

## **Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026**

I am writing to the scrutiny committee as a concerned member of the public and community services practitioner with experience working with adults with histories of removal and families currently navigating the child protection system.

I am deeply concerned about the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026. While I support the importance of keeping children safe, I am concerned that the Bill significantly expands the Northern Territory Government's powers to intervene in family life without first ensuring families can access the housing, therapeutic support, rehabilitation and early intervention services needed to safely care for children.

I am 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. The associated costs that will be incurred as a result of these reforms represent a missed opportunity to invest in families to provide the resources and support, they need to

From my previous work across support work, case management and advocacy roles, I have witnessed how 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. I am concerned that the Bill risks increasing surveillance and coercive intervention into the lives of families already struggling under significant social and economic pressure.

This Bill is likely to have immediate impacts on the children and families in the Northern Territory. In the Northern Territory, young people and families are already experiencing significant barriers in accessing services and supports due to underfunding, extensive waitlists and the barriers of remote service delivery. In the Northern Territory, the housing waitlist is up to ten years and over ten years in locations such as Darwin and Palmerston. The long waitlists to access mental health supports and formal assessments of neurocognitive conditions means that young people and families are unable to access timely disability support, NDIS access and mental health assistance. Waitlists for alcohol and other drugs are also long and programs that are culturally appropriate and accessible are lacking. I am concerned that the bill will penalise families who face significant structural barriers to accessing housing, mental health, drug and alcohol and disability support.

With the limits to the timeframe for reunification in this bill, I am also concerned that families will not be able to attend to all parts of their Family Responsibility Agreement within a two-year timeframe because of the lack of services and extensive waitlists. The

two-year timeframe was overturned in Victoria last week in recognition of the complex barriers vulnerable families face in accessing appropriate support.

This Bill also represents a missed opportunity to invest in prevention, healing and early intervention. By lowering the threshold of intervention in the lives of families in the Northern Territory and increasing the number of children in out of home care, the cost of these changes will be significant. This is a poor allocation of government resources that could be redirected to early intervention supports and programs to support children and families. The existing evidence tells us that children who are placed in out of home care experience significant and long term psychological, behavioural and spiritual trauma. Resources should be directed to ensuring that families receive sufficient early intervention, holistic and wrap around support to assist families to stay together.

For example, the public schooling system is under immense pressure. Instead of penalising families for school non-attendance, funding could be allocated to supporting school aged children to keep learning. This could be through increased investment in bilingual programs and more specialised support for students with disabilities and behavioural needs.

In my experience, children are safest when families can access stable housing, therapeutic support, culturally safe services and community-led early intervention before crises escalate. I am concerned the Bill prioritises compliance and intervention without corresponding investment in the supports families need to succeed. I support the importance of child safety and recognises the need for effective child protection systems. However, I do not believe this Bill addresses the underlying causes driving child protection involvement in the Northern Territory. Moreover, it takes resources away from where they are most needed to support families to stay together.

Instead, I am 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;
- risks causing further harm to vulnerable children, families and communities.

It is telling that NAAJA, The North Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Services (NAAFLS), Central Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Service (CAAFLU), Legal Aid NT, Top End Women's Legal Service (TEWLS), Katherine Women's Information and Legal Service (KWILS), Central Australian Women's Legal Service (CAWLS) and the Darwin Community Legal Centre (DCLS) have all called for the bill to be scrapped. Workers and services working on the frontline know that this type of bill will not support families to stay

together. The impacts of these changes will be intergenerational as more children being placed in out of home care means more our community members in the future will carry the significant developmental, emotional and spiritual trauma that removal creates.

I am calling on the Northern Territory Government to scrap the Bill and undertake genuine consultation with Aboriginal organisations, community services, legal services, frontline workers and affected communities to develop evidence-based reforms that keep children safe by strengthening families and communities rather than expanding punitive intervention.