

**INQUIRY INTO STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ALCOHOL
ABUSE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW**

Organisation: Illawarra Legal Centre Inc

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Re: Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW

I am writing to you in my role as Coordinator of the Children's Court Assistance Scheme (CCAS) a project of the Illawarra Legal Centre Inc.

The Illawarra Legal Centre (ILC) is a Community Legal Centre that provides free legal advice to people in the Illawarra and surrounding areas. The ILC is an accredited member of the National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) and is based in Warrawong, a southern suburb of Wollongong.

ILC workers identify through their casework the need for law reform that seeks to improve access to justice for those who live with the greatest social and financial hardship.

The Children's Court Assistance Scheme (CCAS) primarily provides support to young court attendees and their families and provides referral to key support services.

I would like to make the following brief points based on my observations working with young people in the juvenile justice system and in relation to the Terms of Reference you have provided.

a) Alcohol Advertising

My work at the Children's Court anecdotally suggests that significant and regular alcohol consumption is a 'normal' occurrence within a youth cohort. There is extensive alcohol advertising using 'cool' imagery, music and names/logos, in all forms of advertising, logically it follows, that advertising plays a role in 'normalising' the notion that alcohol is a 'cool' part of all our lives.

Given the high personal and social cost of alcohol use and abuse among young people I believe there should be significant restrictions on advertising alcohol replicating the approach taken around cigarette smoking.

b) Alcohol Harm Minimisation

My work in CCAS seems to show that many of the harm minimisation strategies may be targeted to young people who are currently engaged in mainstream activities, namely, school, vocational training and with those connected to social media. However, many Children's Court attendees have slipped away from many mainstream activities and isolation and a sense of hopelessness seems to reinforce risky alcohol consumption.

One solution could lay with developing or expanding social engagement activities that provide alcohol free activities that meet the needs of young people to be creative, part of a group, engaged in formal and informal skill development and connected to responsible adults with strong pro social values. One such example is the work of Beyond Empathy, as their website outlines, they are an Australian community, arts and cultural development organisation that creates art projects with people living on the margins of their communities to tell their stories and engage with new futures.

c) Alcohol in the Workplace

d) Reducing Drink Driving

I strongly advocate driving programs that target the young people who live with the greatest financial and social disadvantage. We want those without access to resources, supportive responsible adults and gaps in their education to be the focus of free, accessible driving instruction with an emphasis on peer mentoring to improve driver safety. Programs that foster responsible driving practices are likely to translate to reduced drink driving.

In the way the State Government's Work and Development Order (WDO) scheme not only assisted people reduce or eliminate fines debt through constructive social engagement, but provided a mechanism that opened the way for participants to continue their studies, work or social engagement so they could reap further benefits.

e) Reduce Alcohol Related Violence

Research shows that around 70 percent of young people convicted of an offence were under the influence of drugs or alcohol. (*Alcohol, drugs and crime: a study of juveniles in detention: Jeremy Prichard Jason Payne; Research and Public Policy Series: No. 67: Australian Institute of Criminology*).

CCAS observations suggest that young people who are connected as participants in sport or creative endeavours such as music or creative pursuits, are less likely to re-attend Children's Court. These young people have coaches, teachers, timetables, guidelines and projects that focus attention and promote positive engagement.

I strongly recommend that integrated programs, that link young people to housing, health, education and training programs, as well as providing opportunities for creative expression and sporting pursuits, be enhanced. These programs provide stability and progressive development that is recordable, where each achievement builds on a future one. The ILC CCAS works closely with Southern Youth and Family Services that provides a range of services to over 2,000 young people who are vulnerable and, many, at risk of homelessness. SYFS take this integrated approach and their holistic model recognises the complex, long-term needs of a young person in crisis.

f) Alcohol Abuse and the Health System

Young people at fifteen, sixteen or seventeen years of age with eight to ten years of behavioural, cognitive and emotional growth and change before them are vulnerable to falling outside the law and risking their health and wellbeing. It is critical that 'building wellbeing' programs, involving education and support are available from the age of ten years.

Working with young people at the preventative end of the health and wellbeing continuum, while expensive in the short term, is socially and economically cost effective when compared to the crisis end of the spectrum. In some cases of young people in the juvenile justice system that I have observed, around five years of serious alcohol abuse, combined with poor diet, injuries from violence and poor mental health, results in extensive, costly residential treatments and the likelihood of ongoing medical care.

Given the poor prognosis for those who abuse alcohol at the most vulnerable stage of their development, I unhesitatingly recommend enhanced resourcing for support services, within and outside the juvenile justice system. It is vital that a proportion of support services be adequately funded to provide professional, flexible services that target those who are most isolated from mainstream support.

g) Any other related matter

It seems to be the case that many young people will not be successful at their early attempts to responsibly use alcohol or quit altogether. Their success seems to be dependent on the amount of support they have at the various stages in their development and the capacity of their support people to find the most appropriate form of help, for example, counselling, mentoring, intensive case management, residential treatment or a combination of all of these.

Thank you for considering the issues arising from my observations at Children's Court over the past five years. In closing I note that there are lessons to be gained from the overwhelming success of the Work and Development Order scheme as it not only assists individuals with fines debt but provides an alternative to offending and its longer term consequences. I believe an effective strategy for addressing alcohol abuse should also include incentives, long term social engagement programs and appropriate ongoing follow up where necessary.

Yours sincerely,

Sharon Callaghan
Coordinator Children's Court Assistance Scheme (CCAS)
A project of the Illawarra Legal Centre