



MEDIA RELEASE

Hon. John Hatzistergos MLC
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DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE TO WORK OFF THEIR FINES

In an Australian first, severely disadvantaged members of the community will be able to complete charity work or treatment programs to pay off their fines, NSW Attorney General John Hatzistergos announced today.

Mr Hatzistergos said major reforms to the state's *Fines Act* were being introduced into Parliament this week and had received the backing of the state's key charity groups, including The Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul Society and Youth Off The Streets.

"Currently we have a system in which any unpaid penalty notices and court fines are ultimately referred to the State Debt Recovery Office (SDRO) for enforcement action," Mr Hatzistergos said.

"This system works well for people who have an income and assets. However, there are many disadvantaged members of the community who are simply unable to pay."

Mr Hatzistergos said the Rees Government would conduct 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.

"These Orders could require a person to undertake voluntary work for approved charities. Alternatively, they could be required to complete educational, vocational or life skills courses, counselling, drug and alcohol treatment, or a mentoring program if the person is under the age of 25," he said.

The program aims to address a phenomenon known as 'secondary offending', which occurs when disadvantaged people can't pay their fines and then get dragged deeper into the criminal justice system because of their fine debt.

Other changes to the *Fines Act* include:

- Easier and more flexible payment options for fines, such as periodic deductions;
- Giving guidelines to officers so they know when they should issue an official caution instead of a penalty notice for minor infractions; and
- Making it clear that all agencies can review penalty notices in exceptional circumstances.

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 ensure those people who can't afford to pay their fines are able to give back to the community in a meaningful way," Mr Picot said.

Chief Executive Officer of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, Robin Banks, said:
“We congratulate the Government and, in particular, the NSW Attorney General for moving forward with these important reforms.

“The Attorney's willingness to work with organisations seeking reform has been very positive and we think the reforms will make a very real and positive difference for individuals and the community,” she said.

The changes were based on recommendations made by the Sentencing Council in its 2006 report on the effectiveness of fines as a sentencing option.

In addition, the NSW Law Reform Commission will conduct a further review of penalty notice offences to ensure fines are consistent across government.

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