

President's Annual Report 2007

(Presented at the November AGM)

Introduction

This twelfth President's report covers the 12 month period from November 2006 to November 2007.

I would like to thank all those who contributed during the year to the group's activities by writing letters, writing submissions, visiting MPs and others, participating in media events, addressing groups and meetings, assisting with various organised activities, participating and providing support and attending meetings. I would like especially to thank my office bearers John Ley, vice president; Bob McFadden, treasurer; and Cynthia Groundwater, secretary and Joan Westaway who has ably filled in for Cynthia when Cynthia is away. I also thank Marion McConnell for her organising work and support, and St Ninian's Church for the use of its hall.

It would be remiss of me indeed if I did not give a very special mention to Bill Bush. Bill adds a very important dimension to our work through his professionally and compassionately written submissions which are all very well referenced. We, as members of FFDLR, have every reason to be proud of the high quality of our submissions which are submitted to Parliamentary and other inquiries. The hours which Bill puts into this work can not be calculated. Bill's astuteness is also valued. FFDLR's contribution to ensuring that the new ACT prison is human rights compliant and a place where prisoners are given every opportunity for rehabilitation and a better life on release is another area in which Bill has played a major part. We owe Bill a great deal.

Events of significance

Internationally there have been some positive signs of change. There is a positive movement in the UK to make changes to the drug classifications and from unexpected quarters, such as the North Wales Police Authority, which recommended a repeal of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and its replacement with a new Act based on a new hierarchy of harm that includes alcohol and nicotine. Earlier, the Deputy Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire urged the prescription of heroin to curb crime. An injection room and trial of prescribed heroin are under way in Canada in spite of opposition from a new conservative government in Ottawa. In other parts of Europe, excellent results from prescription heroin are winning it acceptance and consolidating its place in routine drug treatment in several countries. Medically supervised injecting centres. Of note also is that increasing numbers of prisons have recognised the need for syringe exchange programs.

In Australia: Little change has taken place although attitudes seem to be changing if newspaper opinion piece articles are anything to go by. The Joint Committee on the Australian Crime Commission issued a sound report in February 2007 on amphetamine and other synthetic drugs. However, vocal voices within the federal government are pushing the replacement of harm minimisation by zero tolerance with all its consequences, thus undermining the harm reduction pillar of Australia's harm minimisation strategy. The most significant has been the House of Representatives report "The winnable war on drugs" which came from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services inquiry into 'The impact of illicit drug use on families' and chaired by Ms Bronwyn Bishop which uses graphic images from the USA (reminiscent of "Reefer Madness") and in its extreme manifestation recommends the permanent adoption of children of illegal drug using parents.

It was a positive step when the Sydney Medically Supervised Injecting Centre was given another 4 years to operate by the NSW Government.

In the ACT the government is proceeding with the construction of its first prison – the Alexander Maconochie Centre. The Community Corrections Coalition, of which our group is an active member, is monitoring closely the establishment of the prison and has produced a report card for that purpose. We have contributed to ministerial correspondence, submissions and papers of the Committee, notably on the Corrections Management Bill and performance measures. It was satisfying that the ACT Government agreed to the provision of health services being moved from the control of Corrections to Health – a step we strongly urged. Many other important prison policy papers are in preparation or planned by this committee, largely due to the efforts by Bill Bush.

We were saddened to hear of the death of Audrey Fagen, ACT Chief Police Officer. A condolence motion was passed at our April meeting. The death of Peter Andren, Federal member for Calare also saddened us.

Involvement in the community or other organisations

FFDLR is represented as follows:

The Opiate Program – ACT: John Ley. There have been some changes here and John is involved in trying to keep this program not only intact but also to develop it.

Crime Prevention Committee: Bill Bush but the committee wound up in December 2006

Community Corrections on Coalition: Bill Bush, Brian McConnell, John Ley. The work of this group will prove to be significant in the effectiveness of the prison.

ACT Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy Implementation & Evaluation Committee: Brian McConnell continued his representation on this group.

DIRECTIONS ACT: Brian McConnell is a member of the Board of this drug user support and education service agency.

ADCA Reference Group: John Ley is represented on the Prevention and Community Education Reference Group.

Representations

FFDLR members met with and made representations to the following:

- Bill Stefaniak MLA to discuss the New Prison Legislation March 2007
- Mary Porter M.L.A
- Zed Seselja MLA mainly to inform him of the issues around the new prison.
- ACT Health and Justice ministers, Katy Gallagher MLA and Simon Corbell MLA mainly to discuss the value of having the Health Minister responsible for Health in the prison rather than Corrections. In the event the government was persuaded to change certain critical parts of the Corrections Management Bill prior to being passed into law.
- Senator Gary Humphries on the Bronwyn Bishop inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on families.
- ACT Hepatitis C Council
- We asked for a meeting with Nicola Roxan, Shadow Health Minister, prior to the election and were offered a phone conversation with her adviser on drugs, Shaun Kelly which Brian had on 27 August.
- John attended a focus group on the Siggins Miller evaluation of the buprenorphine and methadone program in the ACT.
- Vince McDevitt, EO of the CPSU concerning the opposition to a needle/syringe program in the new ACT prison by prison officers.

