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Advocates upset as govt misses diversity targets

By Ben Westcott

Advocates for equality in the ACT have reacted with disbelief to figures showing the government has missed its diversity hiring targets again, and by a large margin. Less than a third of the projected number of staff were hired.

Representatives of Canberra's Aboriginal and disabled communities have called for new programs to be considered, including the possible introduction of quotas in ACT government departments.

The then Stanhope Labor government launched its respect, equity and diversity framework in December 2010, with the aim of increasing the number of Canberra residents from diverse backgrounds in the government workforce by 2015.

However, a year from the framework's end date, the number of diverse residents working for government is still hundreds off the proposed target.

ACT directorates' annual reports show that only 21 of a planned 72 people with disabilities were hired in the past year, making the government 253 people short of its 2015 target.

Additionally, the government only hired 16 people from an Aboriginal background in the past year, well below the intended 58 and leaving them to find 150 people in one year.

ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body chairman Rod Little said the new numbers were not good enough.

"If you commit to something I think you should at least come close to achieving it. If you're missing the target two years in a row, you have to be asking the question, 'How serious are you?'" he said.

Mr Little said he had seen work being done by the ACT government to change the culture inside Canberra's directorates, but it was taking too long.

He said the government should be considering other strategies to

improve indigenous participation in the ACT public service and that if the framework was not producing results a conversation needed to be had.

"The main concern for us is [that] while this is taking its time we're not getting people employed and there are consequences of that. That means people are not getting their services, or are missing out in participating economically in society," he said.

Advocacy for Inclusion general manager Christina Ryan said she was starting to question the government's strategies for recruiting people with disabilities.

"They got 30 per cent of their target and their target wasn't even a very big one," she said. "It's one thing to be coming up with strategies and programs and language but, excuse me, we need results."

Ms Ryan said the government had to work harder to attract people with disabilities into jobs. At present, they comprise only 2 per cent of the workforce in ACT

directorates. If the targets were not effective in getting people with disabilities into the public service, the government needed to consider quotas, she said. "We need to ask whether quotas will be more effective and make recruitment people sit up and think whether they need to do something about it. Quotas produce outcomes," she said.

Commissioner for Public Administration Bronwen Overton-Clarke said the targets set in the respect, equity and diversity framework were deliberately designed to be challenging.

A range of measures had been applied to meet the targets, including identifying designated positions, support and mentoring programs, as well as traineeships and work-experience programs, but she admitted more work needed to be done. "We need to do more to understand, in a practical way, why directorates are finding it difficult to attract people with a disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to jobs."

Chifley's hotel to take guests again



RENOVATION: Hotel Kurrajong manager Robert McKenna outside the building. Ben Chifley's room will be kept in its original state. Photo: JAMILA TODERAS

By Henry Belot

Former prime minister Ben Chifley's residence of choice, the Hotel Kurrajong, will reopen its doors to guests in December after a six-month renovation that has sought to revitalise part of Canberra's political history.

The hotel, which is co-owned by TFE Hotels and NRMA, was designed in 1924 by the government's chief architect, John Smith Murdoch, who also designed Old Parliament House.

Mr Chifley made the hotel his residence of choice while prime minister and then opposition leader - rejecting The Lodge in Deakin - until he suffered a fatal

heart attack in his hotel room on June 13, 1951.

NRMA ACT chief executive Alan Evans said a lot of time, money and energy had been invested in the hotel to ensure it retained its historical importance and charm. "We are very conscious that we have a significant and valuable part of Canberra's heritage and we must preserve it," he said.

Mr Evans said the former prime minister's room would remain in its original state despite other rooms being extensively refurbished.

TFE Hotels chief executive Rachel Argaman said the company was looking forward to reopening it as a 4.5-star hotel and

allowing guests to enjoy its legacy.

"Our guests want more than just a bed, and at Hotel Kurrajong they will experience a piece of the capital's history with the hotel having enjoyed a long association with key Australian political and architectural figures," she said.

