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Landmark youth justice report a chance for meaningful change

The watershed final report of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, handed down today, is an opportunity to shift from punitive responses to diversion, rehabilitation and therapeutic approaches, says Jesuit Social Services.

“The horrific treatment of young people in Darwin’s youth detention system sparked this Royal Commission, and since then a range of significant issues and allegations have emerged from youth justice systems across all parts of Australia,” says Jesuit Social Services Acting CEO Sally Parnell.

“It is clear that nationwide, our youth justice systems have failed in their duty of care, and that this has been at the expense of vulnerable children and young people, their families and the broader community. Every effective youth justice system must have prevention, diversion and rehabilitation at its heart, with prison always a last resort”.

Ms Parnell says the organisation welcomes many of the proposed reforms contained within the report, such as an increase of diversion and therapeutic approaches, minimum qualifications for youth justice officers in the Territory and a recommendation to raise the age of criminal responsibility.

“Prison is no place for a primary school aged child – but the age of criminal responsibility in all Australian jurisdictions is 10. This is despite the fact that United Nations recommends that the age of criminal responsibility should be 14, and many European countries have 14 as the minimum age of responsibility.

“Jesuit Social Services has long campaigned for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised to at least 12, in line with extensive evidence about brain development”.

Ensuring children and young people have greater access to diversion programs will result in more people being steered away from detention and supported to connect with education, family and the community.

“Less re-offending means fewer victims and safer communities for all – and that is what we hope is the result of this significant report”.

Ms Parnell congratulates Royal Commissioners Mick Gooda and Margaret White on the comprehensive report, and acknowledges the courage shown by many people who have had contact with the justice system including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in sharing their stories to advocate for change.

“We look forward to seeing these recommendations implemented, and reiterate that it is crucial this is done in collaboration with Aboriginal community controlled organisations, Aboriginal communities and the community services sector, and that the Federal Government invests in making this a reality.

“Jailing children does not work – it harms them and the community. We are all charged with the responsibility of building hopeful futures for our children and young people”.

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