

President's Annual Report 2004

Introduction

This seventh formal President's report covers the 12 month period from November 2003 to November 2004.

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; Pat Varga, treasurer; and Cynthia Groundwater, secretary. I also thank Marion McConnell for her organising work and support, and St Ninian's Church for the use of its hall. In addition some excellent work has been undertaken for FFDLR by Bill Bush and I thank him for his tireless efforts.

Interstate the efforts of Jan Steel in WA and of Jim Bright in the NSW Hunter valley area have been valuable contributions. However we certainly need more families to speak out on policy issues.

I would also like to pay tribute to Kerrie Tucker, former Greens member of the ACT Legislative Assembly and Roslyn Dundas, Democrat member for the ACT Legislative Assembly for their support and action during the years they were in the Assembly. Their contribution and support will be missed.

Although FFDLR members have worked very hard this year there has been little visible progress to show for that work. However in the ACT the implementation of the drug strategy and the proposed hydromorphone trial give cause for hope.

Events of significance

The year 2004 was an election year for both Federal and ACT Governments. In both cases incumbent governments were returned with a majority. The issue of illicit drugs was mentioned only briefly during the Federal election – by the Liberal/National coalition which ran a very negative fear campaign against the Greens' drug policy. The Greens' drug policy was the only one that was based on evidence and attempted to make a real reduction in the harm caused by illicit drugs. Other parties such as the Liberal and National parties and Labor party either had no policy or had it tucked away so that it was difficult to find on their website.

Nationally heroin has returned and overdose deaths and callouts appear to be increasing, although not to the same level as before the heroin drought. The use of methamphetamines (along with the associated violence) has increased – confirmation of this anecdotal evidence is expected to be contained in the household survey, to be published early in 2005.

SIP (Supervised Injecting Place): The Kings Cross Medically Supervised Injecting Place trial was extended for a further 4 years in 2003. However despite that centre's very positive reports the ACT Government, even though it promised at the previous election (subject to certain conditions which were satisfied) to establish a **Supervised Injecting Room**, failed to keep that promise. It is noted in passing that ambulance callouts to overdoses is increasing, the highest callouts are in central Canberra.

The Alcohol and Drug Foundation of the ACT **Karralika facility** was allocated funding and had plans approved for construction work to increase its capacity to 60 beds. Early in 2004 the residents in the area complained that there had been no consultation process on the matter. The Karralika Action Group succeeded in not only delaying much needed facilities but caused the number of additional beds, to be reduced substantially to provide a total capacity of 35 beds. To date consultation processes have not been completed, construction work has not commenced, and is unlikely to commence in the near future.

In the ACT plans have proceeded for the building a **prison**. There has been no recognition that some 80% of prisoners are there because of a drug (or mental health or both) related problem and that effective handling of that problem could reduce the need for the prison. Or at the very least such a large prison need not be built for which there will be pressure to fill the vacant places. Related to the prison issue was the concern expressed that Community Service orders for drug offences were not being issued as often as they could be and that the A.C.T. Government should spend money on early intervention programmes rather than gaol sentences.

The strategy of the drug and alcohol task force was presented to the ACT Government in December 2003 and after some rewriting (on matters that were of little critical relevance to the strategy) the Government accepted and issued the strategy in August 2004. The Government established a group to evaluate the implementation. FFDLR is represented on that group.

Next year will be FFDLR's Tenth Anniversary. It is an occasion that needs to be marked.

Involvement in the community or other groups

FFDLR is represented as follows:

The Opiate Program – ACT: John Ley.

Crime Prevention Committee: Bill Bush.

ACTCOSS Corrections Coalition: Bill Bush.

ACT Alcohol and Other Drugs Taskforce: Brian McConnell continued his representation on this group until December when the work of the taskforce concluded.

ACT Drug Strategy Implementation Monitoring Group: Brian McConnell.

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

ADCA Reference Group: John Ley has nominated for Prevention and Community Education Reference Group.

Family Stories Project Advisory Group: LMS consulting invited Marion and Brian McConnell to assist with the project and participate in the project advisory group.

Representations

FFDLR worked very hard during the year in all its representations, articles and letters to expose the deceptions about the heroin drought and about the problems with changes to the Criminal Code Serious Offences legislation in the ACT. Effort was put into raising awareness of the link between problematic drug use and other social problems such as mental health and poverty. An initial attempt has been made to provide an evidence basis for the drug busts that are reported in the media.

FFDLR made representations to the following members of parliament during the year:

- Simon Corbell, ACT Health Minister – among other things we have been attempting to get access to overdose data. At time of writing this report FFDLR has been invited to make application for access to the database.
- Julia Gillard, Federal Opposition Health Spokesperson – a general meeting and an attempt to encourage the opposition, because of the government's flawed claims of success of their "Tough on Drugs" strategy, and similar flawed claims about the heroin drought, to take up the issue. She understood the issues very well but was reluctant to take the issues up at that time.

- Jon Stanhope, Chief Minister of the ACT –letters in respect of the changes to the Serious Criminal Code Amendment Bill. Our concern was that the Bill widened the net and was likely to catch more users, which should not have been an outcome. The exchange of correspondence was less than satisfactory.
- Phone contact with the Democrats office and other parliamentarians.

