

# Submission

**To** Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport

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**Topic** Inquiry into the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs in Australia

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**Date** 25 November 2024

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## Contact

**E** [advocacy@unitingcommunities.org](mailto:advocacy@unitingcommunities.org)

**P** 08 8202 5111

## Acknowledgement of Country

Uniting Communities respects the enduring spiritual relationship First Nations people have with land and sea and the importance of this relationship to the wellbeing of First Nations people, including their languages and customs.

By seeking reconciliation and working in partnership with Aboriginal communities, Uniting Communities will move towards healing, justice, self-determination, and empowerment for Aboriginal people.

## About Uniting Communities

We are an inclusive not-for-profit organisation working alongside more than 80,000 South Australians each year and have been creating positive change for South Australian communities for more than 120 years. We utilise this expertise to advocate for systemic change across diverse social justice issues to shape public and social policy that delivers better outcomes for marginalised communities.

We support those in need to find the courage to move forward through enriching their lives and uniting the communities in which they live. By tackling the deep-seated challenges that affect people's lives, we work to create systemic change and brighter futures for all South Australians. We provide support services across a range of different areas including legal services, aged care, family and domestic violence counselling, alcohol and other drugs, disability, homelessness, mental health, and child protection.

We have a long history of supporting people who want to change their use of alcohol and/or other drugs (AOD) and have been providing AOD support services for over 120 years. We are the largest provider of AOD services in the Non-Government Sector and currently provide several services that respond to the needs of people seeking AOD associated assistance. This state-wide service provision provides the full spectrum of support, from intensive rehabilitation services to harm minimisation and education for drug users. Uniting Communities AOD programs are as follows:

### **New ROADS**

Our New ROADS program supports clients, over the age of 18 and their significant others, on the path to recovery from AOD use. New ROADS provides a range of support options including counselling, outpatient support, Police Drug Diversion Initiative, needle and syringe program, home detox, group and day programs and rehabilitation.

The residential rehabilitation service operates within a stepped care model, ranging from lower to higher intensity supports depending on the clients' needs. Our 24/7 staffed Intensive Model allows for a holistic approach to supporting people to address their AOD concerns. It is a therapeutic model that incorporates counselling, case management and structured day programs. The Community Residential model introduces more autonomy and flexibility for service users, allowing for empowerment in decision-making, goal setting and engagement in the day programs. The Community Model is semi-structured with a stepped approach, houses vary staffing and support, gradually reducing over time, supporting clients to re-enter the community for long term success.

### **Aboriginal Community Connect**

Aboriginal Community Connect is a 'one-stop' service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples seeking support with their drug and alcohol use, isolation, poverty, and other social issues. Our service works with individuals and families with a cultural and community wellbeing focus and our services are available in north-western Adelaide, Murray Mallee, Riverland, and Limestone Coast.

### **Streetlink Youth Health Service**

Streetlink is a service aimed to support young people (and their families) aged between 10 and 25 with health support and counselling about alcohol and other drugs. Our service combines a medical clinic and AOD counselling and targets young people who are not connected with mainstream medical services or education. This service also offers peer support for young people from those who have lived experience and can help them to navigate their recovery or harm minimisation journey.

## Submission to the House of Representative's Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport inquiry into the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs in Australia

As one of South Australia's largest not-for-profit (NFP) Alcohol and other Drug (AOD) Support Agencies we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the House of Representative's Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport inquiry into the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs in Australia.

### Key Statements and Recommendations:

1. Uniting Communities (UC) acknowledges the South Australian Network of Drug and Alcohol Services (SANDAS) as the AOD Peak Body in South Australia and thank them for their ongoing commitment to enhancing community wellbeing and reducing the harms associated with alcohol and drug use
2. Uniting Communities is fully supportive of introducing approaches that will reduce punitive measures through the criminal justice system.
3. More effective outcomes could be achieved through a strategic and considered decriminalisation of certain classes of drugs that are currently considered to be illicit. Such a program of decriminalisation would need to be accompanied by specific measures to assist those seeking to address their drug use on a voluntary basis.
4. Each State and Territory Government should have a regularly updated "AOD Strategy" that clearly outlines a pathway for deregulation (decriminalisation) of drug use through a process of community discussion and proposed measures. Additional forms of harm minimisation measures such as pill testing should also be considered in every jurisdiction around Australia.
5. Resources are proportionately allocated to the AOD sector, similar to recent state and federal government investments that aimed to address domestic, family and sexual violence and mental health.
6. Improved resourcing and support for the AOD workforce is required to ensure the best outcomes for individuals, their families, and society.
7. Specialised AOD specific training and qualifications across Australia are developed and made easily accessible. This is at all levels, from introductory short courses for workers in the Community Services sector to VET or postgraduate courses for those who would like to specialise. Currently, the lack of training available is one deterrent to people wanting to be employed and specialise in this area, as they do not see the opportunity to gain formal qualifications to substantiate their expertise.
8. The peer (lived and living experience) AOD workforce is further developed supported. There are currently some significant misconceptions about the peer workforce from funders; for example, it is rarely acknowledged that the peer workforce requires additional supervision and support from managers. As such, AOD services require additional resources to be able to support the same number of clients.
9. It is acknowledged that new and emerging issues across the AOD sector continue to evolve (including the recent 200% increase of alcohol consumption for women and the significant number of emerging drugs of concern coming into the drug market) and as a result, state and federal policies and strategies should be easily adaptable to adequately respond to these changes.

