

## **Alcohol and Other Drug Consumer & Community Coalition (AODCCC) position statement on the implementation of drug checking services in Western Australia.**

### **About AODCCC**

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The AODCCC is the peak body for alcohol and other drug consumer-driven systemic advocacy in Western Australia. Our aim is to empower the voices of consumers, their families, and supports, who are impacted by alcohol and other drug use. AODCCC is a membership-driven not-for-profit association with seven hundred members as of 28/08/24. It is our commitment to ensure that these voices are heard and can stand side to side with community leaders, sector professions, policy makers and government to educate and inform while addressing the common stigmas associated with alcohol and other drug use in our society.

Our mission is to promote the interests, education, and welfare of those affected by alcohol and other drug use through community understanding, shaped by the voice of people and families with a lived or living experience of alcohol and other drugs.

### **Key Messages**

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- The AODCCC membership supports an Australia-wide implementation of drug checking services, as a vital addition to our country's commitment to reducing the harms associated with drug use.
- The AODCCC recommends that all relevant stakeholders, including government and non-government organisations, should provide meaningful and accessible pathways to involve people who have a lived and/or living experience of drugs in all relevant decision-making processes in relation to drug checking services and harm reduction strategies.
- The AODCCC agrees with several of Australia's peak medical bodies and organisations, and strongly advocates for an approach that moves away from using the criminal law to address alcohol and other drug use, towards a health-focused harm reduction approach, which includes drug checking services.
- The AODCCC strongly supports that drug checking services should become standard offering in our communities.
- The AODCCC commends the progress and initiative of the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland and Victoria state governments and calls upon the Western Australian government to acknowledge that the prevalence of illicit drug use and alcohol consumption is a significant health and social issue in Western Australia and requires an immediate common-sense health and social policy response, including accessible drug checking services.

### **Background**

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Drug checking services already operate in 28+ countries around the world, particularly in venues known for high rates of drug use like music festivals and events. Over a thirty-year period, the technology used has been rigorously validated and many associated medical/ health professionals endorse this common-sense, proactive, harm reduction approach that prioritises community health and wellbeing. Drug Checking offers the opportunity for people who use drugs to test the chemical content of their own supply. In doing so, people who use drugs are empowered to make informed decisions that may possibly change their use behaviour to remove or reduce the likelihood of harm and improve their wellbeing. Expert chemists and health professionals conduct the testing to ensure reliable detailed results. Drug checking services allow the whole community to have a better understanding of what is contained in the drugs circulating the community and as such, more timely alerts, and warnings of contaminated or high potency batches are in circulation within the wider population. This helps to reduce the chance of unnecessary overdose deaths.

### **Australian Context**

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Australia adopted a harm minimisation approach in 1985, nearly 40 years ago. This embodies the three pillars of demand reduction, supply reduction and harm reduction [1]. The role of harm reduction services within communities has long reflected a central tension: in contrast with abstinence and criminalisation models, harm reduction is often socially and

politically criticised as enabling drug use and making communities less safe. Research consistently finds harm reduction provides positive outcomes for both service users and their communities. In addition to improving the health and wellbeing of people using drugs, evidence suggests that those accessing harm reduction services are more likely to ultimately seek treatment and pursue recovery.

Illicit drug use is widespread in Australia. An estimated 10.2 million people aged 14 and over in Australia (47% of the population) have used an illicit drug at some point in their lifetime [2]. The latest data from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) shows more than 3,500 people died from using alcohol or other drugs in 2022. That is more than 10 deaths per day [3]. Yet, Australian governments spend more on law enforcement of illicit drug policy than treatment, prevention and harm reduction combined [4].

The AODCCC calls upon the Australian Government to cohesively reorientate the approach to illicit drugs in Australia and focus on treatment, prevention, and evidenced harm reduction strategies, including drug checking services.

## **AODCCC Voice**

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With more than seven hundred community members onboard, the AODCCC is a conduit for individuals and families with lived & living experience of alcohol and other drugs to have their voice heard and make a difference in Western Australia. The knowledge, insights and expertise of lived & living experience is integral not only to the work of the AODCCC but also to communities all over Western Australia.

The AODCCC engages with communities who use drugs. We involve people who use drugs and their families in all our systemic advocacy work, which aligns with a human rights approach, specifically the right to participate in public life. It is important to keep in mind that people who use drugs are not a homogeneous group. The AODCCC makes genuine efforts to ensure a diversity of experiences, views and backgrounds when engaging with people who use drugs.

