



MEDIA RELEASE

**Hon. John Hatzistergos MLC
Attorney General
Minister for Industrial Relations**

Tuesday September 15, 2009

HOMELESS TO DO CHARITY WORK TO PAY OFF FINES

Homeless and disadvantaged people in the community will be able to pay off fines by doing charity work or treatment programs under a scheme to be officially launched today by the NSW Attorney General John Hatzistergos.

“For people who are homeless, mentally ill or chronically poor the accumulation of debt through unpaid fines can be a real impediment to getting their lives back together,” Mr Hatzistergos said.

“This program offers people experiencing hardship the chance to pay off debt and avoid being drawn into the criminal justice system.”

Mr Hatzistergos said the NSW Government has begun a two-year trial to allow disadvantaged people such as the homeless, mentally ill and persons experiencing acute financial hardship to apply for a Work and Development Order from the SDRO.

He said a wide variety of organisations have applied to take part including large charity groups, youths services, drug and alcohol services, neighbourhood centres and mental health service providers from across the State.

“This trial is strongly backed by many of the state’s key charity groups including The Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul Society and Youth Off the Streets,” he said.

“The first participants have been issued with Orders and the early signs are that this program will make a real difference in helping some of our most vulnerable groups.”

Mr Hatzistergos said the Orders could require a person to undertake voluntary work for approved charities, counselling, drug and alcohol treatment or complete educational, vocational or life skills courses.

“This program aims to address a phenomenon known as ‘secondary offending’, which occurs when disadvantaged people can’t pay their fines and descend deeper into the criminal justice system,” he said.

Captain Paul Moulds of The Salvation Army’s Oasis Youth Support Network said: “For far too long young people have been excluded from participating in the community because of the debts and fines they incurred while in crisis or homeless. “

“This new scheme will provide an opportunity for these young people to reconnect with the community and move forward with their lives.”

St Vincent de Paul Society’s Chief Executive Officer NSW/ACT, John Picot, said they welcomed the opportunity to participate in the scheme.

“These are innovative measures that will allow people who can’t afford to pay their fines to give back to the community in a meaningful way,” Mr Picot said.

Father Chris Riley, CEO and Founder, Youth Off The Streets, said the first participants in the scheme are showing positive signs of improving their lives.

“Work and Development Orders have provided an extra incentive for young people to keep regular contact with our Counsellors, giving them the best chance at making a full recovery from their addictions,” he said.

Julie Hourigan Ruse, Co-ordinator of the Homeless Persons' Legal Service, said the scheme will help lift the financial burden on many homeless people.

“This scheme will allow our clients to participate in volunteer work or treatment programs that will have long lasting benefits beyond the payment of the debt.”

Mr Hatzistergos said the Work and Development Order scheme was part of a package of reforms to the state's *Fines Act* last year 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.