

# REDUCING HARM FROM DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE

## INTRODUCTION

The Greens want to create a safe, healthy and connected community, by ensuring people are not impacted by significant health, social, legal and economic harms associated with drugs. We want to ensure people can access the services and support they need for substance use, including legal substances such as tobacco and alcohol.

The punitive approach to drugs has increased rather than prevented the harm caused by drug use. We need to stop the head in the sand approach of previous governments, which fails to recognise the reality that many people will experiment with illicit drugs throughout their lives, and criminalisation has seen too many people miss out on the treatment and support they need. We also need to recognise that negative consequences of drug use are felt differently due to stigma, discrimination and an uneven treatment of people caught up in the justice system.

Social and economic inequalities in our society contribute to the harm caused by drugs; where some are given a warning from the police while others are not; where some are able to afford early intervention, rehabilitation services, while others cannot. This is not a just system, it is a system that reinforces existing inequality.

Instead, the Greens take a harm minimisation approach, which works to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of drug and substance use in our community.

**This means treating drug use as a health issue - not a criminal one. We will put more money in treatment and rehabilitation services, improve safety for young people, and seek legal reforms that will keep people out of the justice system.**

## THE GREENS DRUG AND ALCOHOL HARM REDUCTION PLAN WILL:

1. Reduce the harm from drug use
2. Increase supports for people with drug dependency issues
3. Support and enhance medicinal drug use

This package of reforms ensures that people who use drugs, their families and the ACT community are in the best position to address the health, economic and social harms caused by drugs. By shifting from a punitive approach to a public health approach towards drug use we will see reduced stigma - so that people who use drugs feel comfortable disclosing their

drug use and can seek help. This enhanced ability to access support will reduce demand on the criminal justice system.

The ACT Greens believe the use of any drug, including alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceuticals, has the potential to be of harm to the person and their community.

The most harmful drug in our society is alcohol, which is legal and accessible. The Greens seek to apply similar policies to drug use, and minimise the harm caused by all drugs, by treating people with illicit drug dependency with care and compassion, focusing on improved health outcomes, rather than criminalisation.

## 1. REDUCE THE HARM FROM DRUG USE, BY:

### PROVIDING ROUTINE PILL TESTING AT FESTIVALS

We know that despite security, police and harm minimisation messages, festivals are places where people are taking drugs. Years of experience around the world has shown that pill testing is a cost effective way of improving people's understanding of the harms of drug use; reducing the amounts of drugs that people may choose to take; improving law enforcement intelligence gathering; and of course ultimately saves lives by supporting the disposal of substances containing high levels of active and novel ingredients - often poisons and toxins.

The ACT Greens have spent years urging the ACT Government to provide [pill testing](#) at these events, and after [multiple positive evaluations of 2 trials at Groovin the Moo](#), it's time to commit to helping young people party safer, and over time supporting every major festival in the ACT to have mobile testing available.

### RESOURCING AND SUPPORTING PERMANENT PILL TESTING SITES

The ACT Greens understand that people continue to use drugs, and many young people in particular are experimenting with new and unknown substances regularly on weekends - not just at festivals. We also know that these substances are not safe, but that we can help people make safer choices easily and cheaply, and that we can save lives.

That is why we will move decisively to establish a dedicated 'pill' testing site in the heart of the city's nightlife precinct, to ensure that people are also able to have drugs checked outside of the festival days. It is worth noting that given the COVID situation, festivals as we knew them may not return for quite some time, thus the need for these more accessible drug checking sites may be even more pertinent.

## **PROVISION OF FREE AND RELIABLE INTOXICATION LEVELS TESTING TO SUPPORT ROAD SAFETY**

If we are serious about harm minimisation - and the Greens are - we want to support people to make safer choices, both for themselves and the wider community. That is why we will work together with community events, festivals and licensed venues to increase the provision of self-testing alcohol and drug testing kits, such as breathalysers and saliva tests to every patron who wants to ensure they do not drive “under the influence” and can meet legislated road safety intoxication level limits.

## **PILOTING A SAFE DRUG CONSUMPTION SITE**

Medically Supervised Injecting Centres (MSICs) are places where people inject or take drugs, such as heroin or methamphetamine (ice), under the supervision of medical staff and health professionals. MSICs are also referred to as drug consumption rooms. But these facilities provide more than overdose prevention. The safe and supportive environment also sees social workers and drug and alcohol counsellors provide health and rehabilitation advice and options to drug users in a way that enables changed behaviours in the longer term - similar to the benefits of pill testing. The ACT Greens propose establishing a pilot site in Canberra, modelled on the effective [Medically Supervised Injecting Centres operating in NSW and Victoria](#).

