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Policing substance misuse in rural & remote communities: a good practice framework

The prevalence of cannabis and volatile substance misuse in rural and remote communities in Australia has become a growing concern in recent years (Gray et al. 2006; Delahunty & Putt 2006a). However, evidence suggests that mainstream drug policing strategies in these settings are generally not practical. A good practice framework has been developed to assist police in their responses to illicit drug use amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in rural and remote areas of Australia (Delahunty & Putt 2006b). The framework suggests three main areas for improvements.

Strategic policies and programs must encourage agencies and jurisdictions to work together through coordinated approaches to drug control. This includes:

- maximising the effectiveness of police work in rural and remote areas through recruitment and training
- improving community-police relations with policies and initiatives relevant to the practical needs of frontline police, yet flexible enough to respond to evolving challenges
- innovative approaches to drug law enforcement including the effective coordination and dissemination of intelligence across borders and regions. This will depend on getting and supporting the right staff and developing a healthy working relationship with local communities.

Local, district & regional area planning should focus on supporting local community safety initiatives. This involves taking existing community concerns and approaches to crime prevention and drug law enforcement, and developing these into a community safety plan and continuously reviewing outcomes to be achieved. Critical elements include environmental scans to identify services, cultural complexities and police resources, coupled with an assessment of potentially risky situations, such as people affected by alcohol and other drugs, group fighting, and the search and seizure of vehicles. Continuing community consultation is essential to identify and redefine priorities and to provide feedback on the efficacy of police interventions.

Individual police practices includes, winning over community support – no easy task in high-need communities. Four principles are used to guide individual decision making: take community concerns seriously; respond with law enforcement measures that provide some respite to stressed communities; build on goodwill created by discretion and other confidence building measures; and provide leadership on prevention by working with other agencies to build capacity and help communities address their own needs. Police are well placed to provide such leadership as they are often the only service readily available in rural and remote Australia to intervene in a crisis.

References

Gray D et al. 2006. *Policing, volatile substance misuse, and Indigenous Australians*. Monograph series no. 16. Canberra: NDLERF

Delahunty B & Putt J 2006a. *The policing implications of cannabis, amphetamine & other illicit drug use in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Communities*. Monograph series no. 15. Adelaide: NDLERF

Delahunty B & Putt J 2006b. *Good practice framework – policing illicit drugs in rural & remote local communities*. Monograph series no. 15a. Adelaide: NDLERF