

NT says it cannot afford all of juvenile detention royal commission's reforms

Territory government commits \$229m over five years but wants federal contribution as well

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20 Apr 2018



The NT government has acknowledged the royal commission's finding of big failures in the youth justice and protection systems.

The Northern Territory government has announced more than \$229m in funding to enact the recommendations of the royal commission into abuses in the juvenile detention system but has conceded that it cannot afford to cover all of them.

It said the government had looked at what it could afford and repeated calls for federal government assistance in addressing the 227 recommendations handed down last year.

On Friday, the NT minister for Territory Families, Dale Wakefield, again acknowledged the royal commission's finding of "shocking and systemic failures" in the youth justice and protection systems.

“A system which was meant to make the community safer has in fact made more dangerous,” Wakefield said. “Today’s reforms are not just about more money. It is about doing things differently. This is about long-term, systemic changes that will be drivers for a safer community for us all.”

The \$229m is earmarked to be spent over five years and is on top of current funding. It includes some previously announced funding, such as \$71.4m to replace the Darwin and Alice Springs youth detention centres, which the NT government conceded on Friday was not enough.

Friday’s announcement pledged new or improved initiatives, including a youth and children’s court in Alice Springs, the introduction of family group conferencing, youth diversion programs and recidivism reduction measures.

It also committed \$5.4m for an overhaul of the out-of-home care system, which is understood to include improved involvement from Indigenous carers and families, and partnerships with Indigenous organisations. Out-of-home care now costs the government \$110m a year, out of a total department budget of \$270m.

The funding also includes \$66.9m to replace the department’s case management and information systems.

A new system would ideally link police, child protection and health systems, and provide alerts about domestic violence and other incidents within one or two days.

The notoriously dated systems, which are essentially paper-based and without streamlined coordination, have frequently been cited in instances of department failures.

In February, the department sent staff to Tennant Creek to investigate the circumstances around the alleged rape of a two-year-old girl. An internal review found that caseworkers did not have comprehensive information, which would probably have led them to make different decisions about the girl’s safety and potentially prevented the alleged rape.

The royal commission recommended the establishment of 20 child and family centres across the NT. As part of Friday’s announcement, 17 will be established at a cost of \$11.4m, with locations yet to be determined.

“We believe that the family and children centres is a way that the federal government can support the Northern Territory, and particularly Territorians in remote communities, to have access to services that other

Australians take for granted,” Wakefield said. “They have funded that type of facility before.”

The lack of full funding for the recommendations comes amid the NT’s economic woes following the redistribution of GST payments, which the Territory government estimates will amount to a cut of \$1.4m over four years.

“I think this plan gives the federal government plenty of opportunities to invest alongside the Northern Territory, in particular in the family and children centres,” Wakefield said.

“Obviously we are in a difficult budgetary situation. We looked at what we could afford within the Territory budget. We have absolutely made a significant financial commitment to this reform process, through this plan.”

The NT government had accepted – either entirely or in principle – all but 10 of the 227 recommendations delivered in March by the royal commission into the protection and detention of children in the NT, which it said were the responsibility of federal or non-government bodies.

It is yet to act on non-financial but significant recommendations, including raising the age of criminal responsibility to 12 or banning the detention of children under 14.
