

Appropriateness and effectiveness of the Community Development Program

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Thank you for the invitation to submit a response to this inquiry. The area of my expertise most relevant here draws on economic anthropology and a particular interest in the study of work. I recently conducted qualitative research into Indigenous experiences of employment in the Australian Public Service and I am currently exploring interactions between the Public Sector and Indigenous Sector.

This submission concerns a specific request from the committee to respond to matters raised at the Alice Springs session of the inquiry on the 28th of August 2017 concerning 'skills and capabilities and organisational arrangements needed in central government'.

In essence, I wish to suggest in this submission that:

Highly relevant skills and capabilities currently exist in the APS among its Indigenous employees that could be far better utilised than is presently the case.

In this regard, I make three substantive suggestions:

1. Improve engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants

Many of the skills and capabilities required to improve policies and relationships in relation to Indigenous people are already positioned within government but are currently underutilised. Greater attention to organisational arrangements could improve the situation.

The commonwealth goes to enormous efforts annually to maintain its number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. This cohort has strong knowledge of issues facing communities and often possess firsthand experience of the effects of policies, many through previous roles in the Indigenous community sector, in addition to possessing a range of 'soft' skills vital to improved engagement with external stakeholders. Individual departments need to give consideration to identifying existing proficiencies and skillsets within their Indigenous workforce as *an important asset*, and actively create opportunities where these can be applied and developed, including at lower levels.

My research suggests there is a high level of motivation among Indigenous public servants to assist in shaping and improving policy, but many find it difficult to effect change or to raise insights or concerns. Indigenous employment is currently concentrated at lower levels in the APS, with very few individuals advancing to decision-making roles. Greater support should be directed to the advancement of Indigenous employees, which includes supporting the efforts of the Indigenous cohort within the SES to maintain and build their numbers.

2. Seek to maintain linkages with those ATSI employees 'orbiting' between government and the Indigenous sector and benefit from the expertise this offers

While the APS has had some success in recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people, it also experiences a high annual turnover among Indigenous staff. Some of this movement occurs as 'orbiting' – that is, a proportion of Indigenous APS employees enter from and also depart for the Indigenous community sector. Precise numbers remain unquantified, but anecdotal evidence suggests a potentially significant proportion of ATSI employees are involved in movement of this sort.

In the first instance, a better understanding of the movement of ATSI people through the APS and to other sectors is crucial and currently lacking. What positions are they departing to fill (particu-

larly from EL and SES levels)? Do they intend to return to the APS at any stage, and what key factors are involved in decisions of that kind?

My own research suggests ATSI public servants choose to leave the APS for the Indigenous sector for a range of reasons, but prominent among these is a desire to develop a broader range of skills and work more closely 'on the ground' in capacity-building efforts within Indigenous communities. Some former public servants expressed interest in seeing how a particular program they were working on within government was being rolled out, but were frustrated at the lack of available opportunities to do so without departing from the APS entirely. Greater institutional flexibility in this respect, such as through short secondments, placements or leave arrangements, may prevent some ATSI employees from departing the APS as well as providing experiences highly relevant to continuous improvement in Indigenous policy.

In addition, former APS employees working closely with Indigenous communities should be seen as a valuable resource for government. Actively maintaining links with APS employees who are exiting to the Indigenous sector could potentially assist government in pursuing collaborative partnerships with Indigenous communities and organisations in addition to providing a critical source of relevant place-based expertise (for example, in developing strengths-based approaches to particular programs). Such efforts would also leave the door open for valued ex-APS employees to return to the bureaucracy at a later stage. There is evidence that this is occurring informally; formal measures to encourage relationships of this sort would be beneficial.

Maintaining links with departing employees (and potential returnees) can be facilitated through better exit processes, such as providing employees formal opportunities to debrief on their APS experience and reasons for departure in a confidential setting with an impartial interlocutor, ideally one at arms length from government (an online survey is insufficient here). Resulting data could be de-identified and compiled and made accessible to researchers as well as to executive within government departments. Maintaining a register of former employees to call on as consultants or key contacts outside the government sector could also be useful, essentially extending the reach and expertise of government.

3. improve the flow of information to regional office staff and utilise their insights and skills

A key message from regional office 'front line' Indigenous bureaucrats who are in regular contact with the Indigenous community sector is that their knowledge or experience is rarely sought out by central offices. When this does occur, advice often appears to be ignored. Government could consider developing accessible means to enable feedback to be elicited routinely from regional staff in order to build and deepen the evidence base available to government as well as anticipate potential problems in program delivery.

At the same time information flowing to regional staff from Canberra is generally perceived as inadequate, particularly at critical points such as the creation and roll-out of new policy (a recent being the *Indigenous Advancement Strategy*). In these situations regional staff can struggle to maintain their professional advisory roles, and can be quickly perceived as withholding vital information, undermining relationships with Indigenous community and sector organisations that may have been carefully built up over lengthy periods.

Enhancing reciprocal engagement with regional staff through regular communication and measures for eliciting and valuing their local knowledge and experience by central offices would be an important component in deepening government expertise 'at the coalface' of Indigenous policy and programs.

References

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