

**Submission
No 165**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Fair Treatment for Tamworth Region Campaign

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FAIR TREATMENT

Edmond Atalla MP
Chair
Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety
Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities
via: lawsafety@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr. Atalla,

We are writing as members of the Fair Treatment for Tamworth Region campaign. Together with first nations organizations, faith communities, local families, community and health services and those with lived experience of drug and alcohol dependency, we are pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety's inquiry into Community Safety in regional and rural communities, following two years of steadfast campaigning for more alcohol and other drug services for our region.

We understand that the issue of drug and alcohol misuse does not stand alone. It is complex and multifaceted and intersects with other issues, such as mental health, homelessness, domestic violence, crime, unemployment and poverty and, therefore, requires adequate investment.

We strongly believe that if you are able to better support people experiencing drug use and dependency and provide the rehabilitation and wellness services they need in their home towns, this would be a practical solution to make our communities safer.

Whilst this submission is important across all regions in NSW, we want to use the area of Tamworth as an example of a growing and thriving regional area that is in great need of more alcohol and other drug (AOD) services..

Why?

Tamworth has a population of over 65,000 people, with growth predictions into the future of 100,000. However, our community has no local AOD detox or residential treatment service. At the moment, a person from the Tamworth region must wait months for help and must travel as far as Newcastle or Sydney to heal and get well. Local services – such as the Tamworth Aboriginal Medical Service, are doing their best to help people by providing AOD day programs, counselling and other supports but are struggling to meet demand.

This lack of available services is then compounded if someone is experiencing dual diagnosis of AOD use and mental illness.

Currently, researchers predict that between 43.6% and 73.2% of people across Australia seeking treatment cannot get their needs met by the capacity of current services, and this issue is more acute in regional areas where options are limited.¹

What are Service Providers Seeing?

As an Aboriginal Corporation the Tamworth Aboriginal Medical Service connects with people that are severely disadvantaged and have complex needs. The following attests to these facts.

Mental health problems unaddressed, unsupported create ongoing dysfunction in respect of relationship breakdowns. Domestic Violence, AVO's that are issued and not understood or followed. Increasing family violence and adverse contact with the law. Homelessness is already causing vulnerable people to live on the streets. With overcrowding, couch surfing this all adds to these challenges.

People released from prison with no support and a myriad of life stressors that at times lead to them being involved in criminal activity and ending back in prison if they are not adequately supported. Recidivism without rehabilitation only leads to further crime. So, the cycle continues. Financial distress impacts families and community which has a flow on effect.

Drugs and alcohol create further challenges as they cause a break down in society, families, friends, and communities. This then equates to a criminal element that can exist and does exist in communities, which then causes challenges with the legal system, courts, police, health facilities and community.

Not being able to access appropriate Detox (There are no beds for detox at the Tamworth Hospital) which then must be sourced out of the area. This can affect the individual's capacity to stay connected with their support systems within community and country. Not having a suitable Rehabilitation within the Tamworth and Region limits the capabilities for ongoing care and stabilization of individuals. Research has shown that recovery is very hard to achieve without family, friends, and community behind them.

When considering the services offered in urban areas versus rural areas, a clear disadvantage is experienced by country people who need access to local facilities owing to the vast distances to travel. There are higher per capita numbers of people needing, and seeking assistance, without the vital help being available. This lack of support can, and does, lead to a higher rate of suicide in rural areas.

Benefits for the community

The benefits of implementing more local drug and alcohol services provide a flow on effect to multiple levels of our community. First, for local parents needing help, they would have the ability to undertake rehabilitation in their community and continue to provide care for their children with existing support networks, resulting in lowered levels of entry into care. This is one of the highest intersecting issues to those interacting with the justice system.

Then for young people themselves, AOD and mental health services function as both a means for diversion from our justice system, as well as a secondary form of crime prevention within itself. The New England and North-West area shows a significantly higher rate of re-offending for young people than the NSW average (50.5% vs 40%)², which reflects a lack of supportive structures in place to support young people in trouble. AOD services allow for the opportunity for intervention and disruption of cycles of entrenched disadvantage.

What we know is that investment in regional hubs is beneficial to regional NSW as a whole, as it provides a wider range of service opportunities, and works to reduce the strain on pre-existing services which allows them

¹ Ritter A, Chalmers J, Gomez M. Measuring Unmet Demand for Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment: The Application of an Australian Population-Based Planning Model. J Stud Alcohol Drugs Suppl. 2019

² NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, March 2024

to more effectively service their communities. The return on investment for alcohol and other drug services is staggering - with each dollar invested, seven are returned to the community.

Recommendation

Our campaign urges the committee to consider the benefits of providing more AOD services for rural and regional communities and invest in more residential rehabilitation services – including for young people – in key regional hubs, such as Tamworth.

Based on extensive conversations and a survey conducted with the Tamworth community we recommend that immediate investment is made in the following services for the region:

1. A Peer Mentoring program
2. A Residential rehab and local detox. We echo and applaud the recommendation made by the NSW Country Mayors association in their submission to this enquiry, to fund and commit to opening four AOD rehabilitation services throughout regional NSW within 12 months of endorsement of these recommendations.
3. A Culturally appropriate trauma informed wellness centre (to treat both AOD and mental health issues). The vision for this service has come from local First Nations leaders and which we think could act as a blueprint for other innovative services to manage both AOD and mental health dual diagnosis, something many people rural and regional communities are experiencing.

Yours sincerely,

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