## **IMPROVING DRUG EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS**

The ACT Greens know that the provision of information can assist young people reduce the risks associated with taking illicit substances as most information is sourced by peers rather than other avenues. We recognise this needs to occur in a way that is nuanced and aged appropriate. The ACT Greens will work with experts to increase the provision of evidence-based and age-appropriate community education programs about drugs in schools and resource new community education programs to reduce risks and impacts of substance use.

## **2. INCREASE SUPPORTS FOR PEOPLE WITH DRUG DEPENDENCE ISSUES, BY:**

### **IMMEDIATELY DOUBLING FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY DRUG AND ALCOHOL SERVICES BY \$20 MILLION PA**

For many years, ATODA (Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT) - the peak body for drug and alcohol issues in the ACT - has been calling for increased investment in vital services on behalf of its 23 member organisations that provide treatment and services. It's time to listen. If, as a community, we want to be able to respond to the needs of people who

seek support, treatment and rehabilitation in a timely way, then we have to put our money where it counts - in the community.

The Greens support an immediate baseline funding boost to double the immediate annual funding for drug and alcohol treatment services to \$40 million, dramatically reducing long wait times for rehabilitation and detoxification services. This will [fund therapeutic support services, including inpatient beds and improving existing infrastructure](#).

## **AUDITING ONGOING SECTOR NEEDS TO ESTABLISH FUTURE FUNDING**

We will also work with the sector over the next 6 months on a genuine co-designed infrastructure audit of the entire specialist alcohol and other drug service system to inform infrastructure needs in the medium- and long-term. There have been ongoing pressures in the sector over decades, and also significant changes, such as the introduction of the Drug and Alcohol Court which needs ongoing support.

## **ENSURING DEDICATED SUPPORT FOR FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE**

The Greens will develop:

- a dedicated First Nations community controlled withdrawal and rehabilitation service, and
- new family recovery programs for First Nations communities.

The ACT Greens support the aims of the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm (NBHF), which is operated and administered by Canberra Health Services within the ACT Government Health Directorate. However, we know that the NBHF is not a drug and alcohol service, despite its original intention to be so, and never will be. The ACT desperately needs its own dedicated community controlled medical withdrawal and rehabilitation service for First Nations people in the Canberra region, and we are committed to working with local services to understand the needs, scope and resourcing required to make it happen.

The ACT Greens know that programs that support First Nations people dealing with drug dependency must be culturally grounded and take a holistic approach - drawing on both Western medical traditions as well as traditional Aboriginal Ngangkari medicine. They must move beyond individual approaches, and recognise the intergenerational impacts of trauma. As part of its approach to supporting community controlled services, the ACT Greens will support new family recovery programs that respond to the clear evidence that for First Nations communities in particular, the process of recovery must move beyond an individualised approach to addressing drug dependency, and involve families in the process of recovery. These programs will draw on good practice programs already operating and incorporate the knowledge of family assistance, therapy and family work.

## ENHANCING DRUG DIVERSION PATHWAYS

We know that we need to reform the current drug diversion system to focus on personal drug use as a health issue. Our Plan is about reducing the interactions people have with the police, legal and criminal justice system, by investing in community led programs that support people in need, reduce harm and reduce interaction with the criminal justice system.

While the ACT has had a range of progressive drug law policies over many years, the pathways out of the criminal justice system and into education and treatment have not kept up with the community's needs, in particular for young people and First Nations people. We want to see a sensible approach to drug diversion that ensures that every step of the way - from chance encounters with police, to appearing before court - our system acknowledges that for many people, drug use is a personal and health issue, not one that seeks to impose criminal records and punishment.

**The Greens fought to establish a dedicated Drug and Alcohol Court (DAC) in the ACT as a starting point to this shift. It's essential that we continue to refine the DAC model and respond to any unmet needs for participants and treatment services.**

We will do this in partnership with the sector, who can ensure evidence-based person-centered interventions are available. We also want to work collaboratively with ACT Policing to increase the diversion rate for First Nations people for drug and alcohol issues away from the criminal justice system.

## BETTER ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH AND DRUG CO-MORBIDITY

There is a clear and well evidenced link between substance use and mental health - both as a causal factor and a co-occurring health issue. We believe that alcohol and drug services are often also on the frontline of mental health support and vice-versa, and both sectors need ongoing resourcing to improve integrated responses. We believe that this includes increased support and referral pathways away from the criminal justice system for people with co-morbidity; opportunities for cross-sectoral professional development and information sharing; and greater awareness in the community of the complexities of supporting people with these co-occurring issues.

