NORTHERN LAND COUNCIL
Our Land, Our Sea, Our Life

MEDIA RELEASE

Failures still obvious at Royal Darwin Hospital morgue

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Fixing aesthetics of the Royal Darwin Hospital morgue does not fix the failures of the Northern Territory Government to care for Territorians in life and death says Northern Land Council.

NLC Chair Matthew Ryan says while workplace safety needs to be addressed, the government cannot overlook the loved ones who have passed on and the families waiting to bring them home.

> "For Aboriginal people, this is not simply about a building, an air-conditioning system or storage capacity. It is about our mothers, fathers, grandparents, children and loved ones.
>
> “It is about whether they are treated with dignity and respect while they wait to return home to Country."

For many remote Aboriginal families, returning a loved one home is not straightforward and is exceedingly expensive.

Across the NT, vast distances, transport challenges, weather conditions and seasonal road closures can mean loved ones remain in mortuary facilities for extended periods before repatriation can occur.

During the wet season, entire communities can become inaccessible for weeks. Families often have little choice but to wait until travel and ability to safely inter people becomes possible.

When loved ones do return home, communities come together to participate in cultural obligations that can last days or weeks, ensuring their loved one is properly honoured and laid to rest.

Mr Ryan said that reality creates an even greater responsibility for government.

> “When families are forced to entrust their loved ones to government facilities for weeks or months, they should be able to do so with complete confidence that those facilities are safe, respectful, adequately resourced and culturally appropriate – that’s a

NLC has been advocating for consideration of community-directed and culturally informed mortuary and bereavement facilities.

> “We have raised these issues with the NT Minister for Health and the Office of the Coroner to investigate how we can make changes,” Mr Ryan said.

"The current system is largely designed around institutional convenience rather than cultural reality.

"Aboriginal families should have a stronger voice in how mortuary services operate, how families are supported, and how loved ones are cared for while awaiting their return home and the costs associated with that."

The reports coming from Royal Darwin Hospital should serve as a wake-up call for government to look beyond immediate remediation works and examine whether the NT's mortuary system is genuinely meeting the needs of all Territorians.

"The way we care for people during life and after death says a great deal about who we are as a society," Mr Ryan said.

"Families deserve a system that treats their loved ones with dignity, honours cultural obligations and ensures they can ultimately return home to Country with the respect they deserve."

All governments have committed to Closing the Gap targets that bind them to deliver culturally appropriate health and bereavement services.

"Currently our people continue to be failed, with blame games played at Aboriginal Territorians' expense," Mr Ryan said.

- ***ENDS -***

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