

# INQUIRY INTO THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY 2010

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## Media release

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## Board of inquiry report

A focus on prevention, collaboration, greater Aboriginal involvement and control of service delivery, and strengthening families and systems are at the heart of recommendations by the Inquiry into the Child Protection System released today.

In addressing what it described as the 'overwhelming failure' of the Northern Territory's child protection system, the Inquiry's three co-chairs said it was important to focus on systemic failures not the many hard-working, thoughtful, dedicated people struggling to cope with limited resources in an environment characterised by extreme need.

They said their inquiry had uncovered a "tsunami of need" that could be addressed only by immediate action to deal with an overburdened system, preventative measures to deal with the problems upstream and a dual response system to helping vulnerable families that doesn't depend only on statutory interventions.

The inquiry's report, "*Growing them strong, together*", found the Northern Territory child protection system is in crisis because of:

- insufficient resources to deal with both the number of statutory interventions needed and the many issues beyond child protection that are integral to effective case management;
- the number of notifications of children formally identified as at risk which remain uninvestigated – currently there are nearly 1000 children in the Northern Territory identified as at risk who are receiving no support or investigation, with many more cases likely to be unreported;
- the fact that mandatory reporting was introduced without a commensurate increase in support services, with a tripling of notifications since 2003-04 and a 79.4 per cent increase in the past two years;
- an almost complete lack of Aboriginal controlled services, despite the fact that 73 per cent of notifications relate to Aboriginal children;
- under-resourced out of home care options (such as foster care and residential care) despite the fact that the \$34 million budget is the most costly component of the Health and Families budget. The number of children in out of home care has more than tripled to 555 in the past 10 years, with Aboriginal children four times as likely as non-Aboriginal children to be in care;
- a failure to monitor children in out of home care or provide appropriate support to foster parents, many of whom feel they are not respected, that they are subject to arbitrary decisions, and that children are moved in and out of their care with little planning or consultation;

- a non-government sector that is poorly resourced yet could play a critical role in supporting families and children;
- fragmented service delivery across agencies, many of which lack confidence in the ability of the child protection system to respond to notifications of children at risk and to work collaboratively with them in addressing problems;
- overwhelming workforce issues, such as problems recruiting staff, high turnover, untenable caseloads, low morale, a lack of Aboriginal workers, ad hoc training and staff inductions and poor supervision;
- a lack of support and therapeutic services for protected young people in the Northern Territory, who are at risk of adverse mental health outcomes, relationship difficulties and becoming clients of the youth and adult justice systems.

The Board of Inquiry into the Child Protection System in the Northern Territory was appointed by the Chief Minister Paul Henderson in December 2009. Its three co-chairs are Professor Muriel Bamblett, Dr Howard Bath and Dr Rob Roseby.

Since its appointment the Inquiry, assisted by a Secretariat, research staff and an expert Reference Group, has conducted numerous public forums throughout the Territory, visited 16 Aboriginal communities, heard from the representatives of many more remote communities, received 156 written and 80 oral submissions and held many other consultations with individuals and organisations.

The Inquiry's report, delivered to the Chief Minister today, contains 147 recommendations aimed at improving systems, programs and processes. There are three clusters of recommendations that focus on key areas of reform:

The first group focuses on the functioning of the current statutory child protection system. The Board finds that the system is overburdened by an enormous and chronic backlog of investigations and case work staff in child protection and out of home care are overwhelmed with the demand. It calls for the Northern Territory Government to immediately move to address the significant staffing shortages and unrealistic caseloads being carried, along with problems around training, support and supervision that have been identified.

The second group calls for the adoption of a population or a public health approach with a greater focus on working with families to prevent the need for statutory intervention as well as a significant new investment in supporting and working with families so children can be returned to safe, nurturing family environments.

"We are calling for a much greater focus on upstream support services to families and a real investment in addressing the context and causes, rather than just the effects, of child abuse and neglect," said Professor Muriel Bamblett.

"We saw a raft of issues that set the context for child abuse and neglect such as chronic housing shortages and overcrowding, chronic unemployment, health and education issues," she said.

"Child protection services cannot be expected to address these problems directly but must deal with the consequences. Governments have a central role in addressing these 'upstream' factors and we have specifically recommended a renewed service focus on the prevention of harm to children through support and therapeutic interventions for at risk families and children."

"We have also called for the development of appropriate Aboriginal-controlled services for child protection and out of home care services," said Professor Bamblett. "They hardly exist in the Northern Territory."

Professor Bamblett said the Inquiry supported the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, in which Aboriginal children at risk are placed with family or foster carers in their own community as much as possible.

“However, in applying this principle, the first considerations must always be the safety and ‘best interests’ of the child,” she said.

The third group of recommendations covers better child protection decision-making and referral services, a greater role for non-government agencies, better collaboration between agencies and alternative pathways for referrals.

“The statutory child protection system should be reserved for serious cases with a range of place-based, interagency services available for families in need of support.

The Inquiry said it was important to recognise that the Department of Health and Families did not have sole responsibility for child protection. Although its staff were often made the scapegoats for the system’s failures, child protection is the responsibility of both government and non-government agencies, families, communities and individuals.

“Fixing the system means acknowledging that everyone has a responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of children and ensuring a comprehensive range of services are in place to ensure our children are able to grow into healthy adulthood,” Dr Bath said.

“The Australian Government will continue to play an important role in protecting the Territory’s children as it provides a range of services and programs both as part of and in addition to the ‘Emergency Response’ (the ‘Intervention’). The Inquiry believes that a Australian-Territory Government partnership around child safety and wellbeing will need to continue well into the future if the very significant needs of Aboriginal children in the Territory are to be adequately addressed,” Dr Bath said.

Dr Rob Roseby said the Inquiry was gratified by the enormous response to its work and felt an enormous responsibility to show it had listened and come up with solutions that were realistic and practical.

“Child protection hasn’t failed because of problems with individuals. It has failed because it is the wrong system. It is completely overwhelmed , in part, because it is expected to do far more than child protection; because it is expected to deal with so many individual, family and community problems that no one else is addressing,” Dr Roseby said.

“What I want to highlight is the dedication of the hundreds of people out there working in the most challenging of contexts. The child protection staff we met are largely thoughtful and hard-working but they are working within a system that is set up to fail. When given the chance to sit back and reflect, they came up with fantastic ideas. There is a sense of a new beginning and an openness to change, that makes me feel optimistic about the future”, Dr Roseby said.

The Inquiry acknowledged the Northern Territory Government’s commitment to address issues highlighted in its Inquiry and the initial allocation of new funding in April this year.

Reforming the system will require a very significant financial investment but also a commitment to achieving change through consultation and collaboration to ensure that protecting the Territory’s children and ‘growing them strong’ is truly ‘everyone’s business’.

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