

AIDS COUNCIL OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
18 October 2007

The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD: Time and again I have raised concerns in this place that the AIDS Council of South Australia is operating in a vacuum of unaccountability and that it is simply out of control.

Last year Family First raised the fact that the AIDS Council of South Australia, through its taxpayer-funded SHine SA program, was referring some of its clients to prostitutes. Then, in June, I raised the outrageous fact that this organisation (this time through its SAVIVE program) was printing a magazine, again using taxpayer funds, which contained pro-drug use articles, including statements like: 'You mean taking as many drugs as you can isn't the meaning of life?'; 'You say I'm smashed like it's a bad thing'; 'Alcohol is fun, but take drugs instead and you'll remember your night out'; and perhaps the worst of all, 'Children are a blessing. You never know when you'll need someone to go out and score for you.' Sadly, it does not stop there.

Today I raise a further concern, this time with the AIDS Council Sex Industry Network program. On 22 September this year, the AIDS Council placed an advertisement in the *The Advertiser* for three positions within its Sex Industry Network program. When Family First obtained the job specifications and the specific advertising for these positions, it was shocked. Indeed, I have a copy of the document here. The job specifications indicate that 'sex work experience is essential for the position'. Two other positions also indicate 'personal experience of injecting drugs is also essential to achieve the position.'

The Hon. A. Bressington: Taxpayer funded.

The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD: Taxpayer funded. My questions are:

1. Is the minister shocked and disappointed at finding that the AIDS Council continues to act in this way?
2. Why is the minister, as the Minister for Substance Abuse, funding an organisation that demands job applicants use drugs or participate in prostitution as a mandatory prerequisite for employment in this organisation?
3. Does the minister agree that this is a gross misuse of taxpayers' funds, and what action will she take to immediately address this deplorable situation?

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Environment and Conservation, Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Minister Assisting the Minister for Health) (14:50): The AIDS Council of South Australia conducts a wide range of very important programs aimed at improving the health and well-being of key client groups and preventing the transmission of HIV and other blood-borne diseases. The funding for these programs comes from a range of sources, including both state and commonwealth.

State government funds are provided by Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia. A key program is the South Australian Sex Industry Network (SA SIN) program which is funded through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)—an illicit drug division initiative supporting measures relating to needle and syringe programs. SA SIN provides an Outreach Clean Needle program service to street-based sex workers in metropolitan Adelaide, a highly marginalised population that is particularly vulnerable to the transmission of blood-borne diseases, including HIV. It is important to put this really important work in perspective. Not only does SA SIN provide a clean needle program but also education and information about safer injecting and also the dangers of sharing injecting equipment, including needles. They provide information about safe disposal practices, as well as providing referrals to drug treatment services and referrals to the

health, legal and other social services; so they provide a wide range of important services. It should be stressed that accessing people who become vulnerable to these blood-borne disease transmissions by engaging in these high risk behaviours is an incredibly complex thing to do.

Paramount to that prevention, it is important to be successful with this group in order to, in turn, help prevent those diseases spreading further into the broader community. It is therefore vital that government-funded agencies such as the AIDS Council do this very important work. The AIDS Council has a proven history of engaging these very hard to reach groups, and Australia has been very successful in its AIDS and HIV prevention efforts. A significant component has been the provision of peer education services such as those provided by SA SIN. Peer education has been demonstrated to be a very successful way of engaging drug users to change this very high-risk behaviour.

Earlier today I was advised that the AIDS Council informed the department that there was an advertisement for a commonwealth-funded project to prevent AIDS and HIV amongst injecting sex industry workers. I have asked for this matter to be further investigated as I was made aware of it only late this afternoon. I certainly do not endorse the requirement that it is essential to employ an injecting drug user. However, I am informed that the advertisement could equally apply to a former injecting drug user. A peer educator may be someone who has significant personal knowledge of or experience in injecting drug use, enhancing their credibility and effectiveness with clients while themselves not engaging in these risk behaviours. So it is important that we reach this community. I am advised that Australia has one of the lowest rates of HIV amongst injecting drug users, and I have been advised that the peer support workers are an important part of that very successful outcome. I have asked for the matter to be further investigated and I do not endorse the position that it be an essential requirement for the position.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (14:56): By way of supplementary question, will the minister explain to the council exactly what professional qualifications are required for these outreach workers within the AIDS Council? Are they required to have a diploma of professional counselling or anything like that or are they just prostitutes and drug users?

