



MEDIA RELEASE

Hon. John Hatzistergos MLC
Attorney General, Minister for Health, Minister for
Industrial Relations, Minister for the Central Coast

Thursday, September 4, 2009

COURT ORDERED DRUG TREATMENT CUTS RE-OFFENDING

NSW Attorney General and Minister for Health John Hatzistergos today welcomed the new report showing an innovative program to treat drug abuse by criminal defendants has successfully reduced re-offending rates in NSW.

The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) released its evaluation of the court-based drug treatment program, Magistrates Early Referral into Treatment Program or MERIT, yesterday.

“The report demonstrates that MERIT significantly reduces the likelihood of re-offending by defendants with drug problems compared with defendants who don’t undertake the program,” said Mr Hatzistergos.

The report found the re-offending rate for defendants who completed the program was 12% lower than for those with drug problems that did not participate.

“The MERIT program provides a genuine opportunity for adult defendants with drug problems to work towards rehabilitation and away from a life of crime.”

BOCSAR says it was likely that the actual decline in rates of recidivism among MERIT participants were even greater than its report suggested.

Mr Hatzistergos said participants in the program are recommended for the program by Magistrates, solicitors, police or the defendants themselves before sentencing and are then assessed by NSW Health.

“Based on the assessment, the defendant may be accepted into MERIT to receive targeted treatment, including drug counselling, therapy, welfare assistance and inpatient or outpatient detoxification”, he said.

He said magistrates then take account of the defendant's progress in the program as part of sentencing.

The NSW Government developed the MERIT program in response to recommendations from the NSW Drug Summit in 1999.

In 2000, the program was piloted in five NSW Local Courts and now operates in 61. By the end of March, 2009, 11,588 defendants had entered MERIT, 7100 had successfully completed it and 491 were still participating.

The BOCSAR report on MERIT can be found at www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au