



MEDIA RELEASE

**Hon. John Hatzistergos MLC
Attorney General
Minister for Citizenship
Minister for Regulatory Reform**

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Helping the homeless pay off fines

A trial scheme to help the homeless and mentally ill work off their fines has drawn widespread community interest, particularly from regional centres across NSW, said Attorney General John Hatzistergos.

Mr Hatzistergos said forums held to promote the Keneally Government's new Work and Development Orders (WDO) have recently been held in the Central Coast, Dubbo, the Far North Coast, Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong.

"News of the scheme has spread among charities and community providers, many of which have been eager to sign up and have their clients take part," said Mr Hatzistergos.

To thank the more than 70 organisations which have been approved to participate in the WDO scheme, including the Salvation Army, Mission Australian and St Vincent de Paul, Mr Hatzistergos planned to meet with their representatives today at NSW Parliament.

(Media are invited to the Strangers Lounge at NSW Parliament at 10.30am today)

Mr Hatzistergos said people who are homeless, mentally ill or experiencing severe financial hardship often face great difficulty getting back on their feet if they have a debt accumulated through unpaid fines.

"The scheme offers disadvantage people who can't afford to pay their fines the chance to pay off their debt and avoid being drawn into the criminal justice system."

"I am pleased to report that work completed by the applicants to date has accounted for approximately \$29,250 in fines repaid."

Mr Hatzistergos said the WDO scheme required a person to undertake voluntary work for approved organisations, counselling, drug and alcohol treatment, or to complete educational, vocational or life skills courses.

He said new online registration forms, available on the State Debt Recovery Office website, now made it easier than ever for community providers to register for the scheme and assist their clients.

"Approved organisations are now given a username and login and can now make new WDO applications for their clients, view approved WDO clients' outstanding debts and request to add court fines to existing WDOs."

Mr Hatzistergos said the the two-year trial of the Work and Development Order scheme was part of a package of reforms to the state's *Fines Act* in 2008 designed to assist vulnerable groups in society.

The changes were based on recommendations made by the Sentencing Council in its 2006 report on the effectiveness of fines as a sentencing option.

Dianne Simek, coordinator of the Monaro Crisis Accommodation Service, said the scheme was extremely positive as many clients were caught in a debt trap and unable to obtain drivers licences.

“This is particularly important in a rural community where the geographical isolation and poor transport infrastructure make it impossible for some people to attend appointments, employment programs and training courses,” she said.

Joe Coyte, assistant coordinator of the Glen Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre, believes the WDO scheme has been a major success.

“It has helped the people that are on them (WDOs), it has helped the clients in our program and it has helped our organisation as a whole,” he said.