

### Northern Territory Police Association

**Madam CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I welcome everyone to this public hearing into the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026.

I welcome to the table to give evidence to the committee a representative from the Northern Territory Police Association, Nathan Finn. Thank you for coming before the committee. We appreciate you taking the time to speak to the committee and look forward to hearing from you today.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being webcast through the Assembly's website. A transcript will be made for use of the committee and may be put on the committee's website. If at any time during the hearing you are concerned that what you will say should not be made public, you may ask the committee to go into a closed session and take your evidence in private.

Could you please state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing.

**Mr FINN:** Yes. Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to appear today. My name is Nathan Finn and I am the President of the Northern Territory Police Association.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Finn. Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr FINN:** I would appreciate that.

On 22 May 2026 the Northern Territory Police Association made submissions to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee regarding the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026 which are publicly available online. What follows is a summary of those submissions and confirmation of the NTPA's position regarding the Bill.

In stating its position with regard to the Bill the NTPA only had two things to consider: firstly, the plight of the children in need of care; and, secondly, the oath that our members take as police officers to serve without fear, favour, affection or ill will. When examined in that light, the NTPA's position was inevitable. It was not a position born of politics or ideology but one that would aid our members in meeting their oath and one that would achieve the purpose of service and protection, in this case the protection of the most vulnerable in our society, our children.

The Northern Territory Police Association's position is born from the perspective of police officers who regularly respond to children and families in crisis. Our members frequently encounter children exposed to violence, neglect, exploitation, substance misuse, family dysfunction, school disengagement, antisocial behaviour and emerging offending.

The NTPA's submission is that the legislative framework must make child safety the paramount consideration. Cultural connection, family connection and parental involvement remain important, but where those matters are in conflict with a child's immediate or long-term safety, the child's safety must prevail.

The Northern Territory Police Association also supports the Bill's focus on permanency, early intervention, parental accountability and coordinated agency responses. We consider that family responsibility agreements, family responsibility orders and police notification pathways provide a more workable framework for intervening before risk escalates into serious offending, serious harm or entrenched child protection involvement.

The Northern Territory Police Association supports the Bill as drafted, while noting its successful implementation will depend on adequate operational resourcing across child protection, police, youth services, diversion, rehabilitation and family support.

The key takeaways from our submission are:

1. Child safety should be paramount. The Bill appropriately elevates child safety and protection from harm as foremost conditions in the best interests in decision-making.
2. The Aboriginal child placement principle should remain important but not override safety. The Northern Territory Police Association recognises the importance of cultural identity, kinship, community, language

and country, but submits the cultural placement considerations must yield where it is in conflict with the child's immediate or long-term safety.

3. Permanency and stability are protective factors. The Bill's emphasis on stable living environments, long-term permanency and timely decision-making are supported because chronic placement instability can increase vulnerability and exploitation, disengagement and lead to potential offending.
4. Early intervention is preferable in a crisis response, and we support the family responsibility agreements, the family responsibility orders and the stepped escalation pathway because they will allow identification of risk, voluntary support, parental engagement, compulsory intervention and, where necessary, the escalation to child protection proceedings if required.
5. Police notification powers are supported. Proposed section 65E is supported because it allows police to notify the CEO where a child is found not criminally responsible while repeatedly engaged in antisocial behaviour. Our position is that coordinated intervention should occur before serious offending or victimisation has already occurred.
6. The Bill has sufficient regard to individual rights and liberties. The Bill engages in parental autonomy, family integrity, cultural rights, Aboriginal self-determination, privacy and child safety. Our position is that child safety must prevail where those interests conflict and that the proportionality is preserved through the least intrusive intervention principles, cultural considerations and court oversight.
7. The Bill has sufficient regard to parliament. The Bill contains clear statutory criteria, maintains judicial oversight for coercive orders and gives operational agencies powers that are appropriate to urgent child protection decision-making.
8. Implementation will require resources. The NTPA supports the Bill, but emphasises that its effectiveness will depend on adequate child protection resources, family support services, diversionary programs, youth services, rehabilitation services and interagency coordination capacity.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Finn. Member for Johnston.

