

Indigenous Directions and Development Limited



Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on
Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

28 May 2009

Re: Senate inquiry into the recent tender for Employment Services 2009-2012.

The Board of Directors of Indigenous Directions and Development Limited welcome the opportunity to voice concerns into the Job Services Australia tender and resolved at its meeting of 20 May 2009 to submit the following.

From our perspective, the approach of the Department to the tender process appears to be dominated by economic considerations, that is, that the larger mainstream organisations have been successful in major cities / metropolitan areas because they have more resources, despite their lack of Indigenous cultural competency credentials.

The more resources they have the more qualified in material terms, the greater marketing ability and the easier to be more acceptable to government.

In short we perceive that there is an inbuilt bias in favour of those with substantial funds available and Indigenous non-profit organisations in major city urban areas, simply cannot compete at this level.

However, the real tragic outcome of this kind of tender process is that the largest Indigenous population in Queensland, i.e. South East Queensland, will not have a specialist service provider to cater for the real needs of Indigenous people. Governments must know by now that having one or two Indigenous people within mainstream services has not worked in the past and will not work now.

This indicates to us and many other Indigenous people that the quality of service that will be given by the mainstream provider's to the Indigenous communities will not only be very limited in scope but will not inspire confidence in the community.

It also appears that where an Indigenous provider has been successful under the tendering process, the majority has been in rural or remote areas. It is reasonable to conclude therefore that there are reasons other than the advantages of a specialist Indigenous provider that have resulted in the favourable decisions on those successful tenders.

The effect of this is that there is no Specialist Indigenous Employment Service provider in South East Queensland region and presumably other regions. This is contrary to the evidence (demographic, labour market and other data) that such a service is urgently needed in this region.

This raises the very real concern that a policy decision has been made to mainstream service provision for Indigenous people in urban areas.

It is submitted that:

Either Government policy is to mainstream the provision of the employment services, or

That the tender document has made assumptions based on an incorrect understandings of government policy, or

The structure and weighting of the tender document has been defective and so has biased the outcome of the tender determinations.

Is there or is there not a government policy to mainstream such services or a policy that has such an effect?

We presume that such a policy shaped the decisions made in the tender process, or alternatively, we would have to conclude that the tender process itself has shaped Government policy.

Put simply our concern is that a significant government policy decision has been made under a departmental procurement process.

If there is such a policy, please provide details and who was responsible for deciding on and implementing that policy?

It is understood that tenderers spent tens of thousands of dollars on their tender. Related to this, it is also noted that there is an indirect but serious weighting against Indigenous organisations participating in such a tender process.

No doubt a **well-written document** was presented but one must query whether such documentation is indicative of a capacity to perform.

Question: Was there an internal decision to mainstream Indigenous programs in urban areas?

If this is the case then this too is an essentially economic decision – once again relegating the needs of Indigenous people to the lowest rung of economic importance and further reducing yet again the right for Indigenous people to have choice as most Australians have choice.

If, in relation to Indigenous people, a need is identified in urban areas, then the Government has an obligation to fulfil this need.

Governments at all levels have acknowledged over time that whatever and wherever the need, Indigenous clientele are best serviced by Indigenous people.

How can the Government assess appropriate servicing on a written document?

In other words, how can this project (or any project) rely upon the merits of single submissions in isolation to the regional impact and community participation in those economic and social outcomes sought by the region as a whole?

How will the generalist service providers meet the diverse cultural backgrounds of South East Queensland's Indigenous population?

The cultural and general competency of these providers can only ever be evaluated after the fact and by that time, the Indigenous client will already have been through the system (of the generalist provider) and become 'invisible'. (This assumption by Indigenous people everywhere is based on real evidence)

There is a well known reluctance on the part of Indigenous people to use mainstream provider services due to past negative experiences and anxiety regarding the standard and consistency of interest, advice and care provided by those organisations.

Are there any mechanisms for a review of the service providers in regions without a specialist Indigenous provider, given that they were not measured against Indigenous needs?

The government must be aware that adhering to tendering processes such as this has the potential to actually create more Gaps rather than help to Close the Gap.

The worst-case scenario, not to mention the irony, is that continuance with such assimilationist policies (which is the real outcome of the tendering process in question) is that the Indigenous client will never fit in or assimilate into the mainstream Australian services culture.

Recommendations

With respect, our solutions to the glaring deficiencies are:

Use some of the resources allocated for Job Services Australia to formulate Indigenous Employment Hubs in all areas where there is an urgent identified need, and

Utilise the successful Indigenous providers for the new Indigenous Employment Programs (IEP) as a platform for these Indigenous Hubs.

Conclusion

Once again the most disadvantaged will be forced to utilise the same provider with persons who, have not and never will, require intensive support.

Australian governments are not neutral or 'culture free' - the values and assumptions underlying the decisions and policies they make are not objective and value free.

What Indigenous people want most is autonomy. If they have economic autonomy, it is a win for both the

government, which wants to end wastage of the welfare dollar, as well as for the Indigenous community, which wants an end to the patronisation and/or indifference.

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