

Dan Howard, head of special NSW inquiry into ice, is visiting Wagga

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By Jody Linbeck

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 Professor Dan Howard, from the NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into the drug ice.

The head of a special inquiry into the drug ice will on Tuesday visit Wagga, a city once described as an "ice capital".

Professor Dan Howard, the commissioner of the NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into the drug crystal methamphetamine, will visit two separate programs providing drug-related services before meeting with members of the indigenous community.

Professor Howard said Wagga is among the regional communities particularly affected by use of crystal methamphetamine and other illegal amphetamine-type stimulants.

Data from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research shows that in 2018, Wagga had a higher rate per 100,000 people of possession or use of amphetamines at 143.6 compared with the NSW average of 90.7.

"Data shows that more people are using methamphetamine in regional NSW than in Sydney," Professor Howard said.

"It is important that the commission hears directly from people in our regions about the impacts of crystal methamphetamine, the availability of services and strategies to reduce harm to individuals and communities.

"One of the commission's tasks is to inquire into the prevalence and impacts of these drugs."

Professor Howard will be visiting the Calvary Riverina Drug and Alcohol Centre as well as Pathways Murrumbidgee.



 Brendan McCorry, manager of the Calvary Riverina Drug and Alcohol Centre.

Brendan McCorry, manager of the Calvary Riverina Drug and Alcohol Centre, has welcomed the chance to discuss ice.

"It is a problem for Wagga and a significant cause of people seeking treatment in our programs," he said.

"It is something that has increased over time and the use of methamphetamines, or ice, is larger in the country than the cities."

"This inquiry will help us review where we are at, where we can go next and provide a grassroots perspective on developing a unified approach for helping reduce the use of ice in regional and rural areas."

Robyn Lewis, a West Wyalong woman who has been drug free for three years after battling addictions for three decades, said the biggest issue from her perspective was the lack of available treatment options.

"Ice is still a huge problem in rural areas," Ms Lewis said.

"We need to discuss facilities where people can go into treatment quickly. When someone cries out for help, it needs to come straight away.

"If you make that call, it can be weeks before you get any response and months before you get a place in a treatment facility.

"I know myself that if you don't get a response straight away after putting out that call for help, by the time something does happen, you don't always want it because you're in a different head space."



 Robyn Lewis, who has had her own experiences with drugs and alcohol, would like to see improved treatment options.

Kay Hull, the former Member for Riverina, has chaired numerous inquiries and meetings about the issue and recalls the heartbreak of a public gathering in the Wagga area, where grandparents spoke about having a son or daughter addicted to drugs and how that was impacting on the grandchildren.

Like Ms Lewis, Mrs Hull would like to see more options for treatments of addictions to ice and other drugs.

She would also like to see more options for dealing with addicts, so that they did not automatically have to become involved with the court system.

Submissions to the inquiry are open until May 7.

For more information, go to www.iceinquiry.nsw.gov.au.