



MEDIA RELEASE

COMMUNITY DEMANDS ACTION ON ALCOHOL

24 October 2013: New South Wales (NSW) community groups and individuals are demanding a greater say in the liquor licensing decisions that impact their local communities.

Their concerns will be voiced at a community forum at Parliament House in Sydney today that will bring together community members, state and local government representatives, police and health professionals to examine the current barriers to community engagement in liquor licensing decisions.

The meeting, to be hosted by the NSW ACT Alcohol Policy Alliance (NAAPA) and the National Local Government Drug and Alcohol Committee, comes as new figures released today reveal an overwhelming majority of NSW adults (76%) believes more needs to be done to reduce alcohol harms, with a majority also indicating the government has failed to adequately address the issue.

Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) Chief Executive, Michael Thorn, says the snapshot of NSW data from the *2013 Annual Alcohol Poll* NSW snapshot provides a true indication of the level of concern in NSW.

“The people of NSW are becoming increasingly and justifiably concerned about the level of alcohol harms they witness in their communities, and the failure of the NSW Government to step up and take effective action. We’re not talking a few concerned citizens. We’re talking an overwhelming majority - three quarters of all NSW adults, who believe Australia has a problem with excess drinking or alcohol abuse and want action now,” Mr Thorn said.

Michael Thorn says that in the absence of government leadership, the people of NSW are determined to address the level of alcohol harms in their communities but are overwhelmed by a daunting and complicated regulatory system that restricts their ability to influence the very liquor licencing decisions that affect them so adversely.

“The playing field is tilted unfairly in favour of industry. Under-resourced communities are facing off against a cashed-up liquor industry. It’s not a fair fight; there are simply too many impenetrable legislative, regulatory and resourcing challenges to overcome,” Mr Thorn said.

NAAPA, the State's leading alcohol policy coalition will today call on the NSW Government to establish and fund an independent Community Defenders Office (CDO).

The proposed CDO would be modelled on the Environmental Defender's Office (NSW) and funded by the NSW Government through the introduction of an annual liquor licensing fee. The CDO would both educate communities about their rights in liquor licensing matters, and also represent concerned communities in liquor licensing challenges.

Mr Thorn says a CDO is the only way to overcome the challenges currently facing communities.

"To successfully influence liquor licensing matters you need a level of specialised experience, knowledge, time and money that is simply beyond the reach of most communities. A Community Defenders Office would provide concerned communities with pro-bono access to skilled professionals and advocates who could ensure their voices are heard," Mr Thorn said.

Details of the CDO proposal are contained in the FARE research report, *Breaking down the barriers: Community involvement in liquor licensing decisions in NSW*.

To be released at today's forum, the report examines in detail the existing liquor licensing regulatory framework and challenges faced by communities in navigating the system.

The CDO would act as both a knowledge bank and advisory service, providing both a central repository of information, and central networking hub, as well as providing access to in-house legal, communications and research support.

FARE is now calling for public comment on the report.

NAAPA will also launch a community campaign today, directed squarely at NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell.

Mr Thorn says the *Save Our Streets: Real Action on Alcohol Now* campaign aims to push effective alcohol policy reform onto the NSW political agenda.

"The Community Defenders Office is one important part of a complete solution. The O'Farrell Government must also revise the liquor licensing system itself; ensure greater community engagement, end the free ride for liquor licensees and introduce annual risk-based license fees, and abolish all 24 hour trading and close late trading licensed venues by 3.00am," Mr Thorn said.

Michael Thorn is available for interview (@MichaelTThorn)

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The NSW and ACT Alcohol Policy Coalition (NAAPA) is an alliance of health and community organisations active across NSW and the ACT that has been formed with the objective of promoting action to reduce alcohol-related harms. The Coalition of NSW and ACT organisations has been formed to lobby and campaign for alcohol policy reform to reduce alcohol-related harms across the two jurisdictions. www.naapa.org.au

