



Ministerial Statement

By

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Minister of National Security

Adolescent Substance Use Treatment Programme

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Madam President, during my first Ministerial Statement in July I advised this Honourable Senate of my immediate priorities as Minister of National Security. Of those priorities, the first I spoke to was the Adolescent Substance Use Treatment Programme. At that time, I indicated that I had reviewed the work undertaken to date and was considering how the proposed programme could be refined to deliver the greatest possible benefit for Bermuda's young people and their families. I also committed to returning to this Senate with a further update as that work progressed.

Madam President, today I am pleased to report that Cabinet has now approved the establishment of an Adolescent Substance Use Treatment Programme within the Department for National Drug Control. This decision gives effect to the commitment made by this Government in the 2024 Speech from the Throne to develop an adolescent substance use treatment programme and reinstitute youth counselling for Bermuda. To achieve full implementation of this programme, the Department is now finalising its design, and recruitment for the new posts will begin in the coming weeks.

Madam President, I want to be precise about the gap this programme fills. Bermuda does not currently have a dedicated substance use treatment programme for young people. Today, our substance use treatment services are designed for adults, and our mental health services for young people are not designed to treat substance use as a primary concern. Valuable prevention, counselling, and support services exist across Government and within our community, and I acknowledge the people who deliver them. But when a young person is already experiencing harmful substance use or dependence, there must be a publicly accessible treatment pathway designed specifically for them.

Madam President, the need for such a programme is growing. The 2023 National School Survey points to rising rates of vaping, alcohol, and drug use among young people. Trauma, chronic stress, and social isolation are contributing to earlier experimentation and heavier use. Easy access through peers, and the normalisation of alcohol and drug use in the environment around young people, add to that risk. The consequences are felt in school disengagement, family strain, mental health crises and, for some young people, pathways into antisocial or gang-related activity.

The data also tells us that more young people are asking for help. The 2023 National School Survey found that treatment-seeking among students reporting alcohol or drug-related problems rose from 18 per cent in 2019 to 27 per cent in 2023, with increases at every grade level. Clearly, this is a disturbing trend that must be addressed by a readily accessible and specialised programme for this age group. Young people are becoming more willing to seek professional help. Until now, when a young person has needed treatment, families, schools, and service providers have been left trying to determine where it can be found. This programme is intended to give them an answer.

Madam President, the programme as approved by Cabinet was developed under the direction of the Department for National Drug Control, informed by extensive engagement across Government and the community, a review of international research, and an analysis of best-practice youth substance use programmes. It will provide coordinated, community-based services offering timely intervention, assessment and treatment, designed around the clinical, developmental, and social needs of young people, rather than adapted from services designed for adults.

Madam President, substance use among young people rarely exists in isolation – and treating the substance use alone, without regard to the rest of a young person’s life, will not produce lasting results. It is often connected to trauma, family difficulty, mental health concerns, disengagement from school or exposure to violence. For that reason, the programme will not operate as a stand-alone service. It will deliver core treatment, and it will serve as a central point for assessment and referral – working alongside schools, families, health and social service providers, community organisations and other Government departments – so that each young person is connected to the full range of support they need.

Madam President, accessibility is essential. A young person or a family seeking help should not face unnecessary barriers. The programme is therefore designed for low-barrier entry: walk-in access, referrals from schools, access initiated by families, and confidential phone and online options, so that young people can seek help in the way that feels safest for them. A young person who is ready to ask for help should find the door open. Reducing stigma and removing barriers are how we identify concerns earlier, connect young people with treatment sooner, and reduce the likelihood that substance use develops into more serious and long-term harm. A youth-focused communication strategy, building on the Department's existing prevention work, will reach young people on the platforms they use and make clear where to turn when help is needed.

Madam President, a programme is only as effective as the people who deliver it. The programme will be delivered by a dedicated team of five new posts specifically created for this programme: a Programme Manager, providing clinical leadership and supervision and building partnerships across the island; two Addiction Counsellors, delivering outpatient treatment; a Youth Engagement Coordinator, working with Ministries, agencies and schools to facilitate assessment and access to treatment; and an Administrative Coordinator, supporting day-to-day operations, data and reporting. This gives the Department dedicated capacity, which it has not previously had, to deliver treatment services for adolescents. I encourage qualified professionals – counsellors, clinicians and those with experience working alongside young people – to look out for these vacancies when they are advertised, and to consider bringing their skills to this work.

