

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

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I write to the committee with deep concerns around the proposed child removal laws that, if implemented, will have devastating impacts on the health and well-being of Aboriginal children and families in the Northern Territory. I am a practising nurse and midwife-in-training working in maternity services and hospitals across Darwin and in Top End retrieval to Aboriginal communities. It from my perspective as a healthcare practitioner that I implore you to listen to experts and Aboriginal people about the issues they know intimately, as the consequence of not doing so has repeatedly landed our nation in a position of deep health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families.

Child safety is paramount and I would be supportive of any bill that genuinely improves the safety of children. However the proposed changes are detrimental to cultural safety, which is deeply tied to the emotional, mental and physical health of children.

There is already a significant housing crisis across the Territory, affecting both our cities and in remote Aboriginal communities. During a recent antenatal appointment, I was speaking with an expecting mother who lives in an overcrowded house in Palmerston with many relatives. My patient was 8 months pregnant, and with her two-year-old daughter has been on a housing waitlist over 2 years but has been told she is unlikely to be given a house for a further two years. By then, first child would already be in school. My patient was doing everything she could to raise her children well with the resources she had, but she knew her children would be better off in a home where they could sleep uninterrupted through the night and not worry about others eating their food. I am deeply concerned that the lower threshold proposed by the new bill for investigating families and for intervention proposed means that this child and expectant mother would be set on a path of removal.

Unfortunately, this story is not uncommon. Many mothers I have met during my placement with Danila Dilba Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

(ACCHO) were on housing wait lists because they knew their overcrowded house was not the best place to raise children. Under the guise of child protection, this bill could criminalise housing insecurity and poverty. Mothers could be branded as neglectful when it is our government that has neglected their role to provide safe housing and adequate supports to raise children.

This Bill disproportionately affects Aboriginal families, despite Aboriginal people not being adequately consulted. Aboriginal kinship systems do not fit simply into a nuclear house structure, and resources are usually shared communally, often resulting in overcrowding. What is viewed from a mainstream Western perspective as an unfit home is sometimes more appropriate from an Aboriginal perspective of community and connection to country, than other, less-crowded structures that are deemed suitable from a Western perspective. For this reason, consultation with Aboriginal people is essential in the development of this Bill. As I'm sure you are aware, many ACCHOs and legal services operating across the Territory have voiced concern around this Bill and dismay in not being invited into the consultation process despite the depth of their understanding and on the ground experience. These organisations are best equipped to provide comprehensive guidance on how best to protect children, rather than lawmakers under pressure for a stop-gap measure.

Further, the proposed Bill risks exacerbating clients' fear of help-seeking. Women are already nervous to report domestic abuse due to fear of child removal. Whilst mandatory reporting is a part of my job as a nurse, I fear the consequences of my mandatory reporting may place women in a worse position. The increased rate of child removal and decreased rates of family reunification threatened by this Bill will cause some of our most vulnerable patients may avoid healthcare altogether. This Bill was touted as preventing children from "slipping through the cracks" however I fear it will have the opposite effect in that more people will avoid engaging with any services whatsoever for fear of child removal.

There is clearly a need to improve child safety in the Territory, and this Bill represents a missed opportunity to invest in the support services that enable families to care for their children. The financial cost of running residential care facilities would be minimal in comparison to the amount required to improve housing and services that could prevent children from entering that system in the first place. Furthermore, the emotional and cultural cost of child removal, as demonstrated by the Stolen Generation, creates intergenerational trauma that is undeniably more expensive to manage. More importantly to me, the health inequities faced by Indigenous Australians are only going to widen if the social determinants of health are not addressed. At work I see the

devastating health impacts of overcrowding which include and are not limited to infectious diseases including scabies which leads to rheumatic heart disease, domestic violence and malnutrition. These are diseases of poverty that unfairly impact Aboriginal children, but do not render their parents neglectful. We need to support families to care for their own children before criminalising poverty by removing people's right to raise their children.

My position as a healthcare worker in the Territory is that child safety needs improvement but this Bill will not achieve that, in fact more children could become unsafe as a result. Families facing housing and food insecurity are likely to be unfairly targeted, and they may become less likely to engage with services as a result. The Bill does not address any of the underlying causes that drive child safety concerns including housing, healthcare and support services for families. Aboriginal families will be disproportionately affected, echoing the Stolen Generation era paternalistic sentiments of governments which decide what is best for Aboriginal people without including them in the discussion. I ask that this Bill not proceed. I also ask that this Bill be put to a public inquiry, so experts are given the opportunity to be heard and Aboriginal people invited into the conversation.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my perspective.

Your sincerely,

Olivia Conan-Davies