

Fresh hope for criminal justice

'Reforms vital in NT'

JASON WALLS

TERRITORY criminal lawyers say they have "a real sense of imminent change" in addressing entrenched systemic issues within the NT's justice system under new Attorney-General Selena Uibo.

Criminal Lawyers Association of the NT president Marty Aust said his organisation had spent decades railing against the over-incarceration of Indigenous and other vulnerable Territorians.

However, Mr Aust said since Ms Uibo took over the portfolio following the August election, there was a new sense things might finally be changing for the better.

"We have fought tirelessly for reform that opens up pathways for alternatives to imprisonment," he said.

"We want to see the abolition of mandatory sentencing, greater diversion options for youths and adults, specialist courts, a functional drug court and reform around drug possession offences, reform to parole including recognition of street time and statutory parole for certain sentences."

Mr Aust said CLANT looked forward to the implementation of the Territory's Aboriginal Justice Agreement after submissions closed on the draft document in March but renewed calls for more funding.

"We have lamented the

dearth of resources and secure accommodation for people with serious mental health issues that find themselves involved in the criminal justice system," he said.

Ms Uibo said while the government was "delivering a range of legislative reforms that support a healthy, responsible, safe and resilient community" there would be no movement on mandatory sentencing before March. "The NT Law Reform Committee has released a discussion paper about mandatory sentencing and community-based sentencing," she said.

"Public comment closes on November 25 and we encourage Territorians to have their say. Our government will await the final report of the law reform committee which is due in March 2021."

Ms Uibo said the government's commitments included \$5m towards the Back on Track program to divert youth offenders away from the justice system but made no promises on additional funding.

"One of the main aims of our draft Aboriginal Justice Agreement is to reduce Aboriginal incarceration and recidivism by providing alternative pathways through the justice system," she said. "Strategies include alternatives to custody (the Alice Springs Life Skills Camp was recently opened), community courts and law and justice groups."