**J DAVIS:** Thank you, Mr Finn, for your submission and for appearing today. Acknowledging that your members are often the first contact the family has with government in a child protection context, and you have just outlined that your submission notes that the Bill's effectiveness will depend on adequate resourcing of child protection services, family support, diversionary programs and interagency coordination, in your experience is that resourcing currently adequate?

**Mr FINN:** That is an opinion I would not be able to place. I can speak on behalf of the police force, but I cannot adequately comment on the staffing resources of Territory Families or other agencies in that matter.

**J DAVIS:** Given you said that for the Bill to be effective it needs to be properly resourced, as far as you can answer, what would happen if the Bill did pass in its current form without proper resourcing in relation to the police? Is there a way that you would like to see police resourced? There are some proposals in the Bill. Does it meet police resource needs or is there a better way to do that?

**Mr FINN:** There is always room for improvement, especially with resourcing. Over many years our police officers have been reporting to us that interagency collaboration is the most important thing. Having those resources available for police, Territory Families and youth services et cetera to be able to correspond with us in an open platform and have available information presented as a matter of urgency and not a matter of delay and, obviously, making requests to get this information, it would enable our members to make immediate decisions in respect of child welfare.

**J DAVIS:** To my earlier question, insofar as you are able to answer—if these amendments pass in their current form without adequate resourcing, what do you think will happen? What will be the impact of that?

**Mr FINN:** It would not be as effective as what is obviously planned.

**J DAVIS:** Sorry?

**Mr FINN:** It would not be as effective as what is actually being planned. The resourcing is an important issue to this.

**J DAVIS:** When you say it would not be as effective, can you speak a little more about what you mean by that?

**Mr FINN:** If you did not have the staff to carry out these investigations or take these behaviours—therefore, it would not work in an appropriate manner.

**J DAVIS:** Are there any risks you can identify in relation to that?

**Mr FINN:** There is a number of risks, depending on the number of reports in train at any one time with Territory Families and police in assisting Territory Families in doing their role. We see interagency collaboration as the most important thing, and having access to those reports.

Our police members attend incidents in a silo fashion, where there is not much knowledge about previous incidents unless they have dealt with these children or families before in their policing. We often see that members will not go to the same events, households or residents over and over again; there is more of a mixed response, depending on the time of day or the resources we have available at the time.

**J DAVIS:** We have heard evidence today that this Bill is likely to skyrocket the number of children in out-of-home care. Are you able to speak to how often your members are called to issues involving children in out-of-home care?

**Mr FINN:** I can only speak from my experience when I was operating out of Palmerston Police Station and being the officer in charge there for a number of years before my appointment here at the association.

There were a number of escalating calls in respect to properties that are managed by Territory Families and household carers, and absconding from those carers as well. Depending on the placement of the child, the location of the placement and who the placement of the child is with, there will always be some issues with it.

**J DAVIS:** Is that something that you would be able to get broader data on? Is it a question you can take on notice?

**Mr FINN:** Potentially not me. To get that data the information would be available from police.

**J DAVIS:** Obviously, your association represents officers across the Territory, including in remote communities. Can you talk of the differences in available infrastructure, family support services and placement options between Darwin and a remote community, and how that might impact on this Bill rolling out?

**Mr FINN:** Again, I can only speak from my experience. I do not have any evidence to suggest. I know from our members in these remote communities that services are very limited in respect to Territory Families or engaging with other agencies in those remote communities. There are very few on the ground. The majority of the time it is our police officers who are the ones who are doing many roles in those communities, such as the Territory Families role, a police role, a mental health capacity, a motor vehicle registry capacity. They do a lot of work in those communities in respect to not having those resources available in remote communities.