Submissions

FFDLR made the following written submissions during the year:

- Submission of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform to the inquiry of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services into the impact of illicit drug use on families.
- ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Health and Disability – Inquiry into the use of crystal methamphetamine. Additionally Bill Bush and John Ley gave oral evidence to the committee.
- FFDLR views on Australia’s mutual assistance arrangements

- Comments on Draft Children's and Young People's Justice Health Services Plan, and Draft Adult Corrections Health Services Plan
- Proposed Submission to the Productivity Commission. This is an important work in progress, for which we have invited other groups, agencies and parliamentarians to become involved.

Conferences, Seminars and Inquiries Attended

- Brian and Marion and others attended the Australian Parliamentary Group for Drug Law Reform forum on 8th December 2006. Speakers were Dr. Ingrid van Beek, Director of the Sydney Medically Supervised Injecting Centre and Dr. David Caldicott whose expertise is in 'Party Drugs'.
- FFDLR members attended a public forum on "ice" in March 2007 convened by the ACT Standing Committee on Health and Disability.
- Brian, Marion & Bill attended the launch at the National Press Club by Dr John Herron of the ANCD paper on methamphetamines on 31 January 2007
- Brian and Bill attended an ALP community sector forum in 21st November 2006
- Families Australia Focus Group meetings on 12th and 14th March which focussed on their submission on the impact of illicit drugs on Australian families.
- ACT Prison: Brian & Bill attended the Corrections Coalition meeting where John Paget, Sean Moysey and Pene Matthew made presentations March 2007
- Bill attended a consultation forum on the development of a national amphetamine-type stimulants strategy at the Australian Institute of Criminology on 13 March.
- Bill and Peter attended, on 23rd April, the launch of the ADLRF economic report, "the three billion \$ question for Australian business"

Published opinion pieces

- Worrying signs of health in ACT jail. By Bill Bush, Published in The Canberra Times 1 June 2007

FFDLR Awareness raising activities

Public Forums

- A Public Meeting was held at the Legislative Assembly, sponsored by Mary Porter MLA which featured Alison Ritter who spoke about "Evidence based drug policy – myth or reality?" It was attended by well over 100 people. Slides from Ms Ritter's talk are on our website.
- Drug Action Week Forum: A forum was organised by FFDLR on 18 June 2007 at the Legislative Assembly entitled "Parental substance abuse, parenting capacity and child protection: always a three way tug of war?" It was presented by Dr Sue Packer, AM, FRACP, Community Paediatrician at the Children at Risk Unit at Canberra Hospital and former president of the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN). The forum was sponsored by Deb Foskey MLA. A copy of the talk is available on our website.

Monthly meetings

Meetings were held every month from February to November. Many important and topical issues were discussed and action taken where appropriate. Guest speakers were invited on two occasions – May and August. The speakers were Paul Ribbons, ACT Ambulance Service and Joanne Smith, Directions respectively.

At our February meeting it was decided to raise the annual membership fee from \$10 to \$15. This was the very first rise in fees for FFDLR. The concession remained at \$5.

Remembrance Ceremony

The Twelfth Annual Remembrance Ceremony was held at Weston Park in the ACT on 22 October 2007. Speakers were ACT leader of the opposition Bill Stefaniak, FFDLR member Tina van Raay, and Rev'd James Barr, Senior minister, Canberra Baptist Church. The Canberra Union Voices added significantly to the ceremony. The speeches by Rev'd Barr and Tina van Raay are on the FFDLR website.

FFDLR also participated in discussion into the possibility of establishing a national remembrance day.

Talks and presentations

- Brian & Marion spoke at Canberra College on 1 November 2007 and Deakin High School on 15 November 2007
- Brian spoke to the staff of the Alcohol and Drug Program on 5 November 2007

FFDLR media activities

There were a number of media appearances/presentations undertaken by FFDLR members during the year.

The Writing Letters to the Editor brochure was revised and distributed with the February newsletter.

A number of letters to the editor were written by members and published.

Media releases were issued as follows:

31 January 2007 Evidence based drug policy – myth or reality?

1 March 2007 Parliamentary inquiry introduces sense into the “ice” debate

1 June 2007 Prison law is foundation for continued victimisation

17 June 2007 In the best interests of the child: Integration of drug and child protection policies (Drug Action Week Forum)

13 September 2007 Bronwyn Bishop drug report a recipe for disaster.

21 October 2007 Opposition leader to speak at 12th annual remembrance ceremony

19 November 2007 No new ideas in Coalition’s dead end policy

FFDLR received good coverage on WIN TV, the local ABC station and the *Canberra Times* for which we are always grateful.

Other awareness raising activities

An important vehicle for raising awareness has been the regular production of the FFDLR Newsletter. Ten issues were produced and mailed to members. In addition a complimentary copy of the Newsletter was emailed to all Australian members of parliaments.

During the year FFDLR continued its good working relationships with the Youth Coalition, ACTCOSS, ADCA, ACT Health and a number of other community organisations

The FFDLR website is an important source of information and a shop front for FFDLR which is increasingly being used by students as part of their school work research.

Brian McConnell,

President