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## Submission to the Inquiry into the Child Protection System – Northern Territory

I welcome the opportunity to provide input to the Inquiry into the Child Protection System in the Northern Territory. I make this submission from a blended perspective as an experienced social worker with direct understanding of vulnerable families, trauma, systemic disadvantage and intergenerational harm, as well as a concerned citizen committed to the safety, dignity and future wellbeing of children.

At the outset, I strongly affirm that the safety, protection and wellbeing of children must remain the overriding priority of any child protection system. At the same time, effective child protection cannot rely solely on statutory intervention after harm has occurred. Sustainable reform requires a system that is preventative, culturally informed, trauma-responsive, accountable and capable of strengthening families before crises escalate.

### 1. Child protection must move from crisis response to early intervention

Too often, child protection systems become heavily weighted toward investigation, removal and reactive interventions after significant harm has already occurred.

A stronger system should invest in:

- Early family support and parenting services
- Maternal and infant health support
- Mental health and alcohol and drug services
- Domestic and family violence responses
- School engagement and early childhood development programs
- Housing stability and poverty reduction initiatives
- Addressing Indigenous disadvantage closing the gap priorities.

When families receive practical support early, risks to children can often be reduced before statutory removal becomes necessary.

### 2. Aboriginal-led and community-led responses must be central

A significant proportion of children engaged with the NT child protection system are Aboriginal children. Reform must therefore be culturally safe, respectful and grounded in self-determination.

Aboriginal communities are not simply stakeholders; they must be genuine partners in designing and leading solutions.

This should include:

- Strengthening Aboriginal community-controlled organisations

- Investing in local Elders, cultural leaders and family decision-making models
- Supporting kinship-based care where safe and appropriate
- Embedding cultural continuity in child wellbeing planning
- Locally informed service responses for remote and regional communities

Long-term outcomes improve when communities are empowered rather than having solutions imposed externally.

### 3. Child protection should address root causes, not symptoms alone

Children often enter child protection systems because broader social issues remain unresolved.

Key systemic contributors include:

- Intergenerational trauma
- Family violence
- Substance misuse
- Poor housing and overcrowding
- Unemployment and poverty
- Mental health challenges
- Educational disengagement
- Historical distrust of government systems
- Systemic Racism

Unless these root causes are addressed, child protection responses risk becoming repetitive, costly and ineffective.

### 4. A trauma-informed and family-strengthening approach is essential

Many parents involved in child protection have experienced trauma themselves.

A system must remain accountable while also recognising that punitive-only responses can deepen family breakdown.

A stronger model should:

- Prioritise therapeutic interventions
- Expand family preservation programs as a high priority
- Improve reunification support where safe
- Provide culturally informed counselling and healing services
- Balance accountability with restoration and resilience-building

This protects children while also supporting safer family environments.

### 5. Workforce capability and staff wellbeing require urgent focus

Child protection work is complex, emotionally demanding and often undertaken in high-pressure environments.

Sustainable reform requires:

- Better workforce retention strategies
- Trauma-informed supervision

- Cultural capability training
- Support for burnout and vicarious trauma
- Recruitment and retention of Aboriginal staff
- Stronger practice leadership and mentoring
- Better support for staff in remote communities

A high-performing system depends on a skilled, supported and stable workforce.

#### 6. Better coordination between agencies

Child protection cannot sit with one agency alone.

Effective responses require stronger coordination between:

- Child protection services
- Health services
- Education
- Police
- Justice
- Housing
- Alcohol and drug services
- Mental health providers
- Aboriginal community organisations
- NGOs

Children and families often fall through gaps when systems operate in silos.

Shared accountability and integrated case coordination should be strengthened.

#### 7. Accountability, transparency and measurable outcomes

The system must be both compassionate and accountable.

Areas for improvement include:

- Clearer performance reporting
- Independent oversight
- Case review and file audit mechanisms
- Data on recurrence of harm, placement stability and reunification outcomes
- Child-centred quality assurance
- Learning from critical incidents and reviews

Accountability must focus not only on compliance, but on whether children are genuinely safer and better supported.

#### 8. Listening to children and communities

Children, families and communities should have a stronger voice in shaping policy and practice.

Reform should include:

- Child-centred consultation approaches
- Feedback mechanisms from families and carers

- Inclusion of lived experience voices
- Strong engagement with Aboriginal communities, particularly remote communities

Policies are stronger when informed by those directly affected.

## Conclusion

The Northern Territory has unique social, cultural and geographic challenges, but these challenges also create an opportunity to build a child protection system that is more responsive, preventative and community-led.

In my view, long-term reform should move beyond short-term reactive responses toward a model that is:

- Child-centred
- Preventative
- Trauma-informed
- Culturally safe
- Aboriginal-led as a priority
- Family-strengthening
- Accountable
- Collaborative across agencies
- Focused on measurable long-term outcomes

Above all, child protection reform should ensure that every child—regardless of geography, background or circumstance—has the opportunity to grow up safe, supported and connected to family, culture and community wherever possible.

Derek DCRUZ