

SUBMISSION TO THE APS REVIEW

The following contribution is based on a personal experience of working for nearly 20 years in the APS, commencing in 1990 in the then Department of Community Services, and in 2008 transferring from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to the newly created Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

This submission relates to issues that need to be reviewed across Australian Government departments involved in social policy and community services for people with disadvantage, specifically:

- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs;
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations; and
- Department of Health and Ageing (on issues related to the last section below, "Issues Affecting Funded Service Providers").

These departments operate by funding external organisations to provide a range of important community services, with a particular focus on disadvantaged people.

Since the early to mid-1990s, various factors have negatively impacted on the ability of these departments to conduct their work in a manner and with processes that are suited to their *special and unique community service role*.

Set out below is the history of my experience, along with some analysis of the causes of the problems that have developed over years, and suggestions for change.

ISSUES:

Results of the Move to an "Accountability" Model --

A shift to excessive focus on quantitative matters -- numbers of service users and timely financial acquittal by funded service providers -- and less on qualitative issues, which are highly relevant and important in the community services field.

Onerous and resource-intensive "risk assessment" reporting on service provider performance introduced and required to be done by departmental officers, meaning increased workload. The value is questionable, as higher risk service providers can and have been managed without this type of reporting.

The gradual eroding of focus on qualitative issues around human service provision has resulted in departmental officers having less discussion on service development issues for passing to their National Office counterparts for program and policy development.

Staff training now has more emphasis on "contract management," and less around quality, development and innovation in community services. This has further weakened State Office staff ability to identify and discuss related issues, and pass information and recommendations to National Office.

Results of Resource Restrictions in the APS --

Since the mid-1990s, there have been: spates of redundancies; rolling out new community service programs without additional departmental resources for their administration; and "attrition" policies, whereby if an officer leaves, their position is not backfilled.

The above state of affairs has meant staff at mid-levels (APS5 – APS6 officers), who do the core work of the above-named departments: taking up clerical roles that were previously done by APS3 – APS4 officers; becoming tired and stressed from increasing workloads associated with redundancies and attrition policies; and not being able to focus robustly on their core role of monitoring and liaising with service providers, and having input to national policy and program development.

Issues Affecting Funded Service Providers –

Lack of recognition by funding departments that some service providers have difficulty with financial reporting and consideration not being given to providing professional, technical supports to assist them with the task.

Recurrent, long-term funding agreements being replaced with short-term contracts, which has not occurred in all cases but there has been an increasing trend in this direction.

It means disruption in service provision to vulnerable people, and to service providers in having to close down operations at the end of a short-term contract (see attachment at pp 4-6 regarding a Canadian experience of recently changing a short-term contract to a long-term funding agreement to deal with these significant issues).

In addition, it means increased administrative work in government departments and by service providers due to resource-intensive retendering processes after the contracts expire.

Community service providers receiving funding through two or more government programs have different financial reporting arrangements. This occurs over programs within one department, as well as across two or more departments.

Although the content of community service programs varies within and across their administering government departments and *reporting related to service content needs to remain separate and specialised*, the possibility of *streamlining financial reporting for service providers receiving funds from across different programs and departments should be examined*.

I hope that raising the above matters for Australian community service government departments has been helpful, and that they will be reviewed.

Special treatment for community service departments is warranted, possibly with special legislation, to ensure *they can operate in their unique, qualitative way* to meet the needs of disadvantaged Australians. They also need to have adequate administrative resources, as well as acquittal and reporting processes to be made and kept simple for both departmental officers and funded service providers.

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ATTACHMENT TO SUBMISSION TO APS REVIEW

Copy of e-mail from Australian Youth Information Network (AYIN) of 17 October 2009 regarding an example in Canada of reversion of short term contract to multi-year funding:

AYIN members that operate programs dependent upon short-term funding cycles will relate to this story from Canada:

In Canada, Katimavik, a youth program that has been operating since 1977 but under threat in recent times due to changes in Canadian government policy, has recently secured multi-year funding.

" 'Operating on an annual basis was very challenging because it hindered the long-term planning process', says David Atkinson, Chair of the Katimavik Foundation.

"With a multi-year agreement now in place, we can embark on a comprehensive funding diversification strategy that will allow Katimavik to reach more youth and communities and increase the number of programs we deliver."

Katimavik promotes civic engagement and fosters sustainable communities through "challenging national youth service programs". For further information on Katimavik see <http://www.katimavik.org> or visit their blog at <http://www.gokatimavik.com>

----- DETAILS -----

The 14 October media release, citing Katimavik's long-serving Jean-Guy Bibeau, Executive Director of Katimavik, is cited at full at the end of this email.

It reads in part:

"Today, the Department of Canadian Heritage announced that it would provide stable funding to Canada's leading national youth service program for three years starting in 2010 for a total investment of 45 million dollars.

"This decision follows several months of discussions between Canadian Heritage and senior Katimavik officials. For the last three years Katimavik had been operating on an annual funding basis.

"We are very pleased to have secured a long term partnership with the government of Canada," says Jean-Guy Bibeau, Executive Director of Katimavik.

"Such an investment in our national volunteer service program will help provide thousands of youth the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way to nation-building while providing useful community service in hundreds of communities across the country. Engaging youth in full-time volunteer service can have a very profound effect especially in light of the current economic crisis. This funding will enable thousands of Canadians to benefit from Katimavik in the years ahead", Bibeau concluded.

"Since 1977, Katimavik has enabled nearly 30,000 Canadians to be involved in more than 2,000 communities throughout Canada. Participants between the ages of 17 and 21 live with ten other youth from across the country in two or three communities. They commit to six- or nine-month programs, where they volunteer for 28 to 35 hours a week for a variety of non-profit organisations. Youth also benefit from Katimavik's structured learning program focused on civic engagement, leadership, official languages, the environment, cultural diversity and healthy lifestyle.

"Katimavik will undergo several structural and operational changes in order to maximize the number of youth who join the program. Starting in the fall of 2009 Katimavik offers three new specialized 6-month program options that focus on the specific themes of its structured learning model. These include Cultural Discovery and Civic Engagement, Eco-citizenship and Active Living as well as Second Language and Cultural Diversity.

" 'Our plan is to diversify both our funding and our program model to meet the needs and growing demands of today's youth and to ensure that we continue to offer relevant and innovative programs,' says Robert Giroux, Chair of Katimavik's Board of Directors.

" 'Katimavik's time-tested nine-month program will remain the cornerstone of our service-learning model for young people interested in engaging in a longer term of active community service'.

"Such new programming coupled with a multi-year funding will allow Katimavik to expand the program to an even greater number of communities across the country.

"Specifically, Katimavik plans to develop programs in Canada's far north that meet the social, cultural and economic realities of the arctic region.

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---- end of media release extract --

Sources:

Marketwire, 'Katimavik to Receive Multi-Year Funding From the Federal Government', media release, <http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/Katimavik-1059709.html>, viewed 17 October 2009,

and

Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP), 'Service News Worldwide', October, 2009, email alert, 17 October 2009.
