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Submission to the Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs:
Substance Abuse in Australian Communities

Toughlove is a self-help group of parents, concerned about their teenagers' troubling behaviours. A survey of Sydney Toughlove groups found that over 90% of parents knew their acting out teenager was a regular drug user. The drugs used include alcohol, sedatives, amphetamine, cocaine, MDMA, heroin, and most frequently, marijuana. These parents identify drug use as a major factor in the negative behaviours of their teenager.

Most Toughlove parents have experienced extreme behaviours from their teenager. These include aggressive, destructive, violent and criminal behaviours. Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs) have needed to be taken out on many of these teenagers. It is our belief that there needs to be an investigation of the association between substance abuse and these behaviours.

Our experience suggests that these teenagers are often diagnosed as having ADD/ADHD or learning difficulties. Indeed, the medical literature is now identifying a link between ADD/ADHD and adolescent drug abuse (Milberger *et al.*, 1997; Wilens *et al.*, 1997). It is our belief that there needs to be an investigation of individual factors that may lead to drug abuse. This could lead to more effective and better-targeted preventative measures.

Another major issue that needs to be highlighted is the need for adequate support services. All of the parents in Toughlove have previously sought help from a range of services including counsellors, schools, police, doctors, mental health, and drug and alcohol services over a period of several years. In most cases, these services have been of little benefit. While members of these services are often highly sympathetic, the contact of the abuser and their family with these services is by its nature inconsistent. To ensure consistency there needs to be identified strategies to support the families of these teenagers. In addition, we would request a strategic evaluation of what constitutes successful treatment for the drug and alcohol abuser.

We are also concerned that when these teenagers come in contact with the legal system, they often escape consequences of their behaviours or where consequences are used, they are of little benefit in assisting them to fight against their abuse of drugs and alcohol. The continuing use of fines as a consequence of criminal behaviour is often treated with contempt by these teenagers and often results in the parent paying for their child's behaviour. While we appreciate efforts to avoid criminal charges, it is our experience that these teenagers often feel that they have been "let off". This commonly results in an escalation of anti-social behaviours. In addition, we fear that without consequences during adolescence these teenagers will first meet the consequences of their behaviours by being imprisoned in an adult jail. Therefore we would support a more cohesive strategy in having these kids face consequences of criminal behaviours, and would recommend mandatory detoxification and rehabilitation programs as a more effective response.

Teenage drug and alcohol abuse represents an important public health issue. Apart from the severe stresses on the family of the abuser there is a considerable burden borne by society. As abusers of drugs and alcohol, these teenagers are often led into criminal behaviours. There continues to be a perpetuation of the drug cycle in that these teenagers often turn to drug dealing to fund their own needs. The resultant cost to society is high, not only as a result of their criminal behaviours but in the cost of their incarceration. In addition, their abuse behaviours often lead to mental breakdown and self-abuse behaviours, which incurs a further cost to society. While the strategies we propose would have significant costs, these costs should be regarded as a relatively small investment compared to a significantly greater reduction in the present and growing cost to the community resulting from drug and alcohol abuse.

References

Milberger, S.; Biederman, J.; Faraone, S.V.; Wilens, T.; Chu, M.P. (1997). Associations between ADHD and psychoactive substance use disorders. Findings from a longitudinal study of high-risk siblings of ADHD children. American Journal of Addictions, 6 (4): 314-29.

Wilens, T.; Biederman, J.; Mick, E.; Faraone, S.V.; Spencer, T. (1997). Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is associated with early onset substance use disorders. Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease, 185 (8): 475-82.