# Submission to the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee Inquiry into Drug Law Reform

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Parliament’s Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee’s inquiry into drug law reform.

VLA has considerable practical experience providing legal assistance to people who are affected by drug use. This gives us a unique insight into how drugs can cause or exacerbate legal problems.

We are continuing to see an increase in the number of people affected by drug use who come into contact with the criminal justice system. In particular, our practice experience suggests that ice use is increasingly prevalent. Many of our lawyers estimate that up to (and sometimes more than) half of their criminal cases have ice as a causal or exacerbating factor. Further, our lawyers report that criminal offending when affected by ice is more likely to involve violence.

Legal problems related to ice are not limited to criminal offences, and are often serious and multi-faceted. Our practice experience reveals that ice use is a driver of legal demand across all of our program areas, including family and civil law. Our lawyers report that ice use can devastate families with alarming speed. We see this in our child protection practice. We also see the extent to which drug and alcohol abuse can fuel or exacerbate family violence. Drug rehabilitation programs should be available and properly tailored for family violence perpetrators. More generally, drug rehabilitation programs should also be available to support parents with drug problems.

We consider that it is imperative to reduce the number of interactions drug-affected people have with the justice system, and provide consistent access to diversionary and support services state-wide.

We know that people experiencing disadvantage and social exclusion are more vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse. We welcome an approach that treats drug use as a heath issue requiring treatment. In this respect, we endorse the approach recommended in the recently released Australia21 report *Can Australia respond to drugs more effectively and safely?*, namely that the overriding objective of Australia’s national policy on drugs should be the minimisation of harm to those who use drugs and those around them, with the emphasis placed on assisting people to make wiser choices about their drug use and minimising harms when they make unwise choices.

In May 2015, we made a submission to the National Ice Taskforce providing details about the impact of ice on the community, including effective ways to combat ice use. We attach for your information a copy of VLA’s National Ice Taskforce Submission.

In our submission we emphasised:

* the need for more resources that provide residential rehabilitation, detox and related programs to allow greater accessibility to individuals who suffer from ice addiction
* more health services, and funding for intensive support services for families affected by drug use
* the need for properly resourced, tailored diversion and case management services to tackle the complex issues ice creates
* the need for a collaborative and cross-organisational approach to education for secondary school-aged students to build awareness about the legal issues associated with illicit drug use and how to minimise harm
* further research into underlying factors that lead to ice addiction, and studies into effective programs to prevent reoffending.

We also note that the Drug Court, which operates as a Division of the Magistrates’ Court of Victoria, located at Dandenong Magistrates’ Court is now expanding to the Melbourne Magistrates’ Court. The Drug Court focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders with a drug or alcohol dependency, and provides assistance in reintegrating these offenders into the community.

We strongly support further expansion of the Drug Court as an important means of responding to drug use and drug-related offending. An evaluation of the Drug Court undertaken by KPMG in 2015 confirms the success of the Drug Court in working effectively with individuals with severe drug and alcohol dependency to improve community safety and reduce crime.

We would welcome the opportunity to comment on any specific proposals to reform Victoria’s drug laws. We would also be pleased to provide practical advice concerning our experience of providing legal assistance to people who are affected by drug use.

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Once again, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry.

Yours faithfully

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