

'National emergency': urgent leadership needed after fifth Aboriginal death in custody since June

Indigenous legal service calls for government to implement all recommendations from royal commission saying cycle of violence must end



'Our people are dying in custody every few weeks': the Indigenous legal service is calling for urgent national leadership after the fifth death in custody since June.

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Five Aboriginal deaths in custody since June is a national emergency that needs urgent leadership, the national Aboriginal and islander legal services has said.

The death of 49-year-old Sherry Fisher-Tilberoo 10 days ago while on remand in the Brisbane watch-house is the fifth Aboriginal death in custody since June, bringing to at least 441 the number of people who have died in custody since the royal commission handed down its final report in 1991.

“Our people are dying in custody every few weeks – this is a national emergency and we demand urgent national leadership,” the co-chair of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (Natsils), Nerita Waight, said.

“There are multiple coronial [inquests] on foot and two police charged with murder for fatal shootings. This cycle of violence, neglect and avoidance of accountability of police and corrections must end, before more of our people die,” she said in a statement.

Black Lives Matter is not a slogan, Waight said. “This is a movement which will not end until there is justice for every family.”

Natsils is calling for governments to heed its Black Lives Matter policy statement , which calls on governments to support affected families, for those involved in deaths in custody to be held personally accountable through criminal and civil processes, as well as more resources for diversionary programs like justice reinvestment.

Natsils is among a coalition of justice groups calling for governments to raise the age of criminal responsibility, and repeal low level offences that are disproportionately directed at Aboriginal people.

Last week, a new report from Human Rights Watch found that between 2010 and 2020, almost 60% percent of people who died in prisons in Western Australia had a disability, and half of those were Indigenous.

“Our mob with disability should be receiving culturally safe supports in community, not dying in custody at horrific rates,” the Natsis co-chair, Cheryl Axleby, said.

“Our communities have had the answers to end this injustice for decades. Solutions have been tabled in parliament, delivered by petition, yelled at rallies across the country.

“We call for urgent national leadership for all governments to urgently implement all of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, working closely with affected families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.”