

# UNIONS NT

Submission from Unions NT on behalf of NT workers

Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment Bill 2



# UNIONS NT

Unions NT is the peak body for Northern Territory unions. It is the collective voice for 13 affiliate unions and exists to organise and grow a movement of workers across the Territory.

Unions NT represents workers across a broad range of industries including health, education, community services, administration, mining, construction, and the public sector. Workers from the public service, nursing, medicine, teaching, and community services sectors have expressed significant concern regarding the proposed Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment Bill 2026.

Unions NT joins the growing number of organisations, practitioners and frontline workers calling for this Bill to be withdrawn. The proposed amendments would substantially expand statutory intervention into family life without the workforce capacity, fiscal planning or service infrastructure necessary to safely implement the reforms.

The Bill will not only increase pressure on vulnerable children and families; it will place unsustainable operational and financial burdens on the Northern Territory's already overstretched health, education, housing, justice and community service systems.

Unions NT submits that the Bill should be scrapped and replaced with a genuine co-design process involving workers, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, legal experts, families and young people.

# Executive

# Summary

The proposed legislation represents a significant expansion of state intervention powers without corresponding investment in workforce capacity, prevention services, housing, healthcare, education or early intervention supports.

The Bill will:

- Increase the number of mandatory reports, investigations, statutory agreements and removals;
- Increase litigation and court involvement;
- Increase demand for out-of-home care and residential care placements;
- Increase administrative burdens across education, health and community services;
- Intensify burnout, attrition and workforce shortages across frontline sectors;
- Increase downstream expenditure across corrections, policing, hospitals, courts and homelessness services;
- Undermine trust between communities and frontline workers.

The Northern Territory Government has not demonstrated that the reforms are financially sustainable or operationally achievable. For a government concerned with economic discipline, workforce attraction and efficient public administration, the reforms represent poor fiscal policy. Expanding statutory demand without adequately funding workforce growth and preventative services will increase long-term government expenditure while worsening outcomes for children and families.

Unions NT submits that the Bill should be scrapped, and this committee should call for public hearings to further understand any future changes to Child Protection laws. Good governance when such holistic changes are proposed would also include the disclosure of:

1. A full fiscal impact statement;
2. A workforce impact assessment;
3. Territory-wide service modelling;
4. An implementation plan developed through genuine consultation and co-design.

# CORE CHANGES

Residential care placements already cost the Territory upwards of \$1 million per child annually. Expanding pathways into these systems without investing in prevention and family supports is fiscally irresponsible and operationally unsustainable.

The Bill also assumes families can access the supports necessary for reunification. In many remote and regional communities, these services simply do not exist.

Families frequently cannot access:

- Stable housing;
- Drug and alcohol rehabilitation;
- Mental health support;
- Counselling services;
- Therapeutic supports;
- Family violence services;
- Early intervention services.

As a result, families may be forced to relocate to Darwin or regional centres simply to comply with statutory requirements, increasing both social and financial pressures.

The Bill operationalises obligations that the current service system is incapable of delivering.

Unions NT is concerned about several provisions within the proposed amendments that are likely to significantly increase pressure across the child protection and broader public service systems.

The following changes need further costing and forecasting before implementation.

- Lowering the threshold of risk to a child under various sections of the act will inevitably lead to more children being removed and requiring support services, including out-of-home care and residential care.
- The inoperability of the Bill will lead to more matters requiring litigation.
- The operational impacts of “proactive” action by the department to support reunification in 6 months will lead to increased workloads on an under-resourced sector.
- This bill operationalises child welfare supports; however, families currently do not have access to all the services they will require for reunification in their communities. It will mean more families must be entirely supported in Darwin, for the CEO to uphold the principles of the act.
- Section 65E will see an increase in the number of younger children referred to the family court by the police.
- The addition of “events of concern” and the broad nature of them, could increase the number of mandatory reports made by workers across many sectors.

It is clear these expected changes will drive net debt up, and require redistribution of budgets from already stretched public services.

# EXACERBATING A WORKFORCE CRISIS

Unions NT is deeply concerned that the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment Bill 2026 will expand statutory demand without first addressing the workforce, service and fiscal capacity required to implement it safely.

The Bill is likely to increase the number of families drawn into investigations, mandatory reports, statutory agreements, litigation and care orders. That means more work for child protection practitioners, teachers, nurses, police, courts, legal services, housing workers and community organisations, without a credible workforce or budget plan to absorb that demand.

This creates perverse incentives through manufactured demand, rather than good fiscal economic planning. The Country Liberal Party government says it is concerned with disciplined public expenditure, but this is poor policy design.

Expanding the legal threshold for intervention without funding the operational system is not reform; it is cost-shifting. It transfers the true cost of the Bill onto already stretched frontline workforces, crisis services, and future budgets.

The child protection workforce is already under severe pressure. Recent reporting in the NT News identified continuing vacancy pressures, including a reported 25% vacancy rate across child protection. Earlier coronial findings were even more stark, identifying a 39.8% vacancy rate across child protection positions. Put simply, the Territory has been asking roughly 60–75% of the required workforce to carry 100% of the statutory risk and the recent budget does nothing to address that existing problem, let alone plan for an influx.

Recent media reporting has also identified frontline workers carrying more than 60 open cases at a time, leaving little practical capacity for meaningful intervention, therapeutic support or sustained engagement with children and families. The intense workloads contribute directly to burnout, vicarious trauma, attrition and declining workforce capability.

# EXACERBATING A COST OF LIVING CRISIS

The Budget does not demonstrate that the system has been resourced for the increased demand this Bill will create.

