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## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **New South Wales Drug Court evaluation: Program & participant profiles**

In its first year of operation the NSW Drug Court placed 224 drug-dependent offenders on a program of treatment and intensive supervision.

Amongst the 224 persons placed on the program in the first year, approximately two-thirds (i.e. 149 offenders) were still on the program as at the 31st of January, 2000, while one-third (i.e. 75 offenders) had been terminated.

The vast majority of program participants (87%) have not been sentenced for a further offence since commencing the Drug Court program.

However because urine-testing of participants was not always random or adequately supervised it is not possible accurately to state what percentage of Drug Court participants have remained drug-free.

These are some of the key findings to emerge from the first report of an evaluation of the NSW Drug Court being conducted by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

Of the 29 people who have been sentenced for an offence committed while on the program, 21 were sentenced for a theft offence. None was sentenced for a violent offence.

The majority (62%) of those sentenced for an offence committed while on the Drug Court program were terminated from the program.

The Drug Court has the power to punish participants who breach the rules of the Drug Court program by sending them to prison for short periods.

In its first year of operation the Drug Court had imposed custodial sanctions on 80 per cent of participants. The average custodial sanction for a breach of program rules was five days.

To be eligible for the Drug Court program an offender must: plead guilty to the offence(s) charged; be highly likely to receive full-time imprisonment; be dependent on prohibited drugs; be over 18 years of age; reside in the catchment area for the Court and be willing to participate in the program.

Offenders currently before the courts for violent offences, sex offences or serious drug offences are excluded from the program.

One hundred and seventy-two people who were referred to the Drug Court were found ineligible for the program during the first 12 months of the Drug Court's operation.

There are three phases to the Drug Court program. The first two phases are intended to last three months and the third phase is intended to last 6 months.

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Participants took longer than anticipated in each stage of the Program. Over 50 per cent of participants in Phase 1 on 31 January 2000 had been in that phase of the Program for longer than three months, while over 60 per cent of those in Phase 2 had been in that phase longer than three months.

Drug Court participants enter a variety of different treatments which can be provided in either a residential or community setting.

As of 31 January 2000, 52 per cent of participants were on a methadone program, 42 per cent were on an abstinence-based program and six per cent were on a naltrexone program. Seventy-two per cent of participants were receiving treatment in a community setting.

The Director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn said that the Bureau findings showed the Drug Court program was progressing largely according to plan.

“The retention rate of participants on the program is good and the re-arrest rate is low by comparison with the re-arrest rate normally found among heroin-dependent property offenders.”

“Those placed on the program are generally persistent property offenders dependent on heroin who face a significant term of imprisonment. This is precisely the group for whom the Drug Court program has the best chance of turning out cost-effective.”

“From the standpoint of evaluation the most significant problem to date is the breakdown in urine-testing procedures. This has made it impossible to state with any degree of reliability what percentage of program participants has remained drug-free.”

“This does not mean it is impossible to rigorously evaluate the Drug Court program. The key test for the program is whether it is more cost-effective than conventional sentencing options in reducing drug-related crime.”

“To address this question the Bureau will be monitoring the re-arrest rate of Drug Court participants with the re-arrest of a ‘control’ group sentenced in the conventional way. The results of this part of the Bureau’s evaluation will be not be available for some time.”

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