

Diversion practices as an alternative means of dealing with drug offenders

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The Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD), the key advisory body established by the Prime Minister earlier this year, today called on all Australians to recognise and support innovative alternatives to dealing with drug offenders under the criminal justice system.

Just as the Council recently recognised the importance of methadone programs for the treatment of heroin addiction, the Council applauds the various diversion systems already in place in Australia, such as the cautioning and diversion of first offenders in Victoria and the South Australian Drug Assessment and Aid Panel.

The Council will closely monitor the progress of diversion programs such as the two year trial of the Drug Court system recently announced by the NSW Government and the Court Diversion Service in Western Australia. The Council encourages the assessment of all of the options available to ensure that best practice principles are applied to diversionary practices which will strengthen outcomes for individuals and communities affected by drug addiction.

At its meeting in Canberra today the Council called on all governments and the community to give urgent priority to the further investigation of diversion programs as an alternative means of dealing with drug offenders under the criminal justice system.

The Council also requested that treatment and rehabilitation services be adequately resourced to cope with the increased pressure, which will inevitably be placed on such services as a result of expectations created by diversion programs and Drug Courts.

The Council expressed particular interest in a trial being conducted in Victoria, which provides for a drug offender, under certain conditions, to be cautioned by police. As part of this process the offender is referred to a health provider for assessment and treatment within five days. Co-operation between health and law enforcement authorities ensures that money is provided for each person involved in this type of diversion and this follows them through the treatment process.

The Council will continue to monitor and evaluate initiatives already under way to assess barriers to the further expansion of diversion programs such as the interactions required between a number of agencies to achieve social change. The Council will provide advice to governments on how these barriers may be overcome.

Both the Intergovernmental Committee on Drugs, which comprises the senior health and law enforcement officers involved in drug policy around Australia, and the Australian National Council on Drugs will be working together to contribute to the diversion debate, looking closely at the extension of alternative forms of justice

which places treatment and rehabilitation above punishment.

The Council also identified other key priority areas for action including:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander substance misuse;
- In consultation with the Australian National Council on AIDS and Related Diseases and the Intergovernmental Committee on Drugs, clarifying the risks of injecting drugs;
- Addressing the harm caused to the community by drugs, including social harms and a crime focus;
- Drug use by young people, including primary prevention and social and structural issues, and
- Causes of death from drug use, eg. heroin overdoses.

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