



Association of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies NT

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MEDIA RELEASE: Drug and Alcohol Peak Body calls for Pill Testing at Bass in the Grass

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The Association of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies NT (AADANT) is the peak body for non-government Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) treatment services in the Northern Territory (NT). We represent over 20 organisations providing drug and alcohol treatment and support to families and clients throughout the NT.

AADANT is calling on the Northern Territory Government to consider the implementation of a Pill Testing (Drug Checking) trial for Bass in the Grass festival.

The upcoming Bass In The Grass (BITG) festival will attract up to 14,000 patrons in May to Darwin to attend one of the first music festivals to proceed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. While music festivals such as BITG always carry inherent risks, following discussions with stakeholders and organising staff, it is AADANT's opinion that this year's festival may pose increased levels of risk around alcohol and other drug use. Factors such as an increased crowd size, a considerable time period since events of this type have been held, and a significant change in demographics all contribute to the need for increased implementation of harm reduction measures.

Of particular note is the change in demographic of attendee origin. Previous BITG festivals have seen approximately 75% local to 25% non-local attendee origin while this year's event will see approximately 45% local to 55% non-local attendees. This change increases the likelihood of a higher quantity, and wider variation of illicit substance prevalence at the festival. The Darwin region historically has limited illicit drug availability relative to other jurisdictions, and the potential increase in quantity and addition of substances more commonly seen in the festival scene interstate (such as cocaine and GHB) poses an increased risk of drug harms for this event.

AADANT lends their full support to this great festival and appreciate the considerable work the NT Major Events Company (NTMEC) team have already undertaken – and continue to undertake – to ensure this event is as safe as possible. NTMEC have been actively engaging with representatives from across various sectors to ensure the festival is as safe and enjoyable as possible for attendees. Harm reduction measures such as the introduction of a DanceWize peer-education and support trial is an extremely positive step forward in providing effective harm-reduction measures for the event however, AADANT believes the risks outlined for this year's BITG warrant consideration of further measures such as pill testing.

Gino Vumbaca from [Pill Testing Australia](#) (PTA) – the organisation that collaborated in delivering Australia's first legal Pill Testing service at Groovin' the Moo in the [ACT in 2018](#)

- has reiterated the organisation's offer to provide a free trial of the service in every jurisdiction in Australia and has confirmed that the service has the capacity to operate at this year's BITG festival if invited to do so.

AADANT calls on the Northern Territory Government, Police, Fire and Emergency Services, NT Major Events and other stakeholders to continue to expand implementation of effective harm reduction and public health responses for BITG festival and future large events in the Northern Territory.

Quotes:

Peter Burnheim, Executive Officer, Association of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies NT (AADANT):

"The "just say no" approach to illicit drug responses fails to address the reality of what we know occurs. People attending events such as Bass will use illicit substances and our primary concern is to minimise the risk and take all measures we can to ensure these members of our community make it home safely."

"We want young Territorians, and those visiting Darwin for the event, to have a great time – but we want them to be as safe as possible in doing so. The Territory Government has a responsibility to ensure they take all measures possible to minimise the risk of harms to festival-goers."

Gino Vumbaca, Pill Testing Australia:

"By providing pill testing at festivals we can start to remove the blindfolds and provide people with information that we know changes their behaviour."

"By engaging with people who use drugs and by providing scientifically backed knowledge, our pill testing services can achieve a reduction in the number and volume of drugs consumed and consequently reduce harm."

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