



# Implementing Harm Reduction in Custodial Settings in Australia: What Role Does the National Hepatitis C Strategy Play?

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## Background

- 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.
- Australia's *Fifth National Hepatitis C Strategy* was released in December 2018 by the Commonwealth Government of Australia.
- Custodial settings fall under the administrative responsibility of state and territory level governments.
- Universal access to direct-acting antivirals (DAAs) has been provided to everyone in Australia, including those in custodial settings.
- Despite an extensive network of community-based needle and syringe programs (NSPs) throughout the country, Australia does not have any operating within custodial settings.
- Australia's goal to eliminate hepatitis C (HCV) by 2030 is undermined by a lack prison-based NSPs.

## Current barriers

- A weakness of the national strategies is that, despite being signed off by all state and territory level health ministers, there are no direct mechanisms to ensure the accountability of governments to implement actions or achieve outcomes.
- Correctional services sector is highly unionised and has historically strongly opposed prison NSP.
- Political will at a state and territory level is needed to address the policy and structural barriers which currently impede the implementation of prison NSP.

## Potential exists

- Within the Strategy, the Australian Government acknowledges that the absence of prison needle and syringe programs (PNSP) represents a significant current policy gap:
  - *"The absence of this (PNSP) evidence-based harm reduction service in custodial settings is a policy gap in the hepatitis C prevention effort."* (p28)
- The Government of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) is currently the only state or territory level government that has a publicly stated policy position to implement PNSP.
- However, with the adoption of the new *National Hepatitis C Strategy*, which has been endorsed by all the federal, state and territory Health Ministers, other jurisdictions are now engaging in discussions with regard to the way forward for PNSP in Australia.

## What needs to be done

Whilst the Australian Government recognises the value and importance of PNSP, state and territory governments have the power and responsibility to act. For progress to be made in Australia, we need allies and stakeholders from a diverse range of fields to work together to ensure:

- 1. Peer-to-peer education of custodial services officers** is undertaken to ensure the workforce is well-informed of the evidence-base and real life experiences of peers who have firsthand experience of PNSP operation.
- 2. Reinvigoration of a national conversation on PNSP** as a key harm reduction measure which is pivotal to the prevention of HCV transmission nationally.
- 3. Framing of the discussion is inclusive of the health and human rights** of people who use drugs who are in custodial settings.

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