Madam President, in July I indicated that initial implementation of my immediate priorities was targeted for the fourth quarter of 2026. I wish to be transparent with this Senate and with the public about what that means for this programme.

The Department for National Drug Control has secured \$450,000 in the 2026/27 Budget to support the implementation of this programme. Having acquired Cabinet approval for the programme, the next few months will be devoted to building and developing it: recruiting the team, finalising clinical protocols, and establishing referral pathways with schools and partner agencies. The programme is targeted to begin receiving young people in March 2027, and as the programme becomes fully established, its ongoing requirements will be considered through the normal budget process for 2027/28.

Madam President, it is fitting that this update comes during September, which is National Recovery Month. This year's theme is "Recovery is REAL – Restoring Every Aspect of Life." It reminds us that recovery is about far more than stopping the use of a substance. It is about restoring health, family, education, purpose, and hope.

For a young person, many of those things are still being built. That is precisely why reaching them early matters. The earlier we intervene, the less there is to restore. In that vein, please indulge me as I paraphrase the renowned American abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass: "it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults."

Madam President, there is one further matter I wish to address directly, because the public is entitled to clarity. I have also been tasked with advancing cannabis reform, and I am aware that some persons have taken that to mean that the Government, or I as the responsible Minister, am not concerned about the harm that substance use can cause. That is not correct.

As I explained to this Senate in July, cannabis reform is about bringing proper regulation, safeguards, and oversight to an area where they are needed. It has never been about making substance use by young people more acceptable. Adolescence is a period of significant physical, emotional, and social development, and substance use during those years, whether of vaping products, alcohol, cannabis or any other substance, carries particular risks.

A Government that is serious about regulation must be equally serious about prevention and treatment. I do not regard those responsibilities as being in tension. They are two parts of the same duty, and this programme is that duty in practice.

Madam President, Recovery Month is also a time to honour the people who make recovery possible. Last week I visited the Department for National Drug Control to meet its staff and to share the news of Cabinet's approval with the team who will deliver this programme. I wish to thank the Director and the officers of the Department for the work that has brought the programme to this point, together with the Government and community stakeholders who contributed to its development.

Throughout September, the Department and its community partners are hosting a series of events to mark Recovery Month. In the coming weeks, I will join the Bermuda Addiction Certification Board in recognising Bermuda's substance abuse professionals, and I also intend to visit the Men's and Women's Treatment Centres to meet the staff and see first-hand the treatment and recovery work being done there. The counsellors, clinicians, peer supporters, and volunteers in this field do demanding work, much of it out of public view. They deserve our recognition.

I also wish to speak directly to every Bermudian in recovery, and to every family that has walked that road alongside someone they love: your resilience is the clearest evidence we have that recovery is real. To anyone still struggling, of any age or background: you are not alone, and help is available. This evening, on Monday, 14 September, the Department for National Drug Control will host a Community Information Session for anyone concerned about their own alcohol or drug use, or for anyone helping a family member, friend or other person find treatment and support. The session will be held from 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. at St. John's Hall in Pembroke. Representatives from several addiction treatment and recovery agencies will be available to explain their services, answer questions, and help people understand where to turn for assistance.

Madam President, in July I said that my central responsibility as Minister is to ensure that the Ministry's work produces tangible results for the people of Bermuda. The

establishment of the Adolescent Substance Use Treatment Programme is one of those results.

Madam President, for young people in Bermuda, a dedicated path to treatment has not existed. With this programme, it will. Recovery is real for people across this island, and our young people deserve the same opportunity to be treated with care and given every chance to restore every aspect of their lives – with the right support, at the right time, designed for them. That was the commitment I made to this Senate in July. Today, it is a programme with Cabinet approval, funding allocated and a target opening date.

Thank you, **Madam President**.