**J DAVIS:** You talked in your opening statement in relation to section 65E which legislates police discretion to refer children under 10 to child protection. We heard from a previous witness today in relation to this. Can I quote from the previous witness or not? Yes. He was from one of the legal services—‘There is an extent to which it is just not necessary. There is no reason why police cannot already speak to the department and work collaboratively.’

From the perspective of the association, what does this new statutory power actually achieve? Why is it necessary?

**Mr FINN:** It gives us a framework to work beyond and make those reports to the CEO, noting that we make reports on behalf of Territory Families. Our members provide notifications to Territory Families through the We Care system. Is it still We Care? That was the last information I had.

We have the ability to transport that. If we have the ability to write directly and communicate with the CEO of Territory Families about our concerns and our escalation of those concerns, if required, it is a good opportunity for us to make sure that the protection required we see.

**Mrs ZIO:** Thank you, Mr Finn, for attending today and for your submission.

As the Member for Johnston said, we have received a few submissions and had some witnesses already come before us. We have received some submissions arguing that the Bill places too much emphasis on child safety and intervention. Your members often are the first government response or representatives to encounter children living in environments affected by violence, abuse, neglect, substance misuse, mental health, serious dysfunction or all of them. We know that police often encounter these situations and have to deal with the flow-on effect of it as well as the burden that goes with all the administrative responses.

You did touch on this in your opening statement, but I will delve a little bit deeper. I know that the association strongly supports the implementation of extended use of family responsibility agreements and responsibility orders as well as early intervention pathways. From a policing perspective, what are the consequences of waiting until a child's circumstances have deteriorated to the point of serious offending, exploitation or victimisation before intervention occurs?

**Mr FINN:** A very good question—at the crux of what we are dealing with, the safety of a child is the most paramount. Once they start a life of offending, our police officers find that it is very hard to stop that life of offending. They learn behaviours which they are learning in the family household.

I ask these agencies that make claims against what is being said—they are not the ones at three or four o'clock in the morning dealing with an eight or nine-year-old kid who is walking the streets and who you take home to a parent who is supposed to have responsibility for this person and there is no care in the world of where they have been and what they have done. I ask the question of those people: are they the ones who are going to come out and take care of these kids? Often it is left with the police officer to deal with this matter or to find a responsible adult who is willing to take this child, who remains in the care of the police during that time. We have seen children being held in police stations for five to eight hours while we wait for Territory Family workers to come. It is not a very nice situation to be in, but if we cannot find a responsible adult to take care of this child, the onus is left on police. We need the ability to make sure we are doing the best thing we possibly can for this child going forward and making sure they are protected and looked after.

**Mrs ZIO:** Do you have any information to provide the committee on locating a responsible carer? What usually happens in that process? Is it that there are people made available, but they refuse to take the child? What is it in general? I know that you talk to your members about this sort of stuff.

**Mr FINN:** Yes, we do. These are general discussions with our members, if not on a monthly basis—the frustrations they have in locating a responsible adult for a young child, especially one who has committed an offence, or someone to take responsibility or hand them over if they are under the age of criminal responsibility. It is a frustrating thing to find a person who is, first, capable of looking after that child; second, wants to look after the child; or, third, are not intoxicated or under the influence of anything. We have to make a determination based on what we can see in front of us and the information we have available to us at the time, noting that we do not have information about previous child matters that have been referred to Territory Families or have access to those reports and the dangers that they might be placed in by going to a certain person or a certain family member.

**Mrs ZIO:** Based on the collective experiences of police officers in the Northern Territory responding to vulnerable children and families, do you agree that preserving culture, family and community connection remains important but that no legislative principle should operate in way that leaves a child exposed to ongoing abuse, neglect, exploitation or serious harm?

**Mr FINN:** No, that is right. Safety is the paramount feature here. The safety of a child, regardless of their colour, creed or anything else, is of the most paramount importance. If you cannot place that child in a safe environment, they should not be in that environment to start with.

