



yarra
drug & health
forum

ANNUAL
REPORT
2025-26

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JESSE COLLING

Acting Chairperson,
Yarra Drug and Health Forum

It is both an honour and a privilege to present this report as Acting Chairperson of the Yarra Drug and Health Forum for 2025-26 — and to do so in what is a milestone year, as the Forum celebrates its 30th anniversary.

I want to begin by acknowledging Peter Wearne, who has served as Chairperson of the Forum with such dedication and commitment over many years. Peter has taken extended leave this year, and on behalf of the Executive Committee I wish him well. I also thank Amanda Stone, who took on many hats Acting Chair in the early part of the year before I stepped in. The continuity and stability of the Forum's governance through this period is a testament to the collective strength of our Executive Committee.

This has been a year of both consolidation and growth. Our transition to Fitzroy Legal Service as auspicing body, which formally took effect in July 2025, has continued to bed down well. The partnership is one the Forum values deeply — we share a commitment to justice, advocacy and the wellbeing of the Yarra community, and I look forward to seeing it deepen further in the years ahead.

The ongoing loss of Yarra Council funding, \$34,000 representing a third of our annual income has remained a significant constraint. It is disappointing that this support was not renewed, particularly given the recommendation of council officers to continue the partnership. Despite this, the Forum has not stood still. Our Executive Officer Amanda Stone has delivered a remarkable program this year, and I want to acknowledge her energy, skill and commitment. She has been an outstanding advocate for the Forum and for the community we serve.

One of the most exciting developments this year has been the commencement of the Safe and Welcoming Spaces project, funded by the Victorian Government's Department of Families, Fairness and Housing through the North Richmond Precinct initiative. The appointment of a Project Officer in May 2026 marks a significant milestone, and this work — focused on developing inclusive, place-based responses for vulnerable people in the North Richmond Precinct — reflects exactly the kind of practical, community-centred advocacy the Forum exists to support.

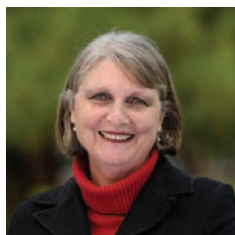
Our Community Network Meetings have continued to draw engagement from across the sector and the community though mixed. This year's program addressed the future of community health, homelessness and AOD care, the Victorian AOD Strategy 2025-2035, creating culturally safe services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and ongoing North Richmond public space and amenity issues. The Forum remains one of the few spaces in Yarra where such a wide range of perspectives can come together in genuine dialogue.

Our advocacy has continued across a range of fronts, including on the future of the Medically Supervised Injecting Room, drug law reform, and preparations for the upcoming state election. The Forum's voice is one that is respected, and we will continue to use it in the service of the evidence and the community.

The Executive Committee itself has been renewed and strengthened this year, with new members joining and a clear plan for the Chair succession to be resolved at the September 2026 Executive Meeting. I am grateful to every member of the Executive for their time, knowledge and goodwill.

As we mark 30 years of the Yarra Drug and Health Forum, I am proud of what this organisation stands for and what it has achieved. The work of reducing harm, amplifying community voices and advocating for evidence-based responses to drug and alcohol issues in Yarra is as important as it has ever been. I look forward to the Forum's next chapter with confidence and optimism.

Thank you to the Victorian Government Department of Health for its continued funding commitment, to Fitzroy Legal Service for its generous partnership, and to all the organisations and individuals across Yarra who make this work possible.



AMANDA STONE

Executive Officer

In March 1996, the Premier's Drug Advisory Council, chaired by Professor David Penington, presented their report "Drugs and Our Community". Among the 72 recommendations was an observation: "Community responses to Council's investigation demonstrate that community interest in the drug problem is high. Council believes that constructive initiatives to reduce use and harm can be built on this interest."

It recommended: "The State Government encourage and support coordination of local responses, and establish statewide structures to monitor and advise on the further development of Victoria's drug response."

In the wake of this landmark report, and against the backdrop of Yarra's street-based drug market and consumption in public places, local health leaders, including Vera Boston and Peter Wearne, supported by Yarra Council, established Yarra Drug and Health Forum.

In the 30 years since, the Forum has provided a non-judgemental space for the discussion of alcohol and other drug-related issues, for the sharing of information, concerns and successes.

It has sought to develop local solutions by providing a neutral and safe platform that welcomes all communities. Its work is enhanced by including the voices of people with lived and living experience of drug use in the process of community discourse and problem solving around drug related issues.

We celebrate this 30th anniversary at our Annual General Meeting .

As Executive Officer, it has been a great pleasure to continue the work of the Forum in the last 12 months and to extend our reach in Yarra.

