The Territory Government is totally committed to reducing the incidence of violence against Department of Health and Community Services staff across the Territory.

The Minister for Health and Community Services, Jane Aagaard, said any violence against staff was deplorable and unacceptable.

Mrs Aagaard said the document tabled in Parliament today summarising four years of incidents against staff in the East Arnhem region – which she had not seen before - was shocking and made for unpleasant reading.

However, any suggestion that the Government was disinterested or has failed to act on the problem was totally wrong.

"I have said repeatedly that violence against staff is unacceptable," Mrs Aagaard said. "I find any suggestion otherwise to be dishonest and offensive.

"That is why as Minister I have made what has been a longstanding issue in the Territory a priority for my department.

"We have introduced a number of initiatives, particularly in remote communities, and injected significant funds to address the situation.

"However, this is not a problem that has suddenly occurred under this Government. Regrettably it has been around for years as the information tabled in Parliament this afternoon clearly shows."

Initiatives introduced by the current Government include:

- An Aggression Management Policy issued 12 months ago and updated regularly – which has resulted in a reduction in the number of incidents of threats or actual violence by over 20 per cent.

- The installation of around 30 duress alarms at remote health clinics this year, with 25 more planned in 2003/04.

- Security audits and site inspections of 10 remote clinics and in Darwin clinics, as well as in Royal Darwin, Katherine and Gove District Hospitals.

- Aggression minimisation training has been conducted for all new employees in all hospitals as part of their induction.

- In collaboration with the other agencies, the Department of Health and Community Services is developing proposals to formally adopt a "zero tolerance" approach to aggressive behaviour on communities
– any serious incident will be reported and pursued through police action.

- This will also see the targeting of a small number of communities where persistent incidents or threats have occurred, and engage key community figures to assist in addressing staff safety by developing locally appropriate principles and protocols regarding access to services and the responsibility of community members.

- Identify, through coordinated examination of available information, any key factors which appear to be involved in incidents, such as substance abuse or cross cultural communication problems.

Mrs Aagaard said while the problems were extremely serious, the timing of the Opposition’s attack smacked of a smokescreen to cover up the leadership issues that were threatening to tear the CLP apart.

"I have been advised this afternoon that the information is actually evidence prepared as a set of overheads for a presentation to the Select Committee looking into substance abuse by a local manager from my department. This committee includes two CLP members – Sue Carter and Richard Lim – neither of whom have made any comment to me or the media about the serious issues raised prior to today."