10. Best practice models of substance use care for young people are reviewed and adapted to better meet the needs of young people, as outlined in the recent [article](#)<sup>1</sup> written by Moensted, M. et. al. 2024, published in Drug and Alcohol Review.
11. Safe and secure housing solutions for those completing residential AOD rehabilitation services are prioritised so that clients accessing AOD support services are provided with appropriate solutions.

## Additional Responses to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference

Examine the effectiveness of current programs and initiatives across all jurisdictions to improve prevention and reduction of alcohol and other drug-related health, social and economic harms, including in relation to identified priority populations and ensuring equity of access for all Australians to relevant treatment and prevention services;

As detailed above, Uniting Communities delivers a number of services that aim to improve prevention, and reduction of alcohol and other drug-related health, social and economic harms.

Our [New ROADS program](#) staff don't just clock in – they counsel, they advocate, and they sometimes even tear up at the profound courage of our clients. Our staff witness countless success stories, challenges overcome, and the relentless efforts of our clients each day.

In the past financial year, our Outpatient Counselling service had a target of 5000 booked appointments. We didn't just meet this target – we exceeded it with an impressive 6239 appointments booked! Even better, 4681 of those appointments were attended, giving us a strong attendance rate of 76%.

Additionally, our Key Performance Indicator for treatment completion was set at 50%, and we surpassed that with an outstanding 60% of clients completing their treatment.

This year, the [Aboriginal Community Connect \(ACC\)](#) program celebrated a decade of providing culturally appropriate support and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across South Australia. This program is funded by the federal government's National Indigenous Australians Agency.

Alongside the long-running Kurlana Tampawardli (KT) specialised housing support program, Uniting Communities developed the service in consultation with key community groups, Elders, and Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations.

Together, the ACC and KT programs aim to address the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families, providing support that is not only practical but also culturally safe and respectful.

By recognising and respecting cultural traditions, these programs help to build trust and connection within the communities they serve. Eva Pratt, a proud Arrernte woman who heads up the programs, says they provide holistic services ranging from help with housing and treatment for substance misuse, to mental health support, and community development programs.

"Everything we do is tailored to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal individuals, families and communities, ensuring that clients receive the care and support they need in a way that acknowledges and respects their cultural identity," Eva says. "Key to this is the employment of Aboriginal people, as the

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<sup>1</sup> Moensted ML, Little S, Haber P, Day C. Time to reconsider the best practice models of substance use care for young people. Drug Alcohol Rev. 2024;43(4):817–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.13837>

innate skills, knowledge and experience that cannot be taught through academia are a vital element of our service models.”

“Our team’s commitment to culturally appropriate care makes us a trusted partner within Aboriginal communities, fostering an environment where people feel safe, understood, and supported.”

Aboriginal Community Connect helps individuals and families feel empowered to make sustainable positive lifestyle choices by prioritising harm minimisation alongside social and emotional wellbeing. With a focus on treatment for the individual as part of their family and broader kinship connections, the program offers community-supported residential rehabilitation and outreach case management services in metropolitan Adelaide and regional locations in Murray Bridge, Berri and Mount Gambier.

The impact of this support is profound. Over the past decade, thousands of people have made positive, lasting changes, reconnected with their culture, and built stronger, healthier lives. Over the past six months, 85 per cent of ACC clients who took part in the residential rehabilitation program completed at least 12 weeks of holistic treatment, and over half had sustained their recovery for three months or more.

Through a combination of short-term crisis accommodation, transitional accommodation, and culturally responsive case management, Kurlana Tampawardli achieves similarly remarkable results. Over the past year, an average of 94 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people engaged in the program have transitioned to long-term accommodation, and 70 per cent have been connected with education and employment opportunities.

As Aboriginal services continue to grow at Uniting Communities, so too does our vision for the future. The recent naming of the overarching services area as Taingi Yaitya-Itya, meaning ‘Strength to Indigenous,’ reflects the service area’s core principle of centring Aboriginal culture, knowledge, experience and practice expertise.

Leading from culture and informed by evidence-based theories and community feedback, Taingi Yaitya-Itya’s aim is to provide culturally safe services, as well as providing Organisational Cultural Development for Uniting Communities staff and volunteers.

Looking ahead, the teams remain dedicated to expanding their reach and deepening its impact. Ongoing efforts are focused on creating lasting change – helping individuals and families overcome challenges, achieve their goals, and thrive within their communities.

## Conclusion

We are thankful for the opportunity to provide input into the House of Representative’s Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport Inquiry. We wish the Committee every success in their endeavour to investigate and report on the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs in Australia and trust that our submission is of use to the Committee’s inquiry.