The level of community interest in drug and alcohol issues remains high and the work to reduce harm expands. The changing landscape in Yarra provides challenges and opportunities. A fixed-site drug checking service was welcomed; the announced closure of the sobering centre disappointing. The expanded availability of life-saving Naloxone was celebrated; the increasing range of contaminants in street-supplied drugs a concern. Recent changes to planning laws have made alcohol even more available; but responsible management of licenced premises, supported through the Yarra Liquor Forum, has reduced many of the past challenges associated with pubs and clubs.

Our advocacy in the past year has focused close to home: local government. The Forum has made submissions to Melbourne City Council prior to their withdrawing support for a Medically Supervised Injecting Service in that municipality, and prior to their approval of extending the use of security guards in the CBD to address behavioural issues. We have urged Council to focus on harm reduction and the well-established strategies already in use by homelessness and AOD services in the CBD.

In Yarra, we have expressed disappointment with that council's change in position on the Medically Supervised Injecting Room and its advocacy to the state to move the centre. We continue to advocate for an evidence-based, humane approach to drug and alcohol issues especially in public places, based on harm reduction and what we know works.

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Our Community Network Meetings have addressed current and emerging issues, as well as the goals in our Strategic Plan. The planned closure of cohealth's Collingwood site and the high levels of interest in the North Richmond Precinct provided the focus for two well-attended community-based forums.

Vaping and cannabis law reform are ongoing issues of wide interest and we were able to provide updated information and perspectives at Community Network Meetings.

Providing appropriate and accessible services for different groups in the community was the focus of three forums on homelessness, cultural diversity and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

While these meetings are valued by those who attend, we continue to seek other ways to engage with the wider community. A podcast series funded through the Magistrate's Court Fund is one such way.

We've welcomed the opportunity, through the Safe and Welcoming Places project, to liaise with numerous partners this year in developing a plan for coordinated social and recreational support for people who have complex needs and visit the North Richmond Precinct, including those who access the MSIR.

These initiatives are outlined further in this report.

We couldn't do any of this without the continued funding from the Victorian Department of Health and the significant grant from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing – for which we are grateful.

I would like to acknowledge the valued collaboration and mutual support from the strong networks in Yarra and beyond: the Yarra Service Alliance, Victorian Harm Reduction Network, the Harm Reduction Advocacy Working Group, the St Vincents Nexus team and Yarra Liquor Forum. The drug and alcohol and harm reduction service sector and harm reduction is fortunate in having excellent peak bodies and research institutes: Victoria Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA), Harm Reduction Victoria, Penington Institute and Burnett Institute provide excellent support in different ways to Yarra Drug and Health Forum and other services in Yarra.

The Yarra community continues to keep us focused on finding more and better ways to engage on solutions to the drug and alcohol challenges we face and on supporting those who need it.

I finally wish to thank the YDHF Executive Committee. Their wealth of experience, professionalism, knowledge and commitment to the work of the Forum makes my job enjoyable.

There is a lot for Yarra Drug and Health Forum to be proud of after 30 years but it's clear that its work in Yarra will continue to be important in years to come.

HISTORY

Yarra Drug and Health Forum (YDHF) has been operating in the City of Yarra since 1996 as a community-based response to local illicit drug issues. The Forum began at a time when there was significant community concern about street-based heroin markets and the resulting high number of overdoses with record number of deaths. For over 25 years YDHF has been widely recognised as the foremost community-based forum that works with a broad range of stakeholders to reduce drug related harms in the City of Yarra.

OUR VISION

The community of the City of Yarra is not harmed by drug use.
The experience of drug related stigma and discrimination is eliminated.

OUR MISSION

YDHF provides a platform to initiate and engage in good faith conversations with the Yarra community in seeking grass roots solutions to drug-related problems. To be responsive to alcohol and other drug related issues as they present in the City of Yarra and to be proactive in working with the local community to create a healthy and more just community.

WHO WE ARE

YDHF is a dynamic, adaptive and educative local network. We build strong relationships with a broad range of stakeholders to help identify and respond to the health and social needs of the community in the City of Yarra.

OUR VALUES

- Supporting broad and inclusive participation
- Listening and respecting a diversity of views
- Encouraging discussion to identify mutually acceptable responses to community issues
- Working collaboratively to achieve outcomes

HOW WE WORK

Collaboration
Advocacy
Knowledge Brokerage
Community Engagement

Over the past 12 months the Forum has hosted public events to highlight and debate locally relevant and statewide issues. These public forums have also played a critical role in supporting our ongoing advocacy work.

SEPTEMBER 2025



VAPING AS HARM REDUCTION

Speakers:

Hannah Downes, cohealth

Fiona Patten

Dr James Petty

Australian Drug Foundation on facts and misconceptions and the many policy challenges around vaping .

