

Media Release



Federation of
Community Legal Centres
VICTORIA

State Budget: police and prison spending “wasteful” 4 May 2010

The Victorian Federation of Community Legal Centres today criticised State Budget announcements of record police and prison spending as “wasteful”.

State Budget papers reveal record police (\$2 billion) and prison (\$640 million) budgets. “This budget continues the trend of diverting resources away from services that address the causes of crime into police and prisons that mop up after the fact,” said Federation Executive Officer, Hugh de Kretser. “We need to spend far more on tackling child neglect, homelessness, poverty, drug addiction and mental illness. We need to spend more on prevention and less on punishment.”

The Federation criticised the Police Minister’s statement that: “Labor’s formula for community safety is simple – promise more police and deliver on your promises.” Mr de Kretser said, “Preventing crime requires a sophisticated response that properly addresses the root causes of crime. To spend endless amounts of taxpayers money on more police is simplistic and wasteful.”

The Federation was also critical of new funding for prison construction. The Government today announced an extra \$126 million over four years to build 244 more prison beds.

“Victorian prisoner numbers have grown over 40% over the past ten years,” said Mr de Kretser. “Victorian prisons are bursting. Not because crime is out of control. According to Victoria Police data, overall crime has dropped around 23% over the past 10 years. Prison numbers are expanding because the courts are imposing longer sentences and the prison system is failing to address reoffending. Yet in today’s budget, new funding for prison construction is more than 5 times the new funding for programs to reduce reoffending among prisoners.”

Council of Australian Government figures show that each prisoner costs around \$80,000 per year. ABS data shows that half of Victorian prisoners have been in prison before.

Politicians on both sides in New South Wales have begun to reject the law and order auction. NSW Shadow Attorney-General Greg Smith, a former prosecutor, wrote recently: “Building more prisons to house the growing number of prisoners, many of whom are recidivists who have had little genuine rehabilitation, is expensive and does little to make a better society... We have come to a point in time when the theory of ‘lock them up and throw away the key’ just doesn’t work... This state cannot afford to keep incarcerating more people, and spending will have to shift to reducing incarceration rates.”

De Kretser called for a similar, evidence-based approach in Victoria: “Instead of spending more money on police and prisons, we need to be tackling the root causes of crime. Initiatives which seek to address the causes of offending, such as the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Collingwood and the Drug Court in NSW, have been proven to work.”

Further information:

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Community legal centres (CLCs) are independent, non-profit community organisations that provide free legal services to the public. CLCs across Australia provide referral, advice and assistance to more than 350,000 people each year. www.communitylaw.org.au