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Mr Ken Lay AO APM

Via email: MSISHaveYourSay@health.vic.gov.au

Dear Mr Lay

RE: Supporting the establishment of a medically supervised injecting service in Melbourne CBD

As the Chief Executive Officer and General Manager of Alcohol and Other Drugs at Uniting Vic.Tas, the community services organisation of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania, we are grateful for the opportunity to provide feedback as part of the consultation into the establishment of a medically supervised injecting service trial proposed for the City of Melbourne.

Uniting is made up of more than 6,000 people delivering hundreds of services accessed nearly 200,000 times each year across Victoria and Tasmania. One of our areas of strength is working alongside people experiencing harm from alcohol and other drugs (AOD). Uniting and its predecessor agencies have a long history as providers of AOD treatment services to young people and adults. We currently operate a number of residential withdrawal services, including two specialist youth withdrawal services – Tabor House in Ballarat and Williams House in Coburg. We also operate the only four state funded beds for mothers to undergo withdrawal and bring their infant with them within our 16-bed Adult and Mother-Baby Withdrawal Service in Ivanhoe. In December 2021 we opened the first regional Youth Residential Rehabilitation Service in Gippsland.

We provide outreach support, counselling, therapeutic day programs, harm reduction and overdose prevention services, and a range of specialist forensic programs for those involved in the criminal justice system, including at Port Phillip Prison where we have been providing specialist alcohol and other drug treatment services for over 20 years. As a registered training organisation, we are also a leading provider of education and training services for the AOD sector. Uniting delivers a nationally recognised competency-based training for the AOD workforce, as well as a range of specialist client education courses and drug diversion programs including Cautious with Cannabis and the First Offenders Court Intervention Service, known as FOCiS, among others.

Uniting are the Alcohol and Drug Intake service for the City of Melbourne and we have staff co-located at the Melbourne Drug Court. We are a partner provider at the Medically Supervised Injecting Room in North Richmond where our specialist AOD harm reduction clinicians are co-located to provide brief interventions, secondary consultation, psychoeducation, crisis support, information and referrals into treatment, as well as ongoing care coordination, where needed.

Uniting wholeheartedly supports the establishment of a medically supervised injecting service within the Melbourne CBD as a vital and life-saving harm reduction response. Uniting is a strong supporter of the Public Health Model for understanding and responding to drug use. This model is based on the philosophy of harm minimisation, which involves accepting that drug use is a reality within our society and that trying to eliminate it is an unreachable goal. The goal, therefore, is to reduce the harms and improve health and social outcomes for individuals and the community as a whole. We draw your attention to the success of the North Richmond MSIR, which has achieved its objectives of reducing drug-related harms, improving access to treatment and offering life-saving interventions, with the prevention of 63 fatal overdoses since 2018. Importantly, the North Richmond MSIR provides wrap-around support to some of our communities'

most disadvantaged and marginalised persons, who may otherwise face significant barriers in accessing health-care and other related services (p.6).

The evidence is clear that there is a need for a place-based intervention in the Melbourne CBD to address the unnecessary levels of drug-related harm occurring due to unsupervised injecting practices.

We draw your attention to recent data from the Victorian Coroner's Court that showed between July 2020 and June 2022, the Melbourne CBD had the highest number of public fatal heroin overdoses of any local government area, with 29 deaths across this period. This is of great concern as levels of injecting drug use continue to increase, with 12,000 sterile syringe kits reportedly being accessed each month in the CBD alone, an increase of 1000 kits per month this year (Youth Projects 2023). Every day in the Melbourne CBD, people are facing the unnecessary risk of death by injecting drugs without medical supervision. We cannot ignore the context in which AOD use occurs. People who inject drugs are a highly stigmatised and marginalised population who due to their substance use, face multiple barriers to access various health and social institutions, including primary and tertiary health, housing, employment and education.

We firmly believe that the Melbourne CBD is the best location for a second MSIR service with many support services already located within the area, including late-night outreach, mental health support and homelessness services.

Our service delivery experience tells us that many MSIR consumers are already engaged with support services located within the CBD and the accessibility of public transport means that people across Victoria can easily access the services they need. The Ryan Review (2023) found that the MSIR service setting has positive outcomes for referral pathways due to the non-judgemental and voluntary nature of engagement, with support workers having time to build genuine rapport and trust.

Uniting is aware of community concern that a supervised injecting service would increase drug trade and substance affected persons in the CBD; however, we refute these concerns by highlighting the finding from the Ryan Review (2023) that only 6 per cent of MSIR clients were in the North Richmond locality due to using the MSIR (p. 7). We feel this concern speaks to the need for thoughtful design that respects MSIR consumers, local businesses, residents and tourists. We recommend an off-street area for people to wait that is comfortable, warm and respects the privacy of people using the service. The MSIR requires careful and considerate planning, based on the pillars of harm reduction and community AOD education.

People who use drugs are part of our community. It is important that we fight back against outdated, harmful stereotypes and meet international standards by supporting people through health-based responses that we know work. Supervised injecting services are some of the most impactful tools we have in reducing the harm caused by substance use. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and discuss how Uniting can best support the establishment of the second MSIR in the Melbourne CBD.

Yours sincerely



Bronwyn Pike AM
Chief Executive Officer



Adrian Webber
**General Manager, Alcohol and Other
Drugs, Mental Health & Carers**