

Thursday, 2 June 2022

No MERIT in further delay of bold drug law reform and rehab

The Law Society of NSW is calling on the NSW Government to act without further delay on the recommendations of the Ice Inquiry to implement a health focused approach to battling the scourge of drug abuse.

President of the Law Society of NSW Joanne van der Plaats says that it has taken far too long for the Government to act on the recommendations of the Ice Inquiry, and now is the time to make a decision and start implementing programs that will tackle the drug problem in earnest.

“The Law Society agrees with the experts called to give evidence during the *Special Commission of Inquiry into the Drug Ice* that the current prohibitionist approach is not working. We agree with law enforcement authorities who have said we can’t arrest our way out of drug problems,” Ms van der Plaats said.

“Any further delay on a meaningful response to the Ice Inquiry risks further criminalisation and demonisation of drug users who need rehabilitation, not incarceration.”

The Law Society has welcomed the expansion of the Drug Court through a pilot in Dubbo, combined with the construction of a drug and alcohol treatment centre necessary for achieving effective outcomes for drug-related offenders, but Ms van der Plaats says the Government needs to go much further.

“The adoption of this one recommendation of the Ice Inquiry ignores other initiatives like the expansion of the Magistrates Early Referral Into Treatment (MERIT) program, along with programs to assist Indigenous offenders like Circle Sentencing and the Youth Koori Court,” Ms van der Plaats said.

“As a lawyer who has long practised in regional NSW, I am convinced it is vital that diversion and support be extended to regional communities. Many regional communities have been ravaged by illicit drug use, and drug law reform that reduces the chance of offenders possessing very small amounts of drugs being criminalised should be actively implemented across the state.

“Furthermore, given that the Government established the Ice Inquiry in November 2018 in large part to respond to growing use of Ice in our regional and rural towns, their exclusion from justice reforms and rehabilitation services would be absurd,” Ms van der Plaats said.

The NSW Government provided its interim response to the Ice Inquiry in October 2020. The Law Society calls on the Government to delay no further, listen to the experts and deliver reforms to help drug users break their dependence and rebuild their lives.

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