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NT raising the age a step forward in keeping vulnerable children safe

The NT Government’s introduction of legislation to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 years is a step in the right direction and will help to keep more vulnerable children connected with family, culture and the community, says Jesuit Social Services.

“More than five years ago, the landmark Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory began the process of hearing from children, Elders, community service organisations and experts to understand the serious impact of detention on a child’s health and wellbeing,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“The Royal Commission’s final report gave us a blueprint for a youth justice system that would better prevent crime from occurring and support children in trouble to turn their lives around. It recommended that the NT Government should raise the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years, and ensure that no child under the age of 14 is incarcerated. The current age of 10 across the country is out of step with human rights standards and medical science on child development.”

Ms Edwards says that the majority of children who have contact with the justice system at a young age are themselves victims of trauma, abuse and mental illness.

“Jesuit Social Services has long advocated for the age of criminal responsibility to be increased to 14 years, bringing us in line with many other countries as well as the United Nations’ recommendations.

“While we want to see the Territory and all other Australian jurisdictions take legislative action to ensure no primary school aged child is in prison by raising the age to 14, today’s announcement is a positive step. We hope to see this legislation passed and implemented as quickly as possible, to give children in trouble every opportunity to turn their lives around. We also call on the NT Government to commit that no child under the age of 14 will be incarcerated, and that evidence-focused, community-based responses are available for children who need support.”

Ms Edwards says the organisation found in 2013 that, in Victoria, children who come into contact with the justice system at a younger age are more likely to commit multiple offences.

“This highlights the need to keep children out of detention and in community, to give them the best chance to flourish and reach their potential. Raising the age of criminal responsibility is a critical reform, and must be accompanied by effective community-based responses to help children take responsibility for their actions and support them towards positive pathways.”

Jesuit Social Services is a provider of the NT Government’s Back on Track program, which supports children and young people at risk to understand the impacts of their anti-social behaviour on themselves, their families and their communities.

“This model demonstrates that there is a better way to dealing with young people in trouble, by ensuring detention is only ever used as a last resort and by keeping them engaged with family, education and culture. Initiatives like this, and raising the age, work towards the Royal Commission’s ambition of a strong youth justice system that keeps young people and the community safe.”

Media enquiries – Kathryn Kernohan, 0409 901 248 or kathryn.kernohan@jss.org.au