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NT youth detention settlement an urgent warning that justice reform is needed: Jesuit Social Services

A landmark \$35 million settlement between the Northern Territory Government and children who were mistreated in its youth detention system is a warning that youth justice reform is urgently needed, says Jesuit Social Services.

“Five years ago, the entire nation was horrified by the footage of children being abused, neglected and mistreated in the Northern Territory’s youth detention system, by the same people who are meant to be supporting their rehabilitation and preparing them for their return to the community,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“This significant settlement is an acknowledgement of how much the system failed these vulnerable children. Sadly, it will not take away their suffering, but it can serve as an urgent wake up call that the youth justice system needs urgent reform. We need to ensure this can never happen again and that children who get into trouble are given the best chance to turn their lives around.”

The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, announced five years ago today, produced 227 evidence-based recommendations and provided a blueprint for how the Northern Territory could lead the nation in implementing humane, effective approaches to support children and young people.

While all recommendations were supported by the Northern Territory Government, key recommendations including raising the age of criminal responsibility have not been implemented. Recently, the Northern Territory Government introduced regressive legislation that has already resulted in more children being locked up and the government has announced it is going to expand the Don Dale facility, despite the Royal Commission recommending its closure.

“We, and others who work with children in the Northern Territory every day, are deeply concerned by changes to the Bail Act that came into effect in May which have already condemned more children to detention when they should be supported in the community instead.

“Three decades ago we had a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and five years ago we had a Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. How many more Royal Commissions do we need before political leaders finally heed the advice of Elders, experts and people with lived experience and commit to reform that supports, not further harms, vulnerable children?”

Jesuit Social Services and the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) today held the 5th National Justice Symposium in Alice Springs and online to discuss what successful youth justice reform looks like from grassroots to the system level. The event brought together Elders, experts from across Australia, New Zealand and the US, practitioners and the voices and lived experiences of young people who have had contact with the youth justice system.

“The Northern Territory, through the recommendations of the Royal Commission, has a roadmap to a system that can lead Australia and authorise other parts of the country to follow. Today’s shameful news must be a catalyst for positive change.”