

# Harm Reduction Australia



## Media Release

### Federal Budget Drug Testing of Welfare Recipients Slammed

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National drug policy advocacy organisation, Harm Reduction Australia (HRA), condemns in the strongest possible terms the announcement by the Federal Government last night, as part of Budget 2017, to introduce a trial of random drug testing and a range of other highly punitive measures for people living on government benefits.

“Targeting people on benefits who use illicit drugs will only serve to further marginalise an already highly stigmatised and marginalised group within our community. This is effectively just another way to prosecute the already failed ‘war on drugs’ with yet another round of ill-conceived government policy that is doomed to fail and cause significant down-stream harms” stated Ms Annie Madden, HRA Co-founder and Board Member

The Federal Government is proposing a new, 3 strikes “demerit system” that will penalise “deliberate non-compliance” with Centrelink requirements that could result in individuals losing 100% of their benefits for a month, as well as a “modest” 5000-person random drug testing trial that would be given during routine Centrelink interviews. The Government is forecasting to save \$632 million over 5 years in reduced welfare payments through the implementation of these measures.

“This is a desperate and ill-conceived measure that will be extremely costly to implement and unlikely to result in the projected government savings due to the additional costs associated with addressing the inevitable health, social and legal problems created by the policy itself. People living on benefits are already living below the poverty line and struggling to cover basic living costs such as rent and food. Cutting people off all benefits for any period will simply force people into further hardship and condemn them to homelessness and extreme poverty - making it even harder for people to meet their obligations under Newstart and to gain employment” continued Ms Madden.

People in receipt of the Disability Support Pension (DSP) have already been assessed by Centrelink as living with a significant disability or illness that prevents them from participating in regular employment. People on the DSP who are living with ongoing drug dependency and/or mental health issues are often managing multiple, complex and chronic health conditions. To target these people with such harsh and punitive measures is not only cruel and inhumane, but is contrary to all available evidence on what works. Is the Government also seriously intending for people in treatment to lose their benefit?

Additionally, random drug testing has been shown not only to be ineffective and costly to implement, but also to have many unintended negative consequences. Rather than spending large

amounts of public funding on developing and implementing flawed and ineffective proposals, HRA believes the Federal Government should be turning its attention to providing additional funding for evidence-based harm reduction and drug treatment services. Such services in Australia are chronically under-funded and currently unable to meet demand.

“Even apart from the ethical problems this program raises, how is the Government proposing to ensure that Centrelink staff are sufficiently skilled and prepared to appropriately respond to the complex issues that will arise as a result of conducting such testing; and what drug and alcohol services do they intend to draw upon? Or is the Federal Government proposing to implement these measures without providing access to information, services and support?” added Ms Madden

In seeking to implement their proposal to target people on government benefits who are using drugs the Federal Government has opted for what they see as an ‘easy target’. The fact remains however, that ‘easy target’ or not, the proposed scheme is fundamentally inequitable, deeply flawed and will result in significant additional hardship and harm not only for those directly affected but also for their families and the broader community. No-one benefits from such a divisive measure – it simply diminishes us all.

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