org.au/?smd_process_download=1&download_id=30375

Full Statement: https://www.vaada.org.au/?smd_process_download=1&download_id=30372

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Media stories on alcohol and other drugs may be traumatic for some people. Support is available and we ask that media agencies consider publishing the details below:

If this story has raised issues about your own or others drug and alcohol use, please contact the national hotline for confidential counselling and referral on 1800 250 015

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 Sam Biondo, EO of VAADA, on 0414 974 121 for comment or if unavailable, David Taylor on 0413 914 206.