**Mrs ZIO:** Some submitters have suggested that these reforms weaken protections for Aboriginal children. Having reviewed the Bill, do you consider that the reforms remove cultural protections or do they simply clarify that those protections operate within a framework where the child's safety remains paramount?

**Mr FINN:** They operate inside the framework here. There are considerations to be taken, but the consideration of safety is the most important thing for the child.

**Mr HOWE:** Thank you, Mr Finn. I would like to also formally commend the NTPA on having the courage to publicly voice a desire that the law be applied equally. It seems like an odd thing to commend courage on, but I do thank the NTPA and its members for that.

Could you provide any de-identified examples? Permanency and stability is something this Bill addresses and it is also in your submission. Would it be possible for the NTPA to provide any de-identified examples of when reunification or attempts at reunification have caused serious harm to a child?

**Mr FINN:** I cannot provide that information. Again, that information is with the Northern Territory Police. I do not act on behalf of the Northern Territory Police Force; I protect the members of the Northern Territory Police Force and the association.

It is a very important question. I know from personal experience and what I have seen. A number of our police officers foster young children within our agency. I have seen the dramas that have occurred for children going back to placements and the issues that stem from being put into placement, being put into a different set of carers, changing carers constantly. We see issues of detachment, offending behaviours and changes in behaviour.

We need stability. We need to make sure that the care that they are being provided is consistent, there are boundaries in relation to that care and that the people they are placed in the care of do the right thing by that child as well—they are not there just to be paid the money and have a person living in their house; they are there to bring them up as a parent. They should be the parent of that child in replacement of their parents if they cannot be with them.

**Mr HOWE:** Can you provide any commentary, from your own career or those of your members, in frustration at the current environment of child protection?

**Mr FINN:** Only speaking from my experience; I have not spoken to the members specifically about this question.

You realise I am a serving police officer on secondment to the Northern Territory Police Association. My rank is senior sergeant. I have been around for 23 years across the Northern Territory, working from Alice Springs, Katherine, Darwin and remote stations et cetera, and have been managing remote stations across the Northern Territory for a number of years as well.

My experience is that the frustrations have been there for a number of years. We report these frustrations through interagency meetings. Our biggest qualm is being able to access Territory Families staff or have Territory Families staff available when we need them—that being at two or three o'clock in the morning and the ability for us to call out to engage with a child so that they are not sitting in a police station and are being held in a location that is safe to them and is not a frightening experience for them. A young Aboriginal child who is sitting with you at seven or eight years of age in a police station with people who are unknown to them, it is a very frightening experience for them. My experience is that we need people to be able to look after these children until we can find a suitable placement or a suitable responsible adult. They should not be sitting in a police station.

**Mrs ZIO:** In your experience as a police officer and seeing these kids when they are seven, eight, nine, 10—up to whatever age you choose basically—in the situation where they are sitting in a police station, why are they there in the first place? What is the common denominator in relation to why they are on the street ...

**Mr FINN:** The common denominator is they do not feel safe in their home residence. They are out on the streets engaging in antisocial behaviour because there is no parental responsibility for these young children. The police are forced to deal with that, amongst everything else they are reporting to as well. There are numerous nights when our members will have to drive past a group of kids, knowing that group will cause trouble later in the evening, but they do not have the opportunity to deal with that at the earliest opportunity. They get frustrated.

I ask myself and people around the room as well: do you know where your seven-year-old is at one or two o'clock in the morning? Most of us would say, 'Yes, of course we do'. The fact is in the community that is not happening. Children are left to roam of their own devices at a young age. Some are even less than seven. Our members get quite frustrated knowing that they have a parental responsibility. The majority of our members are parents as well. They see the sadness in that as well, that these children would rather be on the streets than be at home. That is not acceptable.

**Mr HOWE:** There have been questions about foster care and the environment that has. From the NTPA's point of view, would an NT police officer apply this framework with the amended Bill the same, be it a home with biological family or a foster care family?

