

Submission

Submission to the Northern Territory Government's Legislative Scrutiny Committee on the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026

May 2026

About Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national Christian charity that has been standing alongside Australians in need since 1859. In the NT in 2024-25, we supported 5,932 people through nine homelessness services, eight specialist pre-employment, education and training services, three housing services and two alcohol and other drugs services. Together, we're building hope and possibility for all.

Recommendation

We are calling on the Northern Territory Government to withdraw the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026 (the Bill) and undertake genuine, deliberate consultation with Aboriginal organisations, community services, legal services, frontline workers and affected communities to inform the content of the Bill. The goal of that process and the ensuing legislation should be to develop evidence-based reforms that keep children safe by strengthening families and communities.

Overview

Mission Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the draft Bill and share our deep concern that it does not put the Child Protection system in Northern Territory on the right path.

We support action to keep children safe, yet the Bill will create significantly expanded powers for the Northern Territory Government to intervene in family life without first ensuring families can access the housing, therapeutic support, rehabilitation, counselling and early intervention services needed to safely care for children.

The current child protection system is under significant strain and is not adequately equipped to keep all children safe, due to under-resourcing, workforce shortages, and similar pressures across the broader community services sector.

At the same time, we are concerned that the Bill lowers the level of concern needed before the Government can intervene in family life by introducing broad concepts such as “wellbeing concerns”, “events of concern”, anti-social behaviour and school attendance as triggers for child protection involvement.

From our work with children and families across the Northern Territory, we know that many of the issues driving child protection involvement are closely connected to poverty, housing stress, service shortages and intergenerational disadvantage rather than a lack of care or love for children.

The Bill risks increasing surveillance and coercive intervention in the lives of families already under significant social and economic pressure, without ensuring they have access to the support they need.

Short-term impacts on children and families

This Bill is likely to have immediate impacts on the children and families our organisation works with. Mission Australia works alongside children, young people and families across the Northern Territory, including in regional and remote communities where access to services is severely limited. The families we support are navigating poverty, housing stress, family violence, disability and the lasting effects of intergenerational trauma. These are families who are doing their best under conditions of profound disadvantage.

Many of these families are already stretched to breaking point by circumstances largely beyond their control. Waitlists for social housing, access to alcohol and drug rehabilitation, family counselling and therapeutic support are long and often measured in months or years, not weeks. In remote communities, many of these services do not exist at all. The Bill proposes a compliance framework that assumes families can access the very supports that are chronically underfunded, geographically inaccessible, or simply unavailable in the Territory. We are concerned that this creates a system in which families are held accountable for failing to access services they were never realistically able to reach.

We are also deeply concerned about the effect this Bill may have on help-seeking behaviour. Families who might otherwise approach a service early may hesitate to do so if they fear that contact with any part of the system could trigger child protection involvement. This is a particular concern in communities where trust in government services has been severely eroded by historical and ongoing intervention. If the Bill discourages early engagement, it is likely to produce the opposite of its stated intent: families presenting later, in deeper crisis, with fewer options available to them.

For children and young people, the short-term risk is not only removal from home, but also from community, from kin, from culture, and from everything familiar. These are harms that do not show up immediately in child protection data, but that our workers see in the children and young people we support every day.

Long-term impacts on children, families and communities

We are concerned the long-term impacts of this Bill may extend far beyond immediate child protection intervention. Mission Australia's experience working with children, young people and families tells us that the consequences of removal, particularly long-term removal into residential or out-of-home care, are rarely contained to childhood. Young people who grow up in residential care settings, disconnected from family and community, face significantly elevated rates of mental health challenges, educational disengagement, housing instability and contact with the justice system. These are not abstract risks. They are outcomes our workers see regularly in the young people we support, and they represent a substantial long-term cost to individuals, to families, and to communities.

We are concerned that the Bill's increased focus on permanency and strict reunification timeframes will result in more children entering long-term care earlier and remaining separated from family, culture and community for longer periods. When families cannot reunify within the proposed two-year window, the permanency pathway is triggered regardless. This is not because they have failed their children, but because the housing, rehabilitation and therapeutic supports they needed were not available. The Bill does not adequately account for the role that systemic failure plays in delayed reunification, and children will bear the consequences of that gap.

From our work, we know that children experiencing disconnection from family, country, language and culture often experience long-term trauma and poorer wellbeing outcomes. For Aboriginal children in particular, the impacts of removal extend beyond the individual child to affect kinship networks, community structures and cultural continuity across generations. Australia has confronted this truth through royal commissions, inquiries and national apologies. The lessons of those processes must not be set aside in the design of new legislation.