We need both our health and justice systems to provide better integrated services whereby mental health issues and drug dependency can be treated concurrently, and holistically. Services must bring together diagnosis, treatment, care, rehabilitation and healthcare promotion to ensure those experiencing comorbidity can learn the management and recovery skills necessary to remain well, and reduce risks.

## **ESTABLISHING AN ONGOING MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR DRUG LAW REFORM**

We need to ensure drug law reform responds to evidence about what works rather than relying on old approaches that cause harm. We need experts from health, the legal fraternity, law enforcement, First Nations peoples and substances users with lived experience to guide us.

A new and ongoing Ministerial Advisory Council for Drug Law Reform incorporating these sectors and people will be tasked with developing new, innovative and responsive legislation and practices to take us out of the past and towards a genuinely advanced system of harm minimisation and the treatment of drug use as a health issue.

The Greens would like to start a community discussion about the broader decriminalisation of drugs, but we understand that progressing this is complicated by Commonwealth Government legislation.

## **INTRODUCING A SET OF OBJECTIVES FOR THE DRUGS OF DEPENDENCE ACT 1989 TO REFLECT A COMMITMENT TO HARM MINIMISATION AND THE TREATMENT OF DRUG USE AS A HEALTH ISSUE**

Current ACT legislation is out of date, and needs to reflect current thinking that incorporates a health and harm minimisation approach to drug use.

### **3. SUPPORTING AND ENHANCING MEDICINAL DRUG USE, BY:**

#### **MORE TRAINING FOR GPs TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE MEDICINAL CANNABIS SCHEME, AND THE VARIOUS HEALTH BENEFITS FOR SPECIFIC ILLNESSES**

Whilst there has certainly been progress in implementing a national medicinal cannabis scheme over the past four years, reports on the ground are that patients are still having difficulties accessing the scheme. The Greens propose funding and support to enable more training for GPs and pharmacists to better understand how the medicinal cannabis scheme works, and which conditions it is suitable to be used for.

#### **INCREASING THE ALLOWABLE AMOUNT OF POSSESSION OF CANNABIS TO 150g FOR MEDICINAL PURPOSES AND REMOVE THE RESTRICTION ON ARTIFICIAL CULTIVATION OF CANNABIS**

Recent debates in the ACT about the further decriminalisation of cannabis failed to recognise that for many people, access to therapeutic or medicinal cannabis is severely restricted, overly bureaucratic and of little help for those who may need a long term supply to make tinctures or

oils for the treatment of chronic conditions. We want to ensure that people are not having to tap into the 'black market' to supplement their supply, and we also recognise that not all Canberrans have access to a back yard or secure outside location to grow the legally permitted number of plants. That is why we will improve the existing legislation to allow people with legitimate medical needs to possess up to 150 grams; and remove the outdated barrier to artificial cultivation.

## **INCREASING INVESTMENT IN TRIALS, RESEARCH AND USE OF MEDICINAL DRUG USE FOR TREATMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH AND PTSD ISSUES**

From the use of psilocybin with patients with terminal illness, to ketamine for depression, and MDMA for treating PTSD, the world's [mainstream health researchers](#) are turning to psychedelics and previously 'illicit' substances more and more, to treat a range of mental health conditions. Using clinical studies and peer reviewed results, these researchers are challenging preconceived and outdated judgements of these substances, and are progressing the field of psychiatric practice. The same can be said of the need for further work in understanding the full potential benefits of cannabis on physical health care. The Greens want the ACT to play a role in this important evolution, and explore what government support can be given to progressing new pilots and trials in the Territory. The ACT is well placed for such trials, through linkages with our academic institutions and health services, similar to mainstream trials already occurring in [Victorian hospitals](#) and around the world.

## **CREATING AN ONGOING MEDICINAL DRUG USE ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

We believe that the ACT could truly be at the forefront of this global effort to better understand the possible benefits of the development of regulatory-approved and research-backed psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy for the treatment of mental ill-health in Australia, and other physical ailments. We will create an ongoing Medicinal Drug Use Advisory Committee, incorporating the existing medical cannabis committees, to examine the evidence and possibilities of bringing further world class research here to Canberra.

## **CONTINUING TO ENSURE THAT THE ACT IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF ACCESSING NEW TREATMENTS AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR PEOPLE WITH A DRUG DEPENDENCY**

The ACT Greens know that important research and advances are underway to support people with drug dependency, including opioid dependence. The ACT should be a leader in introducing new evidence-driven treatments and approaches. We will work with health experts, providers and the community to ensure that Canberrans are offered timely access, and person-centred and respectful delivery, to treatment for drug dependency. We will lobby the Federal Government to ensure that laws and policies support evidence-based approaches to access to treatment and support.