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Media Release

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SANDAS Supports Call for Introducing Pill Testing to SA

The **South Australian Network of Drug and Alcohol Services (SANDAS) Inc)** supports the call by Robert Simms MP of the Greens Party in Parliament today (22/02/2023) to introduce drug checking, including pill testing. This would provide an important addition to our states long-standing commitment to reducing the harms associated with drug use.

Michael White, Executive Officer said, 'Following successful trials at an Australian music festival and the implementation of the CanTEST Health and Drug Checking Service model in the ACT, funded by the ACT Department of Health and delivered by an NGO partnership, SANDAS urges the State government to invest in drug checking initiatives to support a balanced and holistic approach to harm reduction as a matter of urgency'.

Michael also said, 'SANDAS **recommends** that drug checking should become a standard offering at all South Australian music festivals, fixed sites in entertainment precincts, and at mobile sites (metro and rural) and events where illicit drug use is likely to occur".

He noted that, 'Since 1985, Australia's National Drug Strategy has guided governments' investment in a harm reduction initiatives including needle and syringe programs, peer education, Opioid Replacement Therapy, and medically supervised safe injecting rooms.'

Michael said 'SANDAS considers ill-testing/drug checking aligns with harm reduction principles in three key ways:

1. by reducing the immediate risk by ensuring that users are made aware of contaminates and approximate doses of active substances in the illicit drugs tested;
2. by expanding opportunities to provide drug awareness and harm reduction education, including the risks associated with polydrug use, to those already planning drug use;
3. by providing an `early warning system' for new dangers and assisting with the real-time collation of data around Australian drug use'.

Michael said, 'The key intent of drug checking is to prevent immediate harm, including injury or loss of life, to drug users – and is undoubtably why recent research has shown that most Australians support the introduction of drug checking'.

Michael went on to say, 'There are great long-term harm minimisation benefits to be gained from testing which creates opportunities for skilled alcohol and other drug workers opportunities to provide people who intend to use drugs with immediate harm reduction education interventions.'

Michael noted that 'testing creates an number of opportunities to bolster harm reduction approaches by

- by making the results of drug checks carried out on substances recently submitted for testing, confiscated or associated with medical emergencies. This information can be used to inform those intending to use substances to make informed choices.
- it can enable real-time alerts to health workers and police that high-risk substances are in circulation at a specific event or in a specific region.
- Overseas drug checking has been shown to increase drug users awareness of the level of drug substitution and contamination in the drugs they have acquired. This information can change their purchasing patterns and over time the drugs presented for testing showed less drug substitution and contamination, thus reducing the risk associated with using the drugs.'

Michael noted, 'the most common objection to introducing drug checking ais the fear that the practice would increase drug use by normalising drug use and creating the misconception that drug use was risk-free. SANDAS notes that expert evaluations have found there is no evidence to suggest these fears would be realised.'

Michael concluded that 'Drug checking services have the potential to save lives and reduce drug-related harms, including fatal overdose. Drug checking is consistent with the intent of the National Drug Strategy and can provide drug users, treatment services, health providers and police with vital data to enable the delivery of better targeted interventions to reduce the harms of drug use in our community.'

Michael commended the State and Territory Alcohol and Other Drug Peaks Network Position Statement on Drug Checking (including Pill Testing) for a fully referenced discussion of these issues: https://sandas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/02012020-AOD_PN_PillTesting_DrugChecking_PosPaper_Final.pdf.

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The South Australian Network of Drug and Alcohol Services (SANDAS) works to enhance community wellbeing and reduce the harm associated with alcohol and drug use. We represent the non-government organisations providing treatment, support, early intervention and prevention services to South Australians affected by alcohol and other drugs. We provide independent advocacy and representation, workforce development, networking and policy support for our members.