

THE federal government may pull hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding it provides each year to Balunu Foundation in the wake of anti-vaccination campaigning from its founder and chairman, **David Cole**.

Balunu Foundation, which received more than half a million dollars in government funding for the 2019-20 financial year, provides a range of services, camps and programs for hundreds of Territory at-risk youth each year.

Financial records show government funding, including grants, has made up anywhere between 80-95 per cent of the organisation's income in recent years, meaning the curtailment of federal funding could leave Balunu in dire straits.

Mr **Cole**, who is Indigenous, has come under fire in recent months for campaigning against Covid-19 vaccines in several locations across the Territory. At a rally in Darwin last month, he declared to a crowd that six people from Groote Eylandt had died from the vaccine in the space of a week. NT Health has flatly rejected the claim.

Mr **Cole** has declined to comment.

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), the federal agency responsible for funding programs addressing the needs of First Nations people, confirmed Balunu's funding was under review.

"NIAA is in discussions with Mr **Cole** and the other Balunu directors about the program, noting the concerns expressed, including by community members," a spokesman said. "Balunu's funded program with the NIAA is due to end on June 30, 2022." The spokesman said the NIAA's funding, which totalled more than \$450,000 for the 2019-20 financial year, went towards drug and alcohol treatment services, wellbeing services and advocacy services for young people at risk of suicide and self-harm.

Since its establishment by Mr **Cole** and his wife, Mim, in 2006, the foundation has had a tumultuous history as successive governments flip-flopped over funding diversion programs such as those offered at Balunu.

An NT government spokesman said it recently completely defunded Balunu, but would not say why funding was discontinued.

The spokesman said Territory Families provided \$150,000 to Balunu as part of a contract to provide youth camp services between June 2020 and May this year.

"This funding arrangement ended with the expiry of the contract," the spokesman said.

Mr **Cole** caught the ire of Chief Minister Michael Gunner in October, who condemned the Grooteylandt comments, saying: "To spread fear about a lifesaving vaccine is so contemptuous I don't have adjectives media would print." Weeks later, Mr **Cole** posted a video of himself from inside the Howard Springs quarantine facility, announcing he was going on a 14-day hunger strike after being arrested and taken into custody as a "political prisoner".

Police issued him with an infringement for contravention of emergency declaration – providing false information on a border entry form and was required to do 14 days' quarantine, however he was seen at a Darwin "freedom" rally eight days after he entered the facility.

The federal Minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt weighed in on Mr **Cole's** anti-vaccination sentiments, highlighting concerns over Covid-19 misinformation seeping into **Aboriginal** communities.

"I reject the misinformation being spread by Mr **Cole**," Mr Wyatt said. "Misinformation regarding Covid-19 and vaccines threatens the health and safety of people and our communities." According to the Australian charity regulator, Balunu has one other director at present, Nadine Lee. She could not be reached for comment.

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