



# MEDIA RELEASE

19 January 2010

## **Lack of services mean mentally ill sent to prison, not treated**

Up to 80 per cent of inmates in Australian prisons have a mental illness and magistrates in regional areas are sending mentally ill people to jail as there is often no treatment or mental health facilities available.

David Crosbie, MHCA CEO, told ABC current affairs last night that many magistrates are not always able to access appropriate mental health care and too many inmates are sent to prison without the treatment they need.

“There are many frustrated magistrates all over the country and I think it's particularly difficult in regional and rural areas but it can be equally difficult in the city. If someone presents at a court charged with a minor offence and there's clearly the possibility of some mental health issues you can't always get a mental health assessment.”

Mr Crosbie said that magistrates at times have no choice but to send people awaiting judgement or sentence to jail.

“Often in terms of working out what is best for this person and what is best for the broader community Magistrates don't have any options but to see a person go into some kind of remand or some kind of prison setting where they can be assessed because the community assessment options are not available.”

“Prison is the last place a person with a mental illness should be.

“In prison, we see two negative outcomes; the first is that people who are yet to be convicted and yet to be given a sentence end up in prison awaiting a mental health assessment. And that happens quite frequently because the local community-based mental health treatment team is not available to do the assessment.

“The second negative outcome is that people who should be receiving treatment end up in the prison system. And I don't think there is much worse that can happen to someone with mental illness than that they end up in a prison setting. One of the things that we know most exacerbates mental illness and makes it worse for people is if they're isolated and put under pressure.

Professor Ian Hickie from the University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Research Institute agreed, telling the ABC that while diversion programs are available for people before the courts with drug and alcohol issues, “the situation around mental health has largely stayed unchanged because we've not had a viable, working, true court diversion program.”

**Media Contact: Simon Tatz on 02 6285 3100 or 0402 613 745**