FFDLR made representations to the inquiries that were established in respect of administration and clinical practices in the Alcohol and Drug Program. Reports of these inquiries are expected to be available early in 2005. The work in facilitating and enabling our involvement in the inquiry was due to John Ley.

FFDLR also met with the following people:

- Prof James Haire, Executive Director, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture,
- Lin Hatfield-Dodds, Director of Uniting Care and member of the Social Inclusion Board,
- Ara Creswell, Executive Director of ACTCOSS.
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Submissions

- Inquiry of The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the Mental Health Council of Australia into the human rights of people affected by mental illness including the need for better mental health care.
- Tougher Drug Laws make Serious Criminals of Our Kids.

Draft legislation is being presented to legislatures across Australia to implement uniform "model" drug laws. The proposal is deceptive. It is labeled as a criminal code on "serious drug offences". In fact it extends to the ordinary conduct of drug users. The Bill transforms minor players in the drug trade and users into "serious criminals".

- Before the 2004 election, the Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee rejected a Government proposal to amend the Disability Discrimination Amendment Bill 2003 that would have removed protection against discrimination of those addicted to illicit drugs. Nearly all the 118 submissions made to the Senate inquiry objected to this proposal.

FFDLR's submission pointed out that the legislation would further entrench the stigmatisation and marginalisation of those suffering from addiction to certain drugs but not others and that the legitimate interests of employers and others were already protected by the legislation as it stood. It was revealed during the Senate inquiry that the Government had not even consulted its own drug advisory body, the Australian National Council on Drugs. It is possible that the Government will resubmit the legislation during the new Parliament. The submissions by FFDLR and its members, Mr A Benson and Ms B Barnard are, therefore, still relevant.

- Commentary of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform on the Issues Paper: Restorative Justice for the ACT
- Inquiry into support services for families of people in custody by the Standing Committee on Community Services and Social Equity of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory
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Conferences, Seminars and Inquiries Attended

Bill Bush attended the Senate enquiry hearing on the Disability Discrimination Bill.

Adam Benson and Bill Bush attended the meeting of the ACTOSS community coalition on a proposed ACT prison. John Paget, the Director of the Prison Project in the Department of Justice and Community Affairs, a speaker at the conference, had established a community panel to consult with community groups.

Harm Minimisation Conference. Abstracts were submitted for this April 2004 conference but their initial rejection and later acceptance prevented our attendance. However Brenda Irwin, a Melbourne member attended the conference.

Bill Bush attended a Prison forum at which the NSW Corrective Services Minister spoke.

Awareness raising activities

FFDLR held a public meeting on 15 December 2003 in the Legislative Assembly building with guest speaker Prof Desmond Manderson whose topic was "The Heroin Ban in Australia: Modern witchcraft, contemporary inquisitions". The meeting was sponsored by Kerrie Tucker from the ACT Greens.

Drug Action Week Activities:

- a) Forum held at Assembly Rooms Wed 23rd, June: David McDonald, chaired the forum. The theme was "Making it happen: impact of drug policy on the implementation of the Canberra Social Plan". It looked at the Canberra Social Plan from the perspective of drugs. The forum was sponsored by the Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope and the panel members/speakers were Prof Ian Webster, Physician and Emeritus Professor of Community Medicine and Public Health; Associate Professor Dr Michael Levy, Director, Centre of Health Research in Criminal Justice; Meredith Hunter, Executive Officer, Youth Coalition of the ACT; Basil Varghese, Education Coordinator/Ambassador, The Brotherhood of St Laurence.
- b) Members of FFDLR organised and attended a stall in Garema Place during Drug Action Week.

During the year many students from the universities and TAFE college made contact in respect of assignments relating to drugs they were undertaking. We were pleased to help those young people.

Talks at FFDLR meetings

February meeting: Guest speakers Phil Lawler and Lyn Magor-Blatch spoke about the proposed redevelopment at Karralika

April meeting: Guest speaker John Paget, Director ACT Prison Project. He spoke about his involvement in the shape and services to be provided at the proposed ACT prison.

July meeting: Guest Speaker, Affie Adagio, a PhD. research student who undertook research on drug addiction in Australia and overseas. Her topic was "Diversity in approaches to dependencies"

August meeting: Guest speaker, Peter Schwartz, from Open Family who spoke about his low-key helping role with young people in the ACT. His topic was "The work of Open Family especially as it relates to the ACT drug scene".

Remembrance Ceremony

The Remembrance Ceremony was held on Monday 1st November. Guest speakers were Anne and Michael Gardner, Kerrie Tucker, MLA and Rev'd Simon Wooldridge. This was well attended (approx 150 people). Although rain threatened, the day was warm and sunny, the tree was in perfect blossom and those who came were buoyed by the support, understanding and care of others.

FFDLR media activities

Media Release August 2004: **Tougher drug laws - more kids to have criminal records**

The Government's Criminal Code (Serious Drugs Offences) Amendment Bill 2004 although aimed at drug traffickers and serious drug offences, widens the net and imposes draconian penalties on young people experimenting in or addicted to drugs.

Media Release 9 November 2004: **More overdose deaths to be remembered at ceremony**

Little progress has been made to ensure reduction in drug deaths or improvement in treatment, as Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform prepares for its 9th Annual Remembrance Ceremony for those who lose their lives to illicit drugs.

In addition to specific media releases, the media had contacted us on many occasions for comment on specific issues.

Brian McConnell, President