

## Northern Territory juvenile justice program's closure sparks war of words

*Bush Mob's chief executive says failure to provide upgrades to blame but claims denied by NT government*



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A juvenile justice program in central Australia has shut down, with the operators and the government pointing the finger at each other for its demise.

The Apmere Mwerre program at Loves Creek Station was one of the only non-custodial juvenile sentencing options in Northern Territory and was being run outside of Alice Springs as a trial program by the Bush Mob, an organisation that works with at-risk youth and young offenders.

Bush Mob's chief executive, Will McGregor, said the government had not provided infrastructure and security upgrades needed for the camp to run safely and the organisation had no choice but to cease operations.

He told Guardian Australia the road had never been graded, water had to be trucked in and lights and fencing were never fixed, despite multiple requests.

He also said the satellite-based communication system frequently dropped out for days at a time, leaving staff unable to contact emergency services – including last week during an escape by four boys. A 17-year-old remains on the run.

McGregor said the upgrades would have helped staff during the episode. “I don’t know if it would have prevented the escape but it would have made a hell of a lot of risk mitigation,” he said.

He said staff had been unable to call police or a neighbour – from whom the absconders allegedly stole a vehicle and money.

After a meeting with department officials, Bush Mob decided it had to close the program for health and safety reasons.

The Northern Territory government has denied McGregor’s allegations and said it was “disappointing” Bush Mob was withdrawing its services “given the significant funding and support” it had received from Territory Families over the past 10 months.

It cited about \$111,000 in infrastructure upgrades and plans for \$180,000 in additional work.

Bush Mob was funded with \$2.485m from June 2016 to December 2017 to deliver early intervention youth programs.

The Territory Families minister, Dale Wakefield, told the ABC the department would look for someone else to provide the service “if they are feeling that they can’t be the right partner”.

Wakefield said Bush Mob had been funded to have extra staff and supervision, and she suggested CCTV cameras and fences would have gone against the aims of a non-detention environment.

McGregor said: “The bottom line is we asked for basic safety stuff. Our job was to run the program, not look after the infrastructure. We continued to ask for basic OH&S for 14 months.”

He said Bush Mob would continue to run its other programs and work with the community. He said the large number of Indigenous staff working for Bush Mob would continue their outreach work and were likely to continue to run bush trips for youth.

Camps like Bush Mob are increasingly being looked at as an alternative to youth detention.

The royal commission into the protection and detention of children in the NT has finished its public hearings and will deliver its final report in September.

A total of \$15m has been earmarked in the forward estimates for the [Darwin](#) and Alice Springs detention centres but the NT government has repeatedly said it was waiting for the royal commission’s recommendations before it embarks on large-scale changes.

In February it announced an \$18.2m reform package, including an early intervention engagement program for police to identify and work with at-risk children and families.

The package also included safety upgrades to the existing Don Dale youth detention centre but the facility – which is widely regarded as inappropriate for detaining children – remains in use, and figures last week revealed 18 of the 33 detainees were being held in the high-security unit – 10 of whom have not been sentenced and are on remand.

Territory Families said the children in the HSU were not in solitary confinement and that upgrades fitted every room with “improved windows, air-conditioning and individual room water coolers”.

In a submission to the royal commission, Shahleena Musk, a senior lawyer at the Human Rights Law Centre, said modelling youth detention on adult jails was “a recipe for failure”.

“Most of the children in the youth justice system have suffered significant disadvantage, trauma and health problems,” she said. “For the vast majority of children who offend, detention is not an appropriate response and can harm the very objects we are trying to achieve – rehabilitation and community safety.”

Musk, who worked extensively in youth justice as a senior lawyer for the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, said many children were leaving detention worse than when they went in.

“The NT government must shift its priorities away from shoring up failed youth detention centres that warehouse children towards proven, community-based options like education, training and drug and alcohol programs that help kids get their lives back on track.”