OCTOBER 2025

HARM REDUCTION IN DIVERSE COMMUNITIES



Speakers:

Dr Shaymaa Elkaadi

Nyachan Nyak

Dr Shaymaa Elkaadi, Nyachan Nyak led a discussion on building a shared understanding of what harm reduction means for different communities.

NOVEMBER 2025

YEAR IN REVIEW: HARM REDUCTION AND NORTH RICHMOND BRIEFING



Speakers:

Hannah McVean, North Richmond Community Health

Amanda Stone, YDHF

Hannah and Amanda on initiatives being undertaken by North Richmond Community Health in 2025 to address harm reduction, public amenity and community wellbeing in North Richmond and on principles of harm reduction.

JANUARY 2026

WHERE TO FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH?

Speakers:

Chris Turner, Deputy CEO cohealth
Andrea Fischer, Head of AOD
Community Response cohealth
Simone Heald, CEO North Richmond
Community Health

Discussion about the planned closure of cohealth's Collingwood site, the minimal implications for AOD services and the challenges facing the whole community health sector.



FEBRUARY 2026

HOMELESSNESS AND AOD SERVICES - HOW CAN WE BE MORE ACCESSIBLE?

Speakers:

Spike Chiappalone & Colleagues,
Homeless Persons' Union
Andy Dignan, Launch Housing

Outlined how AOD services can be more accessible to people living rough or marginally housed.



MARCH 2026

VICTORIA'S 10 YEAR AOD STRATEGY - WHERE ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES?

Speakers:

Chris Christoforou, CEO, VAADA
Belinda Bravo, Head of AOD North Richmond Community Health
Sione Crawford, CEO Harm Reduction Victoria

Described opportunities for progress in the Victorian AOD Strategy.

MAY 2026

CREATING CULTURALLY SAFE AOD SERVICES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CLIENTS

Speakers:

Paula Russell,

Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation,

Paula spoke about their work locally and provided guidance to services on culturally appropriate settings and approaches.



JUNE 2026

CANNABIS LAW REFORM - THE STATE OF PLAY

Speakers:

Rachel Payne MP

Rhys Cohen (Penington Institute)

Professor David Heilpern (Driving Change)

Discussed the campaign for cannabis law reform with a focus on the need to change laws in relation to medicinal cannabis and driving.

INTERNATIONAL OVERDOSE AWARENESS DAY



Sally Finn ("Finn") was the founder of Overdose Awareness Day in 1991 at a BBQ remembrance event at The Salvation Army needle exchange in St. Kilda. Now an international event, on IOAD local communities organise their own remembrance events each year to raise awareness about drug overdose and its prevention. We were delighted to hear from Finn as our guest speaker in 2025 at our own BBQ remembrance event at Collingwood Neighbourhood House. She provided a reminder of the need to continue to confront the barriers to reducing overdose death and injury and to allowing family and friends the dignity of grieving with support and without stigma. Overdose Awareness Day marks 25 years in 2026.

SAFE AND WELCOMING SPACES

In March 2026, the Forum received a grant under North Richmond Precinct Community Grants Program 2025-26.

While the North Richmond precinct has long been an area of cultural exchange, service innovation and diversity, it has also been an area with social, safety and amenity challenges, especially related to the drug market. The Ryan Review of the Medically Supervised Injecting Room (MSIR) in 2023 found that, while the central goal of reducing deaths and overdose related harms was achieved by the establishment of the MSIR in 2017, the safety and amenity impacts of the drug market were/are still being felt in local spaces and by local communities.

The Safe and Welcoming Place project aims to develop a shared plan for partners to deliver inclusive place-based activities for people who have complex needs and visit the North Richmond Precinct, including those who access the MSIR. It will be developed through an action learning model – bringing together key partners and supports to test and document what works, including feedback from participants.

Working closely with North Richmond Community Health's development of a Safe and Social Place and other partners, we will deliver a final report and Plan by the end of September.



HARM REDUCTION PODCAST SERIES



A grant from the Magistrates Court Fund has enabled the Forum to develop a short podcast series focusing on harm reduction in Yarra. By hearing directly from people involved in harm reduction services in Yarra – clients, workers, service leaders – the series aims to build understanding of how and why these services exist, the benefits to those who use them, and the challenges in securing wider community support. With stigma continuing to provide a significant barrier to seeking support and health services, this series provides information and testimony to address misconceptions and tackle stereotypes.

