

## Australasian Therapeutic Communities Association NSW Drug Summit Position Paper

### Introduction

The Australasian Therapeutic Communities Association (ATCA) is a member-based organisation, representing non-government alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment services across Australia and New Zealand. In NSW, ATCA members encompass some of the largest non-government AOD treatment providers, including Odyssey House, We Help Ourselves (WHOS), The Glen, Ted Noffs Foundation, Watershed, The Buttery, One80TC, Directions, and Karralika. Our membership collectively provides over 800 residential treatment places, along with day and community-based programs, supporting thousands of people across NSW each year, including young people, adults, parents, carers, and families with children.

ATCA members include services operating under the Therapeutic Community Model of treatment or aspiring to become a therapeutic community. Therapeutic Communities (TCs) have been part of the Australian AOD treatment landscape for over 50 years and operate in 40 countries and 6 regions globally, with their effectiveness being demonstrated in many outcome studies<sup>1</sup>. Our membership offers specialised services for First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, individuals in rural, remote and regional areas, those with criminal justice involvement, as well as families with children and loved ones of people who use drugs. TCs approach is holistic, assisting individuals address key social determinants of problematic substance use, including education, social connections, trauma, mental and physical health, housing and employment<sup>2</sup>.

The ATCA and its members look forward to participating in the upcoming Drug Summit, viewing it as a crucial opportunity to contribute to the planning of a sustainable NGO AOD treatment sector. The ATCA has prepared this Position Paper in consultation with our members, to outline our key recommendations for considering ways the NSW Government can enhance drug treatment services to effectively meet the needs of the entire community.

### Recommendations

#### 1. Develop a robust and well-funded AOD sector

ATCA members play a critical role in providing drug treatment for young people, adults and families across NSW. However despite their commitment to meet growing demand and address the diverse needs of those seeking support, their capacity is constrained by inadequate funding and short-term contracts. Multiple NGO AOD sector reports highlight this funding crisis, with unmet demand for treatment ranging from 26% to 48% of individuals seeking AOD support<sup>3</sup>. The ATCA strongly urges the NSW Government to review outdated funding agreements in the NGO AOD sector at the Drug Summit, as current funding, despite cost-of-living adjustments, remains inadequate, necessitating an urgent increase.

Increased investment in TCs, residential and non-residential AOD services, particularly in regional, rural, and remote areas of NSW, is urgently needed. Funding must be long-term, include cost escalation, and ensure renewals of funding are provided in a timely manner to reduce uncertainty for ATCA members and improve their ability to meet the diverse needs of people accessing support. Given that people accessing AOD treatment often experience multiple co-occurring issues, it's crucial that funding reflects the true cost of providing comprehensive and holistic care.

<sup>1</sup> World Federation of Therapeutic Communities (2023). 'WFTC World Social Report', no.2, <https://www.wftc.org/library>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies (2022) Challenges and opportunities for the non government alcohol and other drug workforce <https://nada.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Challenges-and-Opportunities-for-the-NGO-AOD-Workforce-Final.pdf>

## **2. Enhance health, treatment and rehabilitation responses to alcohol and other drug use**

The ATCA advocates for a Drug Summit centred on enhancing health and rehabilitation responses to AOD use. Prioritising substantial investment in AOD treatment services over funding through the criminal justice system is crucial to reduce stigma and discrimination towards people who use drugs and their families, and prevent entrenchment in the justice system. Currently a substantial portion of government funding for addressing AOD use is allocated through the criminal justice system. In NSW and across Australia, more than 60% of people are incarcerated as a consequence of their AOD use<sup>4</sup> and a high majority (63%) have a history of mental health issues.<sup>5</sup> Improving health-focused responses and rehabilitation will enhance outcomes for individuals, their families and communities<sup>6,7</sup>.

## **3. Embrace a diverse array of voices and experiences.**

ATCA believes it is essential the Drug Summit actively involves people with diverse living and lived experiences of AOD use and accessing AOD treatment, including Therapeutic Communities, residential and non-residential treatment. Reducing drug-related harm requires acknowledging that there is no single solution, as different interventions, from safer use to abstinence, are effective for different individuals. Therefore, the Drug Summit must meaningfully engage with an array of people with diverse experiences and especially those from priority populations including First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse and gender and sexuality diverse communities, people living in rural and regional areas, those with criminal justice involvement, and families and loved ones of people who use drugs.

Additionally, it is imperative the Drug Summit incorporate insights and experiences of the ATCA and its members. The ATCA membership is a workforce committed to supporting people experiencing AOD issues and they have invaluable experiences and advice to share, including many staff who have their own lived experience of drug use and accessing treatment. We urge that frontline workers from ATCA member services be actively and meaningfully involved in the Drug Summit.

## **Conclusion**

The Drug Summit is a crucial chance for funding reforms that will improve health outcomes for individuals, families and the community. The ATCA looks forward to engaging in discussions at the NSW Drug Summit to represent our members and those they serve. We urge the NSW Government to consider our recommendations and involve the ATCA, its members and people with lived and living experience in shaping the future of AOD funding, policy, and programs in NSW.

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Drug Foundation (2023) Prison, Alcohol and Drug use. <https://adf.org.au/insights/prison-aod-use/>

<sup>5</sup> Mental Health Commission of NSW, The Justice System. <https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/content/justice-system>

<sup>6</sup> Parliament of New South Wales Committee on Children and Young People. (2022). Support for children of imprisoned parents in New South Wales..

<sup>7</sup> Yfoundations. (Submission, February 2020).