Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League

Custodial Settings

The Missing Link to Hepatitis C Elimination

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Introduction

- The Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) is the national organisation representing people who use/ have used illicit drugs and is the peak body for the state and territory peer-based drug user organisations.
- The *Fifth National Hepatitis C Strategy* was released by the Australian Government in December 2018 which recognises custodial settings as a priority location to achieve hepatitis C (HCV) elimination.
- AIVL facilitated a national consultation process with representatives of its 9 peer-based user organisations throughout 2018/2019 to gain an understanding of service user's experiences and perspectives.

Outcomes

- Harm reduction and health care are viewed as key issues by the drug-using community.
- Custodial settings are not only recognised as a priority setting and population by the Australian Government, but by drug users as well.
- Inconsistent policies and processes exist across state and territory jurisdictions in terms of direct-acting antiviral (DAA) treatment and continuity of care upon release from custody.
- People exiting custodial settings do not always feel that they receive the appropriate support to help them successfully complete DAA treatment.

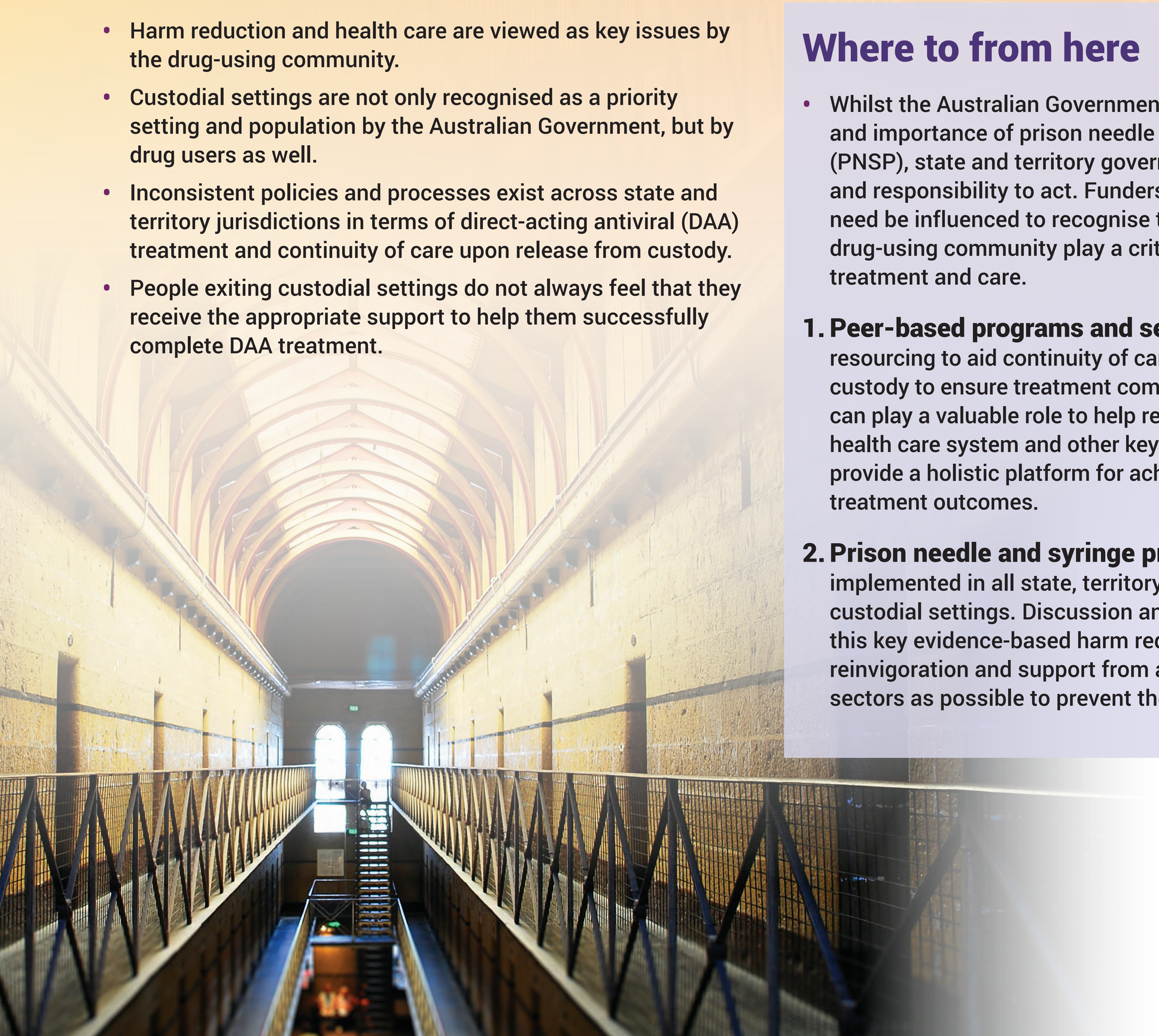
Barriers

- More work needs to be done to engage people who use drugs in DAA treatment, peers can play a key role in engaging what some see as a 'hard to reach' group as they are able to gain trust and build rapport with greater ease than health service professionals.
- Structural systems barriers, such as issues relating to Medicare cards expiring during incarceration so people are released without a valid card which makes achieving continuity of care difficult for some.
- Whilst transitioning back to community life, issues of homelessness, unemployment and ongoing drug use can have an impact on HCV treatment compliance.
- Decisions regarding harm reduction measures within custodial settings are highly politicised.

Where to from here

- Whilst the Australian Government recognises the value and importance of prison needle and syringe programs (PNSP), state and territory governments have the power and responsibility to act. Funders and policy-makers need be influenced to recognise that peers within the drug-using community play a critical role in HCV testing, treatment and care.

1. **Peer-based programs and services** need enhanced resourcing to aid continuity of care for those exiting custody to ensure treatment compliance. Peer caseworkers can play a valuable role to help releasees navigate the health care system and other key social services which provide a holistic platform for achieving successful treatment outcomes.
2. **Prison needle and syringe programs** should be implemented in all state, territory and privately-operated custodial settings. Discussion and advocacy around this key evidence-based harm reduction tool needs reinvigoration and support from and within as many sectors as possible to prevent the transmission of HCV.



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