

Statement from the Elders Council of Dharriwaa Elders Group 29 November 2024.

Opportunity for NSW Government to work differently in its response to the fine burden on disadvantaged communities

Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) welcomes the announcement that [23,000 fines from the lockdowns during the pandemic will be withdrawn](#) and repaid by the NSW Government.

However, the significant fine debt carried by small communities such as Walgett remains and disproportionately impacts Aboriginal people. According to the NSW Government's own data, as of 7 November 2024, the value of overdue fines for the Walgett postcode is \$1,014,182.

We acknowledge that the NSW Government is increasing its data sharing capability so that communities like ours can [get a better picture on fines data](#) and we can come up with preventative and harm-reduction solutions that will work for our community. The Revenue NSW data dashboards have been useful to help us understand the level and nature of fine debt in Walgett.

In our community, the unfair fines system means [increased contact with the criminal justice system driven by punitive policing practices](#) and new fines create more financial stress and entrench intergenerational poverty. The [police-led public health responses at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the extent of this practice](#), and we will continue to speak out about the harms caused by the government's reliance on police to issue fines in our community.

Speaker of the Dharriwaa Elders Group, Sandra Suey-Thorne urges the NSW Government and the Department of Customer Service:

"Take this important opportunity to work differently with communities like ours, to deal with fine debt once and for all. We have demonstrated this is possible and achieves strong outcomes for people in Walgett. Government needs to listen to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations about what will work for us".

DEG's [Dealing with Fines program](#) was set-up in 2022 with the support of UNSW collaborators and philanthropic funding after we learnt [Walgett had the highest number of Covid-19 fines issued by police in the state](#).

We support community members to get legal advice from the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT through its [state-wide Fines Clinic](#). We have also set up our Work and Development Order (WDO) service with the assistance of Legal Aid NSW's WDO Unit.

As a result of working differently in Walgett, \$233,000 worth of fine debt has been permanently dealt with (as of 30 June 2024).

Wendy Rose, DEG Dealing with Fines Team:

"During Covid-19, people had little knowledge and understanding about why the fines were issued. Fining people had a big negative impact in the community. Our work helps reduce the financial and emotional impact."

We know that other communities in western and south-western Sydney and western NSW have also been negatively affected by the issuing of Covid-19 fines and carry the burden of devastating fine debt. These communities have their own local organisations with ideas and solutions and the NSW Government could also be working with them differently right now to make the fines system fairer and reduce the harms of the fines system.