

Alcohol and other drugs services in crisis amid COVID-19 related spikes in demand

21 October 2021: Alcohol and other drugs services across NSW are facing a 'perfect storm' amid the pandemic with surging demand, rising costs, reduced capacity and a stretched and near-broken workforce, the Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies (NADA) has warned.

While the NSW Government has significantly boosted funding to mental health services, at this stage there is no additional funding for alcohol and other drugs services—despite the impact of problematic substance use across the community, exacerbated by repeated lockdowns.

Research commissioned by NADA found that despite the increasing numbers of people seeking help, those receiving it had already fallen by 14% due to reduced capacity. This research was undertaken in late 2020—services on the frontline in 2021 report that the situation is even more dire.

"Alcohol and other drugs services in NSW were already struggling and underfunded prior to COVID-19, but now many services are on their knees. The pandemic has increased operating costs, has led to reduced rehab and detox beds, stretched staff and lengthened waiting lists," NADA's Chief Executive Officer, Robert Stirling, said.

"While additional government funding for mental health is welcome, we will not be able to properly respond to the mental health crisis if we do not also bolster alcohol and other drugs services that are so desperately in demand during this pandemic."

Mr Stirling said there was an urgent need for substantial, additional funding for alcohol and other drugs services in NSW to respond to the increased demand and reduced service capacity this pandemic has created.

He said the NSW Government should also release its substantive response to the report of its own Special Commission of Inquiry into the Drug 'Ice' which it has had for almost two years now.

"While NADA supports most of the recommendations in the report, it believes a starting point for the NSW Government is to commit to recommendation 5: That the NSW Government develop and implement, as a matter of priority, a whole-of-government alcohol and other drugs policy. Within that recommendation it is asserted that the policy should ensure that there is an appropriate distribution of resources and activity – which to NADA means more funding and treatment options available to people." Mr Stirling said.

Research results

- 97% of the AOD workforce reported increases in stress and anxiety and more than 60% reported the constant pressure and demands on staff had led to a decrease in staff wellbeing.
- AOD services are reaching 1,711 or 14% fewer clients (in 2020 vs 2019). There was a 33% decrease in residential rehabilitation services, a 45% decrease in day programs and a 23% decrease in case management and support – this at a time when demand has increased as indicated by longer waiting lists for services.
- Almost 40% (37.5%) of services have experienced increased costs due to workforce training, PPE and special cleaning services, while 40.6% suffered reductions in donations and client contributions due to reduction in bed numbers and occupancy rates.

Source: van de Ven, K., Ritter, A., & Stirling, R. (2021). [The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the non-government alcohol and other drug sector](#). DPMP Monograph No. 34. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

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