



**Mark Speakman**  
Attorney General  
Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

Friday, 27 November 2020

### **MERIT PROGRAM MARKS 20 YEAR MILESTONE**

One of NSW's most effective programs to reduce re-offending reached a significant milestone this month, marking two decades since it was first introduced to the Local Court.

Attorney General Mark Speakman said the Magistrates Early Referral into Treatment (MERIT) program is helping end the cycle of addiction and drug-related offending.

"The program works because it doesn't just focus on a person's criminal behaviour, but directs participants into rehabilitation to help them address the drug and alcohol use that led to the offending in the first place," Mr Speakman said.

"Over 20 years, MERIT has demonstrated how the criminal justice and health systems can effectively work together to help people get their lives back on track and keep away from the criminal justice system in future."

Participation is voluntary and allows adult defendants charged with relatively minor offences to work towards their recovery as part of the bail process. Magistrates, police officers and lawyers may make referrals.

Mr Speakman said evaluations conducted over its lifespan have consistently found participants who complete MERIT are less likely to reoffend.

"Defendants report significant improvements to their health and wellbeing and a significant decrease in their drug use," Mr Speakman said.

MERIT began as a trial in Lismore Local Court with 55 participants in the first year, while in 2019 more than 2300 defendants received access to treatment in 62 locations across NSW.

Mr Speakman said MERIT has continued to build on its success, with 45.4 per cent of people successfully completing the program in the first year growing to 63.5 per cent in 2019.

"From Bankstown and Broken Hill to Waverley and Wilcannia, more than 35,000 people have participated in MERIT to date, with more than 22,000 successfully completing the program," Mr Speakman said.

Magistrates receive regular reports on participants, who are case-managed throughout the program by the MERIT team from NSW Health and non-government organisation partners.

Chief Magistrate Graeme Henson has been the judicial representative involved in the conception, implementation and oversight of MERIT.

“The program has been a boon to the court, defendants, families, the community and a source of pride for the many health personnel and MERIT team members who have given so much of themselves to the program over two decades,” said Judge Henson.

Increased judicial supervision is an integral part of the program, and at the final hearing magistrates can consider the defendant’s treatment progress as part of the final sentencing.

“Additional court appearances help track how a person is managing their treatment and can offer encouragement or address lapses and issues they may face during rehabilitation,” Judge Henson said.

“I cannot think of any other initiative that comes close to the enduring success of MERIT in my 32 years of experience in judicial office.”

The program has also adapted to other health issues facing communities, with Alcohol MERIT introduced in 2009.

Drug MERIT is available in 55 metropolitan, regional and remote locations around the state, with seven local courts (including Bathurst, Dubbo and Coffs Harbour) offering Alcohol MERIT.

Find out more about MERIT, via [www.merit.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.merit.justice.nsw.gov.au).