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Environment and Conservation, Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Minister Assisting the Minister for Health) (14:56): I am not aware. I am happy to provide details of the person specifications required for this position. I do not have those details in front of me. I have been very clear that these peer educators may be someone with significant personal knowledge or experience with injecting drug use, and that has been shown to be very effective in their credibility in engaging other clients. I have made very clear that the information I have is that the advertisement could pertain to someone with former experience, and I certainly do not endorse its being a requirement for the holder of the position to be a current drug user. I have asked for the matter to be fully investigated.

The Hon. D.W. RIDGWAY (Leader of the Opposition) (14:57): By way of supplementary question, will the minister guarantee that none of the funding provided to the AIDS Council and the Sex Industry Network is used for social functions, such as the annual whores party held this year at the Directors Hotel, where I am informed that free drinks were served? It features in the centrespread of *SIN Mag* No.59.

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Environment and Conservation, Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Minister Assisting the Minister for Health) (14:57): Not that I am aware of, but I am happy to take the question on notice and bring back a response.

The Hon. R.D. LAWSON (14:58): Was any member of the minister's ministerial or departmental staff made aware of SHine's proposal to place these advertisements prior to today? The minister said that she learnt about this today. Were any members of her staff made aware of this matter, or were approval sought for the placement of these advertisements?

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Environment and Conservation, Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Minister Assisting the Minister for Health) (14:58): To the best of my knowledge, no. I was only informed of this quite recently. To the best of my knowledge none of my staff were aware of it either, but if the answer is different from that I am happy to bring back that response to the chamber.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (14:59): By way of supplementary question, is the minister saying that an NGO (non-government organisation) is being funded by state taxpayer dollars and that she has no idea of the qualifications necessary to work in that organisation? Why does that not apply to other non-government organisations in the drug and alcohol sector? *Members interjecting:* **The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON:** That is a pathetic excuse. You should know what qualified people are working with vulnerable groups of people. There is no excuse for this. There is no excuse.

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Environment and Conservation, Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Minister Assisting the Minister for Health) (15:00): I remind members of the chamber that the position which is being advertised is a commonwealth-funded position. I want to stress that it is a commonwealth-funded position. The suggestion of the Hon. Ann Bressington that the minister would know the person specification and job requirements for every single position that is placed within our agency or our NGOs is outrageous. We have service contracts with about 20 NGOs that employ hundreds of different people. It is absolutely outrageous to suggest that I would be expected to know the person specification and qualification requirements of every single position within my agency, and all the service agreements that we have with NGOs. If there is anything specific the honourable member wants to know, I am happy to take it on notice and bring back a response.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (15:01): I have a supplementary question. Is the minister saying that Mr Keith Evans, a director of Drug and Alcohol Services, who was in charge of the NGO sector and was responsible for the service agreements for the organisation DrugBeat of South Australia, does not report back to her on the requirements of people to work in the drug and alcohol sector? What is the minimum training required?

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Environment and Conservation, Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Minister Assisting the Minister for Health) (15:01): Mr Keith Evans is not here on the chamber floor today. *The Hon. A. Bressington interjecting:* **The Hon. G.E. GAGO:** It is outrageous to suggest that a chief executive would provide me with information that would go to the detail of all the person specifications and qualifications of every single person. That is an administrative matter and chief executives are expected to get on with it. That is their job and that is what they are employed to do. If there is an issue of concern—as has been raised today—it is appropriate and reasonable that that level of detail be sought. I have indicated that I do not have that level of detail here with me today. I am happy to obtain the information and bring it back to the chamber.