We are particularly concerned about the impact on Aboriginal children and families if kinship and cultural placement options are not adequately supported and prioritised. The removal of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle as a standalone framework risks producing exactly the conditions those protections were designed to prevent: children placed outside family and community, growing up without connection to country, language or kin, and carrying the weight of that disconnection for the rest of their lives. The intergenerational harm this produces is well-documented, and it is harm that no subsequent intervention can fully repair.

Missed opportunity to invest in prevention and early intervention

This Bill represents a missed opportunity to invest in prevention, healing and early intervention. The Bill itself recognises that families need access to housing, counselling, alcohol and drug services, parenting support and domestic and family violence services. However, many of these services remain significantly underfunded or inaccessible across the Territory. In regional and remote communities, they are often absent entirely. The 2026 NT Budget contains no substantial new investment in family preservation, reunification support, Aboriginal-led parenting programs or therapeutic counselling. The Bill creates a compliance framework without creating the conditions in which compliance is possible.

In our experience and supported by extensive literature, children are safest when families can access stable housing, therapeutic support, culturally safe services and community-led early intervention before crises escalate. The families our workers support do not need more surveillance. They need earlier access to practical help. They need housing they can afford and rely on. They need counselling services with short waitlists. They need parenting support that is culturally safe and delivered by people they trust. When these supports are available and accessible, families are more likely to engage, more likely to stabilise, and more likely to keep their children safely at home.

Community-led responses are particularly effective in reaching families who have historically disengaged from government services. Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, family support workers embedded in communities, and peer-led programs have demonstrated strong outcomes in building trust and supporting early intervention. These are the approaches that warrant investment. The Bill does not propose to expand them.

We are concerned the Bill prioritises compliance and intervention without corresponding investment in the supports families need to succeed. A child protection system built on enforcement, without the services to back it up, does not make children safer. It makes families more fearful, communities more guarded, and the pathway to genuine safety harder to find.

Impact on the people and communities we work with

The proposed reforms will have real impacts on the people and communities our organisation works alongside every day. Our workers regularly support families who are trying to keep children safe while living in overcrowded housing, waiting for specialist services or recovering from violence and trauma. These families are not statistics. They are parents who wake up every day committed to their children, navigating systems that are fragmented, under-resourced and often deeply unfamiliar. Many have had negative experiences with government services in the past and have worked hard to rebuild the trust needed to ask for help. We are concerned this Bill will undo that progress.

The parents we work with deeply love their children but are navigating systems that are difficult to access, inconsistent or unavailable. A parent directed to attend rehabilitation cannot attend if there are no beds. A family required to secure stable housing cannot do so if the waitlist is years long. A parent fleeing family violence cannot meet compliance obligations while they are focused on keeping their children alive. The Bill does not account for these realities, and the consequences of non-compliance fall on families who were already doing everything they could.

In remote and regional communities, the gap between what the Bill requires and what is available is even more pronounced. Workers in these communities regularly encounter families with no local access to the services they are being directed to engage with. Transport is expensive or unavailable. Services are delivered inconsistently or not at all. Families are expected to meet obligations that assume an infrastructure of support that simply does not exist where they live.

We are concerned that families experiencing poverty and disadvantage may increasingly be treated as risks to be managed rather than families needing support. Child protection involvement carries significant stigma, and the expansion of triggers for intervention proposed in this Bill means more families will enter a system that is already stretched. For many, that contact will not result in more support. It will result in more scrutiny, more obligations and more fear.

Closing remarks

Mission Australia supports the importance of child safety and recognises the need for effective child protection systems. We work every day to ensure children and young people are safe, well and supported to thrive. It is precisely because of that commitment that we cannot support this Bill.

We do not believe this Bill addresses the underlying causes driving child protection involvement in the Northern Territory. The evidence is clear that children come to the attention of child protection systems primarily because of poverty, housing stress, family violence, disability and the compounding effects of intergenerational disadvantage. These are not problems that can be solved through expanded surveillance and stricter compliance frameworks. They require sustained, adequately funded investment in the services and supports that help families stay safely together.

We are concerned the Bill lowers the threshold for intervention into families, expands coercive powers, increases pathways into long-term care, fails to adequately address poverty, housing instability and service shortages, and risks causing further harm to vulnerable children, families and communities. We are particularly concerned about the impact on Aboriginal children and families, and about the removal of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle as a standalone protection.

We are calling on the Northern Territory Government to withdraw this Bill and undertake genuine, unhurried consultation with Aboriginal organisations, community services, legal services, frontline workers and affected communities. The goal of that process should be to develop evidence-based reforms that keep children safe by strengthening families and communities, rather than by expanding the reach of punitive intervention into the lives of people who are already doing it hard. A Bill that is informed by lived experience will clearly demonstrate its regard for the rights and liberties of the people it serves and ultimately be a stronger and more effective piece of legislation.

Children and their families deserve better than a system that mistakes surveillance for safety.