

Regardless of where people stand on the issue of illicit drugs and illicit drug use, the reality is that a large number of Australians have used or do use illicit drugs. The very illegality of illicit substances serves to force both the drugs themselves and the people who use them into a black market-based underground culture.

The shame and stigma associated with using illicit drugs forces people away from information, support and services and isolates them from family, friends and the rest of society. For people who use or have used illicit drugs, the long-term effects of being locked outside of mainstream society are; serious health problems, unemployment, family and community breakdown and in many cases, premature death.

Representing a Unique Perspective

The Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) and its state and territory member organisations, play a crucial role for those isolated from their families and the rest of society due to the illegal nature of their drug use. As peer-based organisation run by and for people who use and have used illicit drugs, AIVL is in the unique position of being able to both *represent* and *address* the issues and needs of this group.

Through our direct experience we can provide governments, services and the broader community with the 'drug user perspective' on a range of issues in relation to illicit drug use. Equally, as 'peers' we also have the credibility and trust required to reach other people who use or have used illicit drugs who are isolated and extremely marginalised within the community.

While some in the community may view people who use or have used illicit drugs as having very little if anything to offer governments, services and the community, in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. In numerous important areas over the past ten years, the Australian experience has reflected the value

of involving people who use or have used illicit drugs in the development of policy and programmatic responses.

Through AIVL, people who use or have used illicit drugs have been directly involved in the development and review of many national policies including:

- five National HIV/AIDS Strategies;
- two National Hepatitis C Strategies;
- two National Drug Strategies/Frameworks;
- National Heroin Overdose Prevention Strategy;
- National Sexually Transmissible Infections Strategy;
- National Mental Health Strategy;
- two National Indigenous Sexual Health/BBV Strategies & Complementary Drug Strategy;
- National Cannabis Strategy;
- National Hepatitis C & HIV Testing Policies; and
- numerous other support policies.

In many of these important public health areas, Australia leads the world due to our willingness to respond early, to create partnerships and to involve the affected communities directly in the response.

Building Partnerships with Others

Building on this national policy work, AIVL and its local member organisations also work in partnership with state/territory governments and local services to develop programmatic responses to the health, legal and social issues affecting people who use illicit drugs. The direct involvement of service users or 'consumer representatives' in the planning and delivery of services has been accepted as critical in all other areas of health and social services provision.

In the illicit drugs area too, the involvement and consultation with representatives of people who use or have used illicit drugs is just as critical. Part of the role of AIVL and its members is to ensure the services are appropriate and meet the expressed needs of the intended service users. While negative community attitudes towards people who use illicit drugs has lead some to question whether drug users should have a say

in services provided for them, such attitudes undermine the fundamental Australian principle of 'quality health care for all'. Moreover, basic health economics suggests that consultation with service users creates accessible and effective services that are also cost-effective in terms of the public purse.

As well as working in partnership with governments and services, AIVL and its member organisations also work with local councils and other community-based groups. The establishment of locally based 'drug action coalitions' has created an opportunity for our organisations to demonstrate our willingness to be 'part of the solution' when it comes to managing illicit drug use within the community.

AIVL and its member organisations are also involved in collaborations with family support organisations at both the national and local level. While on the face of it, it may seem that AIVL and the family-based organisations have very little in common, the reality is, both organisations have important roles to play in terms of 'modelling' the healing process that can and must occur between people who use or have used illicit drugs and their families and friends.

The Peer Based Approach

The unique feature of AIVL and its member organisations is our 'peer-based' approach to our work, programs and services. The peer-based approach is based on respect and a recognition that people who use drugs can and do educate and learn from each other in our everyday interactions.

The peer-based approach also recognises that people who use or have used illicit drugs can manage their own effective and professional organisations and can speak for themselves on the issues that affect them. AIVL and its member organisations employ a range of peer-based approaches within our programs and services including peer education, peer training, peer facilitation, peer support, peer teaching etc.

We also work across the full range of issues affecting people who use or have used illicit drugs including health issues such as: HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B & C, endocarditis, bacterial infections, overdose, reducing drug related harm, drug treatment, legal issues such as laws, police, courts, prisons, discrimination and social issues such as education, employment, social security, housing, parenting, training, etc.

