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Northern Territory’s Aboriginal Justice Agreement will improve outcomes, but further work needed: Jesuit Social Services

The Northern Territory Government’s landmark Aboriginal Justice Agreement is a significant step towards improving justice outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but must be supported by a consistent approach across the justice system to keep young people out of detention, says Jesuit Social Services.

The Aboriginal Justice Agreement has been developed in strong consultation with Aboriginal leaders and communities to design a roadmap to reform that will ultimately reduce the offending and imprisonment rates of Aboriginal Territorians.

“Jesuit Social Services endorses proposals to implement alternatives to prison that apply a strengths-based approach to addressing the underlying factors behind a person’s actions, and establishing 20 Community Courts across the Northern Territory,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“These are evidence-based approaches to improving outcomes for Aboriginal people and ultimately the entire Northern Territory. The Aboriginal Justice Agreement must receive bipartisan support and be adequately resourced to ensure these goals and ambitions can become reality.”

Ms Edwards says that the Northern Territory Government’s commitment to keeping more Aboriginal people out of the prison system must be matched by similar goals in the youth justice space.

“Thirty years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and five years after the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, it is a national shame that First Nations people remain over-represented at all points in the criminal justice system.

“This is even more profoundly experienced in the Northern Territory which continues to have the largest proportion of Aboriginal prisoners than any other state or territory, and where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are imprisoned at 15 times the rate of non-Indigenous men.

“We remain deeply disappointed that the Northern Territory recently implemented changes to the Bail Act which have already resulted in more, overwhelmingly Aboriginal, children in youth detention instead of them being supported to connect with family, education and culture in the community.

“Five years ago, the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory gave us a blueprint to a humane, effective youth justice system and these recent legislative changes are at direct odds to the Royal Commission’s recommendations about only using detention as a last resort given the significant and detrimental impact it has on vulnerable children.

“We welcome the fact that the Aboriginal Justice Agreement will help to steer people towards positive pathways. In parallel, we also want to see the Northern Territory have a youth justice system that gives our children and young people the same opportunities to address their underlying problems and ultimately lead healthy, productive and fulfilling lives.”

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