

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

An alliance of the CLC, NLC, CAALAS, NAAJA and AMSANT

MEDIA RELEASE

Prison's Indigenous Cultural Centre mustn't be tokenistic

22 May 2015

Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APONT) welcomes the establishment of the new Indigenous Cultural Centre at Darwin's prison.

"We urge the NT Government to ensure that it doesn't become a tokenistic gesture by properly resourcing the Elders Visiting Program and other initiatives that support cultural strengthening at all stages of the NT justice system", APONT spokesperson, John Paterson said.

"The NT justice system is fundamentally failing Aboriginal people.

"It is long established that prisoners need to maintain ties with their family and community to successfully reintegrate to the community. Yet the Northern Territory is the only state or territory without any Aboriginal-specific programs", John Paterson said.

"We have also seen the NT Government de-fund the Community Court and Corrections remove the Aboriginal-specific Aboriginal Liaison Officer positions at Darwin Prison.

Commissioner Middlebrook is right that "maintaining and building strong cultural links" (NT News 21/5/15) is a crucial way of breaking the cycle of offending.

Nearly 90% of prisoners are Aboriginal. Many Aboriginal people in Darwin prison are from remote communities, hundreds of kilometres from home, and with no visits from family. Many Aboriginal people in prison speak no English. Others have hearing or other impairments that make them completely isolated in prison.

"Elders play a vital role in helping get people back on the right track, to convey community disapproval about offending, and to reconnect people with their culture, their identity and to help with healing and unaddressed trauma.

"If the Indigenous Cultural Centre is to be more than tokenistic, we need a commitment from Corrections that the Elders Visiting Program will be supported and expanded.

For 10 years, Corrections has run an Elders Visiting Program that is supposed to support Elders from remote communities travel to Darwin to meet with prisoners from their home community. But these visits have simply not happened often enough.

“It is time for Corrections to properly support the EVP. How often will the Cultural Centre be used? What programs will run from it? How often will Elders visit? Will the Elders visit kids in youth detention?”, John Paterson said.

“We need to face the reality that the 'lock em up' Territory approach to justice has failed for 40 years.

If the Government is serious about an Indigenous Cultural Centre, it needs to support culturally strengthening approaches at all stages of the justice system.

“If we want to reduce crime, we need Elders involved. And not just in prison, but in early intervention programs like diversion and Aboriginal courts”, John Paterson concluded.

Media enquiries: Brionee Noonan, APO NT Coordinator – 0424 727 151