The hotel will relaunch as a 147-room hotel with 26 heritage-listed rooms, four executive suites, four balconies and eight terraces.

NRMA chief executive Tony Stuart was quick to point out the history and tradition of the building and described the reopening as "an exciting chapter in the NRMA's growing travel and accommodation portfolio".

"We can't wait to open its doors

to our members and the broader community," he said.

The garden built by Commonwealth horticulturist Thomas Charles Weston in 1926 will remain, along with most of his original paintings.

The relaunch will include Chifley's Bar and Grill, which will offer more than 80 local and international wines.

Between 1976 and 1978, the Kurrajong closed its doors to guests and became the temporary base for the offices of Parliamentary staff. The ACT government secured a 50-year lease on the building in 1993 and reopened it as a hotel in 1995 before selling it in 2013.

ACT firm lends hand in Ebola-hit Liberia

By Natasha Boddy

In the Ebola-stricken west African nation of Liberia, conditions facing health and aid workers sound eerily post-apocalyptic.

Sanitation is lacking, there is no garbage collection, food distribution has become difficult and access to clean water is poor.

Borders are closed in some areas and there are checkpoints in others. In some smaller villages, deeply held beliefs about the handling of bodies and suspicion about the virus run strong.

For aid and health workers, it can be dangerous and confronting work and there is no definitive answer as to when the world's worst Ebola epidemic will end.

For the past several months, workers from Canberra-based company Aspen Medical have been providing care in a developing nation that has seen its health system buckle under Ebola.

"Most Australians would just be staggered if they went over there and saw what the health workers are putting up with to be able to deliver those really vital services, and all of those health workers are really just doing an outstanding job in what is a very difficult situation," said Glenn Keys, chief executive of Aspen Medical.

Aspen Medical had already set up a clinic in the capital Monrovia several months ago, before the Ebola outbreak.

But as efforts turned to the outbreak, primary healthcare became an unintended casualty.



WORKING ON THE FRONT LINE: A street scene in hard-hit Liberia.

"Everybody is still going through the rest of their lives while the Ebola outbreak is happening - people are still having car accidents, they're having heart attacks, children are still getting ill," Mr Keys said.

"There's still quite a large need that I think is forgotten, which is that you still need to be able to provide primary care to the population while Ebola is being treated."

"One of the things that is very sad is that the public health system in Liberia has almost collapsed under the weight of the Ebola outbreak."

Medical have stepped in to help meet that forgotten need.

"The local hospital, the JFK Medical Center, is almost inoperational due to the Ebola demand, so we're seeing a large number of non-Ebola patients that are all just the primary healthcare issues that you would want addressed if you lived there," Mr Keys said.

He said Aspen was also talking to aid organisations and other countries about providing support for the Ebola epidemic and had been asked by the United Nations to provide extra staff in Ebola treatment facilities.

The Ebola crisis has created a challenging environment for workers on the ground. More than 6500 people across five West African countries have been infected and 3091 have died, according to the UN health agency.

Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone are three most affected countries and face enormous challenges in stopping transmission and providing care for all patients.

"People are seeing a range of things that really can be very confronting," Mr Keys said.

"I think everybody is really learning as we're going, because I don't think we've ever seen anything quite like this in recent times."

"Our staff are being very careful - they're doing a lot of infection control procedures, they're doing a lot of management of patients. If we find patients that have fevers, which is the first indication of Ebola, then we direct them towards the treatment facilities."

"It is challenging for our people in our clinic. We have to make sure we're managing the clinic, we're treating our people, we're forwarding Ebola patients to the appropriate facility and that we're not infecting our clinic, which would then remove it as a treatment facility."

For the half a dozen Aspen Medical staff in Liberia, the work is not without its risks.

One of Aspen's doctors contracted Ebola while working at JFK Hospital. He has since recovered.