The Government today announced the next step in its three-point Tough on Drugs plan - the establishment of drug courts in the Territory during 2003.

Chief Minister, Clare Martin, and Minister for Justice, Dr Peter Toyne, said the Government would fund the compulsory treatment of addicts through a drug court system in the August budget.

At the same time, Ms Martin condemned pro-drug groups for urging young people to attend a protest at Parliament today opposing the Government’s tough new drug laws.

Ms Martin said the Network Against Prohibition calls for school students to wag school and participate in a protest on the rights of cannabis users was offensive and extremely irresponsible.

"The Government’s agenda is to focus resources on preventing our young people from taking up drugs and the attempt by NAP to somehow link youth rights with cannabis use is unacceptable," Ms Martin said.

The Tough on Drugs plan tackles the illicit drug problem and associated property crime through:

- law enforcement with zero tolerance on drug production and distribution
- compulsory treatment of addicts arrested in drug-related crimes
- a sound drug prevention strategy including family support policies and education campaigns directed at our young people

"The legislative package debated this week implements the first point of our plan," Ms Martin said.

"Dr Toyne will have carriage on developing a drug court model for the Northern Territory based on best practice across Australia."

Minister for Justice, Dr Toyne, said that drug courts operating in other states have had success in helping illicit drug users to break the drug crime cycle that many fall into.

"We will be looking carefully at other models being used across Australia to develop the best possible drug court for the Territory, bearing in mind local factors," he said.

The National Drug Strategic Framework 1998-2003 (Commonwealth Dept of Health and Aged Care 1999) recognises treatment as an effective strategy for reducing the demand for drugs by stabilising the lives of people dependent on drugs, and preventing use and crime.

Dr Toyne said the MERIT scheme operating in NSW is one good example of the types of models the Government will be looking at.
This scheme allows Magistrates to order that offenders with a drug problem undertake a three-month treatment and rehabilitation program while on bail before going back to court for a plea and sentencing.

A management team attached to the court, links the offender with the health system and other services they may need - like housing or job training - to deal with their problems.

Their behaviour while on the program and the results of their participation would than be considered during sentencing.

"Drug courts are not a soft option - addiction is hard to beat and there is a strict monitoring process to keep addicts on track," he said.

"A drug court system will be a significant step forward in drug rehabilitation in the Territory and will help drug-addicted property offenders break the crime cycle through compulsory treatment.

"I have recently highlighted real case examples of drug-related property crime court case including the specific case of one addict who claimed his crime spree was 'driven by desperation to obtain money for drugs'.

"This particular person, addicted to amphetamines, had in 36 counts of aggravated unlawful entry/break-ins stolen property valued at over $100,000 to support his $200 a day habit."

Dr Toyne said cases such as these make it very clear that drug-related property crime is not a miniscule problem as claimed by Denis Burke, and for that reason this Government is committed to making a real impact on the problem through the Tough on Drugs plan.

"Our three-point plan is a coordinated and well-researched approach to tackle drug use and related crime prevention."

This plan covers education strategies aimed at preventing uptake of harmful illicit drugs, policy legislation and structural changes to target access, supply and use of illicit drugs and treatment programs and support for addicts.