

Media Release

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NAAJA on track to resume intake of new clients as legal workforce strengthened

The North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) is on track to reopen its youth legal practice to new clients within weeks as it boosts its Central Australian workforce.

The organisation is in the process of finalising specialist staffing arrangements ahead of an anticipated March 1 reopening of its Youth Court practice in Alice Springs, which it was forced to temporarily suspend in late November 2023 amid a shortage of staff and unprecedented demand for legal services.

NAAJA has also instigated a new plan to assist people currently in custody without any legal representation. Along with Territory Criminal Lawyers, NAAJA will provide lawyers for around 25 unrepresented defendants currently in Alice Springs Prison.

The organisation has meanwhile entered agreements with several leading legal firms to provide short-term lawyers as well as partnerships with Victoria Legal Aid and the NSW Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions to recruit lawyers on secondment.

NAAJA's Principal Legal Officer Jared Sharp said recruitment plans were well-advanced, giving the board confidence that a staged return to full-service delivery could soon commence.

"NAAJA is a critical part of the Northern Territory social fabric," Mr Sharp said.

"As the largest Aboriginal-run legal service in the Territory, NAAJA simply must succeed. That's why the board and management have been working overtime in recent weeks to address structural challenges and the concerns of our funders, so we are in a position to re-open from March.

"Importantly, throughout this challenging period, NAAJA has continued to provide criminal law services to our clients; our lawyers continue to appear in court for existing clients every day and continue to travel to Tennant Creek and all bush courts.

"Last year, our lawyers supported more than 8000 Territorians amid overwhelming demand for our services as a result of heavy policing leading to increased numbers of Aboriginal people in detention straining resources.

"At the same time, we have been impacted by the same funding and staffing constraints that have hit the broader sector and forced Aboriginal Legal Services in several states to cut services.

"Despite facing this perfect storm, the board is confident that the necessary steps are now being taken to build capacity and ensure we can continue to provide high-quality and culturally appropriate services to the community long into the future."

Under NAAJA's Service Delivery Action Plan, the resumption of taking on new youth cases will be closely followed by adult matters, starting with clients who are in custody.

"We are mindful that many of our clients are highly vulnerable so while we are keen to return to full service quickly, it is not possible to simply re-open overnight," Mr Sharp said.

"Our plan ensures that services resume in a staged and sustainable way and ensures our lawyers are equipped for the challenging work they do in supporting Aboriginal Territorians.

Mr Sharp called on the NT Government to switch the focus of its criminal justice policies away from incarceration towards alternatives, such as community courts, law and justice groups, and diversion programs.

"The latest Closing the Gap report card shows that the NT is going backwards, with the number of children in youth detention increasing while nationwide it is going down," he said.

"Locking people up in jail is expensive and it doesn't make communities safer.

"NAAJA is calling on the NT Government to urgently repeal laws that contribute to the mass incarceration of Aboriginal people; and to consider smarter non-custodial options like Community Courts, return-to-country programs, and improved bail support programs."

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