NORTH RICHMOND COMMUNITY FESTIVAL

A highlight in bringing together such a wide collection of community members, services, community groups and artists in one space, Yarra Drug and Health Forum was delighted to join cohealth and Penington Institute to deliver information and guidance on harm reduction in Yarra. Many conversations on local drug issues, on naloxone – how to use it, where to obtain it – and on health issues and services were held. Events like these help identify gaps in community knowledge and awareness and plan to address these over time. They also help build community awareness of the tools and supports available to them when dealing with some of the complexities of life in North Richmond. We appreciated the invitation from Belgium Avenues Neighbourhood House to join this special event in March 2026.



Yarra Drug & Health Forum Profit and Loss

For the year ended 30 June 2026

Account	2026
Trading Income	
Grants	86,026.92
Total Trading Income	86,026.92
Gross Profit	86,026.92
Other Income	
Donations	3,200.00
Total Other Income	3,200.00
Operating Expenses	
Amenities	91.25
Annual Leave	6,402.09
Catering	449.83
Consultants	8,500.00
Management Fee Expense	12,903.52
PLSA Levy	547.71
Printing	268.17
Project Costs	229.03
Salaries	50,337.66
Security	270.00
Superannuation - SGC	6,257.69
Venue Hire	1,111.75
Website Hosting & Maintenance	1,655.40
Workcover	202.82
Total Operating Expenses	89,226.92
Surplus/Deficit	(0.00)
Reserves	118,815.00

APOD FAMILY SUPPORT

**BELGIUM AVE & COLLINGWOOD
NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE**

BURNET INSTITUTE

CITY OF MELBOURNE

CITY OF YARRA

COHEALTH

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

**DEPARTMENT OF FAMILIES,
FAIRNESS AND HOUSING**

**ETHNIC COMMUNITIES
COUNCIL OF VICTORIA**

FAMILY DRUG SUPPORT

FITZROY LEGAL SERVICE

HARM REDUCTION VICTORIA

HOMELESS PERSONS' UNION

ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

JESUIT SOCIAL SERVICES

LEGALISE CANNABIS PARTY VICTORIA

LIFELINE AUSTRALIA

**MEDICALLY SUPERVISED
INJECTING ROOM, NRCH**

NAS RECOVERY CENTRE

**NGWALA WILLUMBONG
ABORIGINAL CORPORATION**

NEIGHBOURHOOD JUSTICE CENTRE

NEXUS - ST VINCENT'S HOSPITAL

NORTH RICHMOND COMMUNITY HEALTH

NORTH RICHMOND PRECINCT COMMITTEE

NORTH-WESTERN MELBOURNE PHN

PENINGTON INSTITUTE

**ROYAL MELBOURNE HOSPITAL
ADDICTION MEDICINE DEPARTMENT**

SACRED HEART MISSION

SALVATION ARMY, NORTH RICHMOND

SMART JUSTICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

SR MARY'S HOUSE OF WELCOME

ST VINCENT'S HOSPITAL

TURNING POINT

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL
HEALTH SERVICE (VAHS)**

VICTORIA POLICE

**VICTORIAN ALCOHOL AND
DRUG ASSOCIATION (VAADA)**

YARRA LIQUOR FORUM

YARRA SERVICE ALLIANCE ALLIANCE

YARRA SERVICE ALLIANCE

YOUTH SUPPORT + ADVOCACY SERVICE (YSAS)

YOUTH PROJECTS

THE FORUM WISHES TO THANK:

Fitzroy Legal Service for auspicing our organization.

The Department of Health for continued funding which enables our work.

North Richmond Community Health who allow us to use their Community Room and smaller meeting room for our regular meetings.

The **North Richmond Precinct Project** team and **North Yarra Community Health** with whom we have worked closely in 2026 and acknowledge with thanks their cooperation and support.

VAADA, Harm Reduction Victoria, the St Vincents Nexus team, Penington Institute and **cohealth** for their continued leadership in the sector and support for the Forum.

Scott Parham of **4P Design & Print** who has produced our newsletters and Annual Report and to whom we owe a debt of gratitude.

Our **excellent speakers** who give their time and share their valuable experience freely. Thankyou all.

Finally, thankyou to the community in Yarra who have generously shared their insights, experiences and advice over the past 12 months. Our work is not possible without your contribution and participation.



EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Jess Colling (Acting Chair)

Belinda Bravo

Andrea Fischer

Greg Denham

Hieng Lim

Saade Melke

Chloe Span

Adam Willson (Fitzroy Legal Service representative)

Peter Wearne (on leave since October 2025)



yarra drug & health forum

The Yarra Drug & Health Forum (YDHF) is a dynamic, adaptive and educative local network committed to identifying and responding to the health and social needs of the community in Yarra.

The Forum aims to ensure health and community relationships are minimally harmed by drug use in the City of Yarra – this includes the impact of drugs on individuals, families and friends, residents and visitors to the area and local businesses.

For more information visit **www.ydhf.org.au**