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Limestone Coast
Local Government
Association

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AOD AGENCIES REPORT INCREASED DEMAND FOR SERVICES THROUGH PANDEMIC

A rise in alcohol use and increased family violence was reported by Limestone Coast service agencies during the Covid-19 pandemic, a survey by Substance Misuse Limestone Coast (SMLC) has found.

The confidential survey was circulated to government and non-government agencies last year, exploring the impact of the pandemic.

Twenty- eight agencies from a range of sectors across the region participated in the survey, including private counsellors, housing services and aid agencies.

Many service agencies reported a significant impact throughout the pandemic, with some forced to close face-to-face services and move to online and phone service delivery.

Key survey insights include:

- *Alcohol use increase by up to 25 per cent;*
- *Increased reports of domestic and family violence;*
- *An increase in methamphetamine and GHB use;*
- *A 25 per cent mental health presentation increase;*
- *A 25 per cent increase for financial counselling services;*
- *Privacy and security concerns through Zoom and online applications were experienced;*
- *67 per cent of agencies considering altering client contact models into the future;*
- *Regional outreach programs to smaller towns were affected.*

Nearly all agencies reported a surge in demand for emergency accommodation, affordable housing and increased demand for mental health support and services.

SMLC Project Officer Sophie Bouchier said evidence-based reporting is the first step to understanding the region's needs moving forward.

"The survey was designed to highlight potential service gaps and also, inform for the future," she said.

"Expert knowledge and opinions build on our understanding of the current issues and what our future needs may be for the region."

Given the major impact of the pandemic upon communities worldwide, SMLC board member and Sergeant Andy Stott said the survey had provided some insight into the Limestone Coast's experiences.

“Our region is made up of cities and smaller towns, many of which have suffered from a lack of services pre-pandemic,” he said.

“For example, a lack of public transport services and availability of data and technology has always been a problem for regional centres, however these basic needs became critical when clients with no transport need to be referred to services elsewhere.

“Now we have this evidence base and have identified these service gaps, the SMLC team can begin to advocate for the implementation of programs to address our region’s unique needs.”

There were also some post-pandemic positives reported, Ms Bouchier said, with agencies rising to the challenge of supporting vulnerable and isolated clients.

“Nearly 70 per cent of agencies surveyed are looking to change their model of operation to offer clients more flexibility into the future, including offering more telehealth, phone and online support measures,” she said.

“Some agencies and staff were really proactive and developed innovative online programs and developed rosters to support and contact vulnerable clients on a monthly basis.

“Like all of us, service providers are adjusting to a new normal and whether it’s increased demand for services or changing the way they offer services, SMLC will work with our AOD sector to support and advocate for them.”

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Media contact: SMLC Project Officer Sophie Bouchier | M: 0429 342 175 | E: sophiebouchier@smlc.com.au