AODCCC members have consistently reported their support for improved and widespread harm reduction strategies, such as drug checking, to be implemented statewide. Extensive discussions within our monthly reference group meetings, annual membership survey responses and ongoing systemic advocacy work consistently recognises the role of drug checking in overdose prevention; the benefits to the overall agency, health, and wellbeing of people who use drugs; and the globally evidenced impacts of drug checking services at the community and systems levels.

The AODCCC membership has vocalised that a core concept behind drug checking is the idea of establishing a safer, stigma-free space. This means a place where staff are conscious of the language they use in a way that both reduces stigma and makes the individual feel comfortable and accepted. The hope is that when an individual walks in the door, no matter their socioeconomic or substance use background, nor their race or gender, they feel welcomed and comfortable opening a dialogue with the staff and peer workers at the drug checking service. This balanced, humanised, and real-world view would not only meet the individual where they are at but would also allow conversations to flow that otherwise would not.

The AODCCC believes a well-resourced and capable alcohol and other drug sector would have a significant impact on reducing the population level burden of disease arising from alcohol and other drug use. The AODCCC believes person-centred intersectional approaches in delivering drug checking services, expanded essential multisectoral partnerships, sustained prevention and harm reduction will result in improved health promotion service connections and greater community health and wellbeing.

## **AODCCC Position Summary**

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The AODCCC understands that Western Australian harm reduction strategies and trials, such as the Emerging Drugs Network of Australia in conjunction with Royal Perth Hospital [5], Early Warning System in conjunction with the Mental Health Commission WA [6] and ChemCentre - Getting WISE on drugs in conjunction with Curtin University [7] have existed amidst complex and evolving social, legal, political, and funding conditions.

Harm reduction initiatives including drug checking services, needle and syringe programs and naloxone distribution can at times be unpopular socially and politically, as stigma associated with drug use combined with concerns about the goals and practices of harm reduction, can generate powerful community pushback. The AODCCC acknowledges that legislators and policymakers at Local, State, and Federal levels who rely on constituent support may therefore shy away from supporting various harm reduction strategies, despite endorsement from health professionals and robust evidence showing that harm reduction improves the health, survival, and recovery potential for people who use drugs, without compromising community safety.

There is growing concern about the rising rates of both intentional and unintentional drug overdose in Australia due to nitazenes (a class of potent synthetic opioids that can be five hundred times stronger than heroin) [8]. Substances like fentanyl and xylazine can and are being mixed into a variety of drugs unbeknown to the community. A recent spate of overdoses in Victoria and New South Wales has alerted authorities to the growing presence of nitazenes in Australia, with some experts warning that nitazenes could pose a risk of opioid overdose crisis like that experienced in North America.

Drug checking services allow individuals to make informed, and potentially lifesaving decisions about their drug use, while also alerting the drug using community of adulteration to the drug supply with highly potent synthetic opioids.

The AODCCC is convinced by extensive and demonstrated national and international evidence that drug checking has significant harm reduction benefits and believes drug checking should become a standard offering in our communities.

Implementing drug checking facilities in Western Australia will evidently:

- Reduce the number of fatal overdoses from drug use.
- Save lives and reduce risks associated with drug use through early warning systems and public health alerts, by identifying dangerous and emerging drugs. It will also help monitor drug trends to assist and inform the whole community.
- Help educate the whole community on how to reduce harms associated with drug use.
- Improve interactions between vulnerable groups and improve the relationship between some of the most marginalised populations accessing the sector, health, and community services.

The AODCCC advocates that the Western Australian government should harness a whole of government approach to ensure strong and effective collaboration between interrelated sectors, resulting in improved health and wellbeing for the people whose lives are affected by alcohol and other drugs in Western Australia.

The AODCCC encourages the Western Australian government to immediately implement drug checking services within the state and embrace the long vision needed to build a new story that motivates the whole community to move beyond the pervasive stigma of alcohol and other drug use.

## References

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1. [National Drug Strategy 2017–2026 \(health.gov.au\)](https://www.health.gov.au)
2. [National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2022–2023, About - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au)
3. [Illicit Drug Reporting System 2022 \(unsw.edu.au\)](https://www.unsw.edu.au)
4. [Monograph No 36: The Australian 'drug budget': Government drug policy expenditure 2021/22 \(unsw.edu.au\)](https://www.unsw.edu.au)
5. [Emerging Drugs Network of Australia | RPH Medical Research Foundation \(rphresearchfoundation.org.au\)](https://www.rphresearchfoundation.org.au)
6. [Mental Health Commission WA | Early Warning System to respond to emerging drugs of concern \(mhc.wa.gov.au\)](https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au)
7. [Getting WISE on drugs - ChemCentre](https://www.chemcentre.org.au)
8. [Australia's illicit drug problem: Challenges and opportunities for law enforcement \(aph.gov.au\)](https://www.aph.gov.au)