**Mr FINN:** Exactly the same, without fear, favour or ill-will. That is how we operate. That is our oath that we accept and our members accept when they sign up to be a police officer. Regardless of anything, we do the right thing by the child.

**J DAVIS:** You said earlier that one of the key challenges currently is the interagency collaboration. What are the core barriers in relation to that you face in being able to support children?

**Mr FINN:** From the conversations I have with my members, the consistent staffing, the consistent team members who provide this interagency collaboration and the change of staff and management over time. It needs to be said: when people work together who know people and we have that confidence in what we can discuss, we can have an open and robust conversation about the safety of these children and make sure that we are both working in collaboration to make sure that safety is the most paramount thing.

**J DAVIS:** We have heard in another submission that currently the level of understaffing in child protection is more than one-third at the moment. When you are talking about people who are there to do the work, we are extremely under-resourced. From what you have said then, it sounds like it is not that the current Act is preventing you from acting in the best interests of the children; what is happening is that the resources are not in place to support child safety.

**Mr FINN:** That is a statement. We have seen under-resourcing for Territory Families. Having spoken to Territory Family representatives, I am fully aware that they have some staffing issues. Depending on the number of investigations, it is no different to the police force as well. Depending on what is going on at the time, sometimes you have a lot of cases on board and sometimes you do not have many cases on board, so it is hard to establish unless there is a review conducted of Territory Families to see whether it has adequate staff or not. That is not my position. I do not have anything to do directly with Territory Families, but I can only speak from experience when I was there and through discussions with my members.

Everyone likes more staff and more resources, but in this case, to manage the workload they currently see. The workload from the changes in this Bill is going to increase; they definitely need to be resourced appropriately.

**J DAVIS:** Is there anything in this legislation that you can see that will address that concern?

**Mr FINN:** There is nothing written into the legislation about the staffing or staffing requirements of Territory Families. That would be an internal policy of government and also the Territory Families executive.

**J DAVIS:** Some other submitters have raised concerns about the potential for family responsibility agreements and orders creating risks regarding domestic violence and coercive control. Has the association got a view on this?

**Mr FINN:** Not particularly, but any sort of responsibility—and family responsibility agreements are there to maintain that some person has overall responsibility of the child. We are all for that. People need to start taking responsibility for their own children and to make sure they are not walking the streets, that they are safe and provided with a lifestyle and a home that is loving and caring and that they nurture them to grow into fit and proper adults.

**J DAVIS:** Absolutely. Given that police officers will be on the front line of a lot of this, how will your members be resourced and trained to make the kind of referrals and notifications that this Bill is going to require of them, including family responsibility agreement referrals, potentially *doli incapax* notifications?

**Mr FINN:** That would be a question for the Northern Territory Police Force. I know they have not made a submission to the Senate inquiry here, but again that would be something in respect to training and training with the new legislation. I am quite aware that the Northern Territory Police Force when changes to legislation occur, there are training packages—training provided to our members on the first instance of general duties members, who will be out there dealing with the changes in legislation to make sure that they are complying and are doing what they possibly can to abide by the legislation.

**J DAVIS:** In general, that is what happens or in relation to ...

**Mr FINN:** That is in general, not in respect of this. I cannot comment on what they have planned in respect to legislation changes in regard to this, but they are proactive in relation to legislation changes.

**J DAVIS:** In general, is there a timeframe for when that training might roll out. Would it normally happen before the legislation is implemented and rolls out or after?

**Mr FINN:** No. Obviously, the legislation has to be assented to first and passed by parliament. It is usually after that point in time.

**J DAVIS:** Is there a timeframe that might happen in?

**Mr FINN:** I would only be speculating, Member for Johnston.

**J DAVIS:** Can you speculate? Is it a month or a year or ...

**Mr FINN:** You keep fishing for an answer. It is usually within months, yes.

**J DAVIS:** Thank you.

**Madam CHAIR:** There are no further questions. Thank you, Mr Finn.

**Mr FINN:** Thanks for the opportunity to come and speak to you today.

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The committee suspended.

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