

# Drug education and prevention for a Greek community

By Tina Douvos and Evan Sycamniias

---

The Australian Greek Welfare Society (AGWS) has for many years addressed the problem of illicit drug use within its community. It persisted in its efforts for over 10 years, and currently is funded by the Department of Human Services (Victoria) and the Department of Health and Ageing (Commonwealth).

AGWS initially identified several issues via the increase in the number of people accessing its casework services (predominantly parents/families of drug users). As a result, work was undertaken with these parents and/or families—a unique step at the time, as most mainstream services focused only on the user. Research was then undertaken within the Greek metropolitan community, and discussions were held with mainstream services to identify emerging needs and form partnerships to develop responses to the identified needs.

One of the first things to be discovered was the void of culturally and linguistically appropriate information available to the Greek community. With education having a vital role in any program, 26 brochures and booklets were developed in both the Greek and English languages, ranging from *Drug Descriptions* to *Positive Parenting* and *Resilience Building*. These publications have received a lot of attention, so much so that one local council provided substantial funding for their printing.

It was further discovered that due to the taboo-like nature of drugs within many Greek households, many young people were unaware of the potential dangers. This in turn led AGWS to develop youth education and mentoring programs that are being implemented in bilingual schools around Victoria. These programs have been greeted with open arms, and received much praise from not only schools but also the students themselves.

Many other positive and successful outcomes have been achieved, but the most important has been the establishment of adult self-help groups and one-on-one counselling for individuals and families directly affected by drug use. This was particularly important because most mainstream providers did not have the facilities to cater for individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds, and those that did have interpreters available found it difficult to utilise them as often messages lost their meaning in the process of interpretation, leading to frustration and dissatisfaction.

The programs today continue to be successful because they are multifaceted. They have captured attention through ethnic media coverage, including newspapers and magazines, community radio broadcasts, newsletters, the development of a drug-specific website, as well as providing a presence at many community events. Furthermore, they involve the community and regularly review issues and assess needs through community and client feedback.

In some families and sectors of the Greek community, drugs remain a silent and taboo issue, causing isolation, disputes, violence and other crisis situations. This in turn leads to compromises in health and well-being. Fortunately, though, when individuals or families are ready to reach out, they need not be alone—and they do not have to face negative confrontations with mainstream agencies that lack responsiveness and appropriate language to support their needs.