

## MEDIA RELEASE

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



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### **More courts to refer offenders to alcohol treatment**

A successful drug rehabilitation program for defendants is being expanded to include alcohol treatment and will operate at nine courts across the state by the end of the year, NSW Attorney General John Hatzistergos said today.

“Evidence shows that this program works to break the drug-crime cycle,” Mr Hatzistergos said.

“We hope to replicate this success in treating defendants with serious alcohol dependency.”

Mr Hatzistergos said the Magistrates Early Referral Into Treatment program, available in 64 NSW courts, will be offered for alcohol treatment at nine courts by the end of the year.

“The expansion of Alcohol MERIT will provide a greater number of defendants the opportunity to address the underlying causes of their criminal behaviour,” he said.

“By addressing the defendant’s alcohol problem, the program may also address what is often the primary reason behind their offending behaviour.”

The Attorney General will announce the expansion at a conference in Lismore today to mark the 10th Anniversary of the MERIT program, where the program was initially piloted in July 2000.

Alcohol MERIT commenced at Dubbo Local Court in October last year and at Manly in March.

Mr Hatzistergos said a number of existing MERIT courts in regional NSW are already providing an alcohol component including Bathurst, Orange, Wellington, Broken Hill and Wilcannia Local Courts.

MERIT is a \$13 million joint Commonwealth-State program that offers drug treatment prior to sentencing, as a voluntary option for non-violent defendants coming before Local Courts who:

- Have a drug problem;
- Are suitable for release into the community on bail; and
- Are motivated to engage in treatment and rehabilitation.

Research by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research has shown that completion of the program reduces the proportion of offenders reconvicted for any offence by 12 per cent.

MERIT makes use of a comprehensive range of health and welfare services, detoxification, treatment and rehabilitation. Participants are closely case-managed and the magistrate receives regular reports on their progress.

Since the program’s commencement 10 years ago, following the NSW Drug Summit, more than 13,000 participants have entered the program with 8,458 successfully completing it.

“We hope to continue introducing Alcohol MERIT into more courts across the state pending discussions with the Commonwealth,” he said.

Mr Hatzistergos is to deliver the opening address at the MERIT conference, which is being held at the Southern Cross University campus in East Lismore. Chief Magistrate of NSW, Judge Graeme Henson and representatives from NSW Health and the NSW Police Force will also give their perspective on the program’s success.

Mr Hatzistergos said the expansion of Alcohol MERIT would help the Keneally Government achieve its State Plan goal of reducing rates of re-offending by 10% by 2016.