



**Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
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2019-2020 Budget: Investment In Prevention, Diversion And Rehabilitation Must Increase

The Victorian Government spends nearly five times as much on locking up men, women and children as it does on diversion and rehabilitation programs, with the average cost of detaining a young person in Victoria estimated at over \$492,000 per year.

Today's budget announcements reinforce this cycle of investment, with priority given to the new supermax youth prison.

'By prioritising funding for incarceration, the Victorian Government is effectively investing in higher rates of reoffending,' says Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service CEO, Nerita Waight.

While the Government has committed \$45.5 million on early intervention and diversion programs targeting young people, this is not enough.

For too long, Government spending has focused on building a criminal justice system that is tough on crime. And for too long, this system has disproportionality impacted on Aboriginal Victorians, particularly Aboriginal youth and children.

According to the Australian Institute for Health and Wellbeing, Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria are approximately 12 times more likely than their non-Aboriginal counterparts to be detained and are more likely to have earlier contact with the youth justice system.

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service provides legal assistance and representation for Aboriginal Victorians and sees firsthand the impact of early interaction with the youth justice system, including dislocation from family, culture and community.

'Our young people need to be kept out of prison by investing in programs that support families and communities, by raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 and by providing culturally appropriate legal services for our young people.'

In 2017, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service established Australia's first legal service for Aboriginal young people and children, to provide holistic and culturally safe legal services for Aboriginal Victorians.

Balit Ngulu, meaning 'Strong voice,' was successful in diverting young people away from the youth justice system. But despite widespread endorsement across the legal assistance sector and repeated calls for government funding, Balit Ngulu was forced to close its doors in September 2018.

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service calls on the Victorian Government to support the re-establishment of Balit Ngulu as a direct way of supporting the voices and the right to self-determination of our young people.