In understanding how AIVL and its member organisations operate, it is important to stress that we do not encourage or promote the use of illicit drugs. As people who use or have used illicit drugs, we simply recognise the large amount of illicit drug use that is already occurring and believe we have a positive contribution to make and a unique perspective to bring to this important issue facing the community.

Having large numbers of illicit drug users with HIV/AIDS would have significant health, social and economic implications for the entire Australian community, not just the people directly affected. Peer-based programs and services provided by AIVL and its member organisations have played a clear role in maintaining extremely low levels of HIV amongst people who inject drugs in Australia.

One of the main reasons for this is that strategies such as peer education and peer-based needle and syringe programs manage to reach people who do not access mainstream health education campaigns and services. The credibility and trust AIVL and its member organisations have with people who use illicit drugs is based on our relationship as peers and provides a unique and privileged access to a highly marginalised group within society.

Our Direct Knowledge & Experience

While partnership approaches between governments, researchers, services and peers have made Australia a world leader in our responses to HIV and hepatitis

C, the same cannot be said about the approaches to other health, social and legal issues affecting people who use illicit drugs.

Most of the responses to drug related overdose, drug related crime, family breakdown, drug treatment, unemployment, etc, have been developed in isolation to people who use illicit drugs. We have been largely left out of responses to these issues because of a mistaken belief that we would be at best, disinterested, and at worst, incapable of participating in a meaningful dialogue on the issues that affect us.

While we cannot single-handedly address the issues associated with illicit drug use in the community, our involvement in the response is critical. We are the people who use illicit drugs, access drug treatment services and educate and support our peers - we have direct knowledge and experience to offer.

AIVL believes it is a mistake for governments, services and the community to ignore the unique access and information peer-based drug user organisations can provide. All we ask is for an opportunity to show the positive and important contribution we can make.

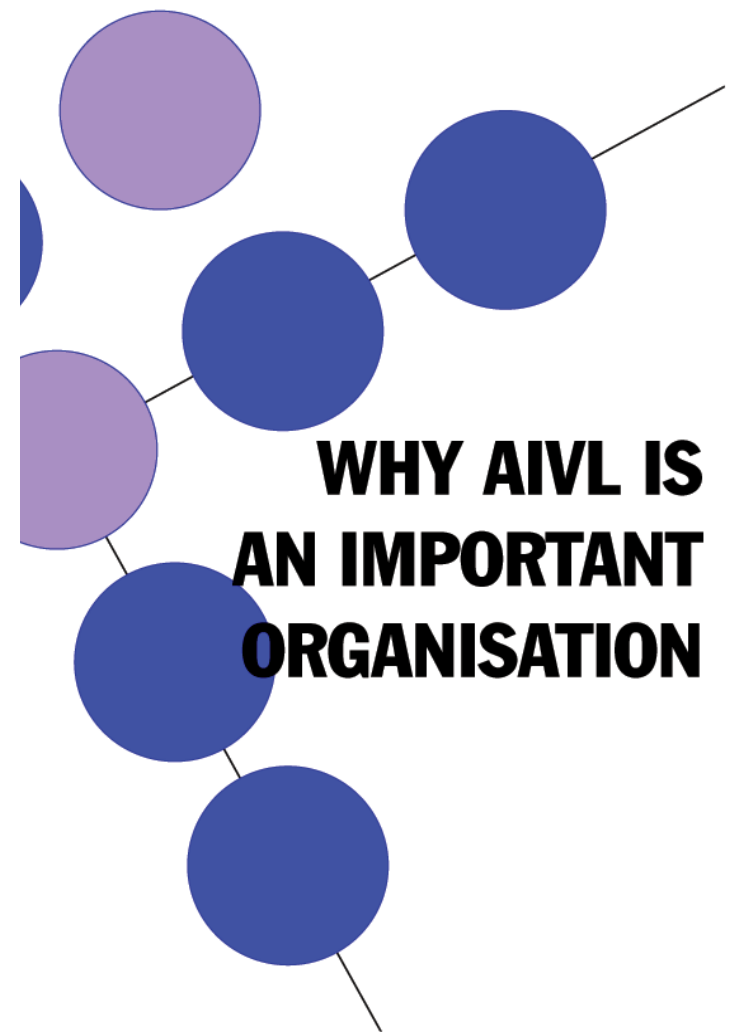


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WHY AIVL IS AN IMPORTANT ORGANISATION