According to the 2026–27 Northern Territory Budget:

- Child protection services receive \$23.953 million in 2026–27, slightly below the revised 2025–26 allocation of \$24.169 million;
- Out-of-home care receives \$143.367 million, with the Budget itself noting increasing placement cost pressures;
- Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence services fall to \$63.511 million, down from previous allocations;

This funding does not represent a workforce expansion strategy capable of absorbing the increased statutory demand likely to result from the proposed reforms.

The reforms are likely to increase the most expensive parts of the system. More removals mean:

- More investigations;
- More court proceedings;
- More placements;
- More residential care;
- Greater police involvement;
- Increased health demand;
- Increased youth justice demand.

Once children enter crisis and residential care systems, expenditure escalates dramatically.

The cheaper and more economically rational option is to invest in:

- Stable housing;
- Early intervention;
- Community-led prevention;
- Family support services;
- Therapeutic care;
- Workforce retention;
- Culturally safe services.

The Bill instead prioritises downstream statutory intervention over upstream prevention. This is not a fiscally conservative policy. It is expensive reactive governance, that Territorians will ultimately pay for.

# WORKFORCE PRESSURES

The instability affecting child protection exists across the Territory public sector. Remote nurses, teachers, doctors and community service workers continue to experience extremely high turnover rates.

Research conducted by Flinders University identified remote nursing turnover rates exceeding 148% annually in some regions, alongside increasing reliance on agency staff. The Australian Medical Association has estimated turnover rates for doctors and specialists in the Northern Territory at approximately 20% annually.

Education systems continue to experience chronic instability, particularly in remote communities. Workforce reporting has identified teacher turnover rates exceeding 30% annually in some schools. These workers are often the frontline of child protection.

Teachers, nurses, social workers and healthcare professionals are frequently:

- Mandatory reporters;
- The first professionals to identify child safety concerns;
- The workers most trusted by children and families;
- Responsible for managing the ongoing impacts of statutory intervention.

Stable relationships are essential to safe child protection practice. When frontline workers are transient, overworked or unsupported:

- Continuity of care declines;
- Community trust deteriorates;
- Families disengage from services;
- School attendance worsens;
- Healthcare engagement falls;
- Crisis presentations increase.

Punitive approaches that increase surveillance and coercive intervention without improving access to support services are likely to worsen these outcomes.

If families no longer trust teachers, nurses or social workers, public systems become less effective and more expensive. This carries long-term economic costs for the Territory.

# CONCLUSION

The proposed reforms are being introduced during a period of significant economic and social pressure across the Northern Territory. Families are already experiencing rising living costs, housing insecurity, overcrowding, limited access to healthcare and increasing financial stress. Frontline workers consistently report that many of the circumstances driving child protection involvement are linked to structural disadvantage, including poverty, housing shortages, trauma, family violence and limited access to support services, rather than an absence of care for children. Despite this, the Bill prioritises expanded statutory intervention and surveillance over investment in prevention, housing, therapeutic services and early support.

At the same time, the Territory's frontline workforces are already operating beyond sustainable capacity. Teachers, nurses, child protection practitioners, social workers and healthcare staff continue to experience high turnover, excessive workloads and chronic understaffing, particularly in remote communities. These workers are not only essential service providers, but are often the first people children and families turn to when they need support. Expanding mandatory reporting obligations and statutory intervention without increasing workforce capacity will intensify burnout, weaken retention and reduce the ability of services to respond effectively to children and families.

The effectiveness of child protection systems depends heavily on trust between communities and frontline workers. Stable relationships with teachers, nurses, healthcare workers and social services are critical to identifying risks early and supporting families safely. In many Aboriginal communities, long-term trust and culturally safe engagement are essential to effective service delivery. Legislative changes that increase fear of child removal or punitive intervention risk discouraging families from engaging with schools, healthcare providers and support services. When families disengage from frontline systems, risks to children increase and pressure shifts onto more expensive crisis responses including hospitals, police, homelessness services and youth justice systems.

The proposed reforms also create significant long-term fiscal risks for the Northern Territory Government. Reactive systems are substantially more expensive than preventative systems. Increasing removals, litigation, out-of-home care placements and residential care arrangements without investing in early intervention will drive escalating expenditure across the public sector. Residential care placements can already cost upwards of \$1 million per child annually. Once children enter crisis systems, government loses control of costs. A fiscally responsible government should prioritise reducing long-term liabilities through prevention, workforce stability, housing and community-led support services, rather than expanding statutory intervention into systems that are already under-resourced and struggling to meet existing demand.

# CONCLUSION

Unions NT submits that proceeding with the Bill under current economic and workforce conditions would be fiscally irresponsible, operationally unsafe and likely to worsen outcomes for children, families and workers alike. Without substantial investment in workforce retention, housing, healthcare, early intervention and culturally safe service delivery, these reforms risk increasing long-term expenditure while undermining the trust and stability necessary to keep children safe.

It is irresponsible governance from the Country Liberal Party to legislate demand it cannot safely fund, staff or deliver, particularly where the consequences fall on vulnerable children, families and exhausted frontline workers. Unions NT maintains that the Bill should not proceed in its current form and should instead be withdrawn entirely.

The Government must:

1. Withdraw the Bill;
2. Conduct public hearings;
3. Release full fiscal and workforce modelling;
4. Develop reforms through genuine co-design with workers, communities and experts.

Without substantial investment across core sectors like housing, domestic violence, and youth diversion, it is likely the removal of children will increase crime and economically drain the Northern Territory budget. People will have less access to public services including hospitals and education. If workers cannot safely execute their jobs we know workforce retention plummets.

Proceeding with the Bill under current conditions would be fiscally irresponsible, operationally unsafe and harmful to the long-term wellbeing of Territory workers, children and their parents..

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