



NSW SOCIAL JUSTICE STATEMENT

**PROMOTING RECOVERY AND  
REDUCING DRUG AND ALCOHOL HARM**

## OUR VISION

**People using alcohol and/or other drugs deserve the same respect and understanding as other people. People with substance use concerns often have past experiences of trauma, chronic health issues or other psychological concerns. Their recovery is not always a linear process. Meeting people where they are at, without judgement, welcoming them in all their diversity, and ensuring they have access to support that reduce harm, gives people a far better chance of recovery and having good health and wellbeing.**

The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW fundamentally believes in this through the social principles of dignity of the human person and solidarity. This means enabling life and human flourishing and prioritising the well-being of people experiencing poverty and disadvantage in all our actions.

## OUR RECOMMENDATION

The Society NSW calls on the NSW Government to better support people experiencing problematic alcohol and/or other drugs use by:

- Increasing funding to non-government services for treatment and post-treatment services to meet unmet need and to ensure organisational and workforce sustainability.
- Investing in evidence-based community education and prevention campaigns, as well as harm reduction initiatives.
- Developing a new NSW Drug and Alcohol Strategy, in partnership with the sector and people with lived experience, that is based on a holistic, person-centred and trauma-informed approach.
- Developing a plan to reduce stigma and discrimination experienced by people who use drugs and their families.

## THE CHALLENGE

**In Australia, an estimated 4 million people are struggling with some form of drug dependency,<sup>1</sup> and around 1 in 3 people drink alcohol in ways that put their health at risk.<sup>2</sup> For many, this will have far-reaching consequences. Tragically, there has been an increase in the number of drug-induced deaths over the last 15 years.<sup>3</sup> The number of deaths now exceeds the annual road toll.**

There is a strong correlation between drug use and other social issues. This is borne out by higher rates of drug-induced deaths in low socio-economic areas.<sup>4</sup> Many people begin using drugs as a coping mechanism for serious social, physical health or

## OUR CONTRIBUTION

St Vincent de Paul Society NSW is a leading provider of frontline services, with 100 services state-wide. We provide daily assistance to people experiencing alcohol and/or other drug concerns through our community-based and residential treatment services such as Matthew Talbot Hostel and Clinic, Freeman House, Frederic House, Rendu House, Rosalie House, the New England Outreach Program and through the Continuing Coordinated Care Program.

**In 2022-2023 our drug and alcohol services supported approximately 1,300 people, most of who were aged 30 to 49 years old. Our services assist people who would like support to reduce harms related to their substance use. Our services also work to support people with their broader goals around housing, health, income, education, employment, and family connections.**

mental health issues such as trauma, childhood abuse, domestic violence, unemployment, social isolation, homelessness, mental illness and chronic health conditions. Yet in the long term, drug use can often make these issues worse.

With drug and alcohol misuse strongly socially determined, criminal justice system responses that focus on individual responsibility have been ineffective at preventing illicit drug use. Criminalizing people who use drugs not only further stigmatises and marginalizes them, but it also raises significant barriers to people seeking help with their substance use issues due to shame, fear of prosecution or having their children removed. Even when a person decides to seek help for their substance use concerns, treatment can be difficult or impossible to access, especially in rural and regional areas, where services are few and wait lists are long.

Substance use carries risks, and individuals using alcohol and/or other drugs require a range of supports to progressively reduce harm to themselves and those around them. For some, long-term abstinence is not achievable, or will take several years to accomplish. Access to health-focused and harm minimisation responses greatly improve an individual's chance of recovery and ability to tackle the root causes of addiction.

Globally, there has been mounting support for a radical re-think of responses to problematic drug use. In Australia, a growing number of organisations, academics, medical professionals and others agree that our laws are not working as a deterrent and

that alternative solutions should be explored.<sup>5</sup> A NSW Special Commission of Inquiry recommended a paradigm shift in our state's approach to illicit drug policy. The Inquiry concluded public health messaging, improved harm reduction measures, education, research and properly resourced treatment pathways to achieve better outcomes for people who use drugs, and for society as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

## OUR APPROACH

**The Society NSW's approach to achieve better outcomes for people who use alcohol and illicit drugs is that:**

- People using alcohol and/or other drugs should have access to a breadth of person-centred end-to-end services that meet their needs at different stages of recovery, including low to high intensity support, residential and non-residential programs, therapeutic and case management services, day programs, and clinical and community-based services.
- The impact of broader social, psychological and physical health issues must be acknowledged and addressed through the availability of holistic wrap-around support, including: 'No wrong door' crisis assistance and care coordination, primary care services, domestic and family violence services, comorbidity programs, child and family support, homelessness and housing support, community inclusion, disability and aged care.
- People using alcohol and other drugs should receive dignifying health-focused responses to their substance use, and that services promote harm minimisation and risk reduction initiatives to support people at different stages of their recovery.
- The criminal justice system should acknowledge the complexity of addiction and considers alternative, non-punitive, community-based responses that reduce shame and stigma, and promote understanding, respect and recovery for people using alcohol and other drugs.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [Society NSW's reports and submissions](#)



## JARROD'S STORY

Jarrod's story of recovery, near death and life began last year after an outreach worker from Freeman House encouraged him to seek treatment. Jarrod was unwell from drinking to excess, resulting in liver cirrhosis. Jarrod said, "When I started in detox, I didn't last a night and had to be hospitalised. It felt as though I was dying and for a time, I lost the use of my legs from the waist down. After recovering in hospital, I was able to complete detox and moved into the residential program where I set about regaining my mind and putting into practice what I was taking from the group sessions. I got to know a lot about myself through the other residents. We had a wide variety of experiences, levels of trauma and barriers. We had motivations and goals we wanted to achieve in our lives."

"I met so many inspiring people during my time at Freeman – nurses, case workers, support staff and management – all of them brilliant and filled with compassion. I feel whole again with purpose and meaning – I'm working, have a place of my own, enrolled in an alcohol and other drugs course and have a support system in place."

"When I reflect on how far I've come since being supported by Freeman House, I'm reminded of a moment from when I was in primary school that speaks to who I am. There was a girl with a disability who was treated like an outcast. It would have been easy to go along with everyone else ignoring her. But I chose to sit with her. It was the right thing to do to show that someone cared: "me"."

<sup>1</sup> Addiction Center (2020) *Addiction in Australia*

<sup>2</sup> AIHW (2024) *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2022-2023 report*

<sup>3</sup> Penington Institute (2019) *Australia's annual overdose report 2019*

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> NSW Special Commission of Inquiry (2019) *Report into crystal methamphetamine and other amphetamine-type stimulants, Sydney.*

<sup>6</sup> NSW Special Commission of Inquiry (2019) *Report into crystal methamphetamine and other amphetamine-type stimulants, Sydney.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of this land, with deep respect. May Elders, past and present, be blessed and honoured. May we join together and build a future based on compassion, justice, hope, faith, and reconciliation.

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**St Vincent de Paul Society NSW is a lay-Catholic member and volunteer-based organisation that has been assisting people experiencing disadvantage and hardship in NSW for over 140 years. Our aspiration is an Australia transformed by compassion and built on justice.**



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