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UMOONA AGED CARE ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

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BY: ATSI A

The Secretary
Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

26 April 2005

Dear Ms Scarlett

Inquiry into Indigenous Employment.

Umoona Aged Care Aboriginal Corporation welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry as we have made employment and training a priority of the organisation. We believe we have had good results in this important but complex area and would be pleased to share some of our experiences.

It is necessary to give the whole picture in order to understand the employment successes. As with all Aboriginal organisations it is not possible to isolate indigenous employment from all other facets of the business. UACAC believes (as do many Aboriginal organisations) that employment and training are inseparable and essential for the success and sustainability of the organisation.

The Umoona Aged Care Aboriginal Corporation runs the Aged Care Program based within a Residential Care Facility at Coober Pedy in outback South Australia. UACAC provides high level care and independent residential accommodation, transport, counseling, advocacy, personal care, meals, domestic assistance, shopping, respite, bush tucker, personal care, housing for frail aged and people with a disability. The Aged Care program also operates a Bush Camp for traditional elders.

Meals and food services, case management, transport, personal care, home help and social support are the main HACC services provided. Reliable, high quality service is given to about 60 clients - 18 residents, and at the Day Centre, 26 aged people and 18 regular transients. All clients are Aboriginal and come from Coober Pedy and surrounding areas including the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands.

The service aims to provide the right kinds of care for each individual, with special importance on making sure tradition and culture are respected. Umoona Aged Care stays flexible, listens to Aboriginal community wishes and preferences, and involves Elders, clients and the community in every aspect of planning and delivering services.

The success of the service can be roughly divided into three basic areas.

1. Aboriginal Community Board control.

Membership of the UAC Management Board, elected each 3 years, has high status in the community. Currently, all board members are Aboriginal Elders who command great respect. The Board sets the values and priorities for the service, deciding, in principle, all aspects of the Centre – design, landscaping and decoration, client admission, staffing and programs. While they are sad that not all who need service get it, they are determined to keep the service strong and avoid alcohol related trouble with a strict staff selection and admission policy.

2. Consistency with traditional law and culture

People at UAC can eat traditional foods, go bush, gather bush medicine and craft materials, paint, cook, sit and eat in traditional ways. They have transport to and from Bush Camp. One visiting Elder has come from Indulkana to help settle down some young drinkers causing trouble. Communication in the Centre is based on respect and traditional authority.

Control by the Board brings integrity and builds up the trust of the Aboriginal community. The organisation's written aims, the building, its surrounds, the workers and the program activities all show respect and work towards strengthening tradition and culture. Rostering arrangements take note of traditional avoidance relationships, Men's and Women's Business and kinship bans. Staff get special leave to attend to ceremonial obligations. Because some of the male residents are old traditional men there are certain ceremonial imperatives that require their personal care (washing, feeding etc) to be carried out by other suitably "qualified" men where possible. This is not an easy criterion to fulfill and UACAC Aboriginal male workers are encouraged to maintain and develop their ceremonial obligations. Paid leave is granted for this important "learning."

UACAC staff assist the community by helping to apply for and work with other programs with similar culturally appropriate goals (e.g. Watiku program, Kungka Tjuta Women's Group, Irati Wanti, School Cultural Awareness program, Substance Misuse, Aboriginal Visitors Scheme.)

3. Staff selection, motivation, training and retention.

Workers are selected for their abilities, skills and suitability for working with older people, plus one essential attitude - respect for tradition and culture.

The Board and Management of UACAC see training as a serious community responsibility, decide the direction they feel should be followed and try to ensure appropriate training is completed by as many community people as possible. A wide variety of options are available:

- Apprenticeships. Four young people have secured 3 year apprenticeships, three in Aged Care through UAC. This is believed to be a first for the Aboriginal Apprenticeship system in S.Aust. These apprentices have chosen to focus on youth work for their final year specialisation and UACAC supports this, respecting the individual's career choice. The training and employment needs of the wider Aboriginal community are seen as more important than immediate UACAC needs. The other apprenticeship is in financial management.
- Traineeships offer a one year course including TAFE studies plus on the job training. Each trainee's course is designed to meet their particular needs.
- All training is accredited and trainees are mentored by already qualified UACAC staff. Trainees have one study day allocated each week. The study day must be taken at work so assistance is always available and trainees keep up with expected study requirements.
- Trainees expect and receive employment on successful completion of their traineeship.
- Study input and feedback may be through on the job training, video links, visiting educators, posted modules and some Open learning on Internet.
- In addition to this accredited training, UACAC also sources on the job training for all staff in OHW&S, administration basics, diabetes, dementia, driving licenses (bus and 4WD).
- CDEP is an important element – workers can try out and see if they like and are suited to the work.
- Recruitment and retention is good because the work of UACAC is highly valued in the community. The workers have status, the building is attractive and comfortable to work in, the clients are (mostly) appreciative and good workers are remunerated well. The atmosphere and sense of team is positive.

This employment and training policy has been a priority since the residential facility opened in late 2002. In that time all full time employees have undertaken supported accredited training. 16 courses have been undertaken with 8 graduates and 8 continuing today. A 100 % completion rate to date. All but 2 of those employees still work at UAC. One left for personal reasons after completing his Cert 3 and the other transferred employment to another community but still works in the same field. A 94 % employment retention rate.

It is understood that the ideas of supported training, a comfortable workplace and so on, as mentioned above, are not new and are generally accepted as essential to positive outcomes in employment. Despite this, Indigenous employment does not have enough success stories.

The difference, we feel, is constant, concentrated hard work to turn theory into reality. This is not as simple as it may appear. It requires dedicated staff, team building, encouragement, counseling and an appreciation of each individual's environment and background.

An example.

Coober Pedy is not an easy place to live for most people. It is in the desert, harsh and inhospitable, remote from many services and comforts taken for granted elsewhere. Unemployment is high. Aboriginal employment is virtually non-existent outside the Aboriginal organisations (which vary in their effectiveness) and the related incidence of substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness and so on is frighteningly high. UACAC recognises the impact this has on all staff and clients, understands the history and expectations and sees, daily, at first hand, the destruction and despair.

Therefore, Aboriginal employment is looked upon differently and normal practices are sometimes waived.

But not as may commonly be expected

UAC provides a structured workplace with clear expectations on all staff and these expectations are adhered to.

As a residential aged care facility staffing is required 24 hours per day 7 days per week. This is not easy to achieve in places with large, trained pools of potential workers to call on. In Coober Pedy, for an Aboriginal organisation with a strong policy of Aboriginal employment, it could be regarded as approaching miracle status.

Casuals are used at times but full time staff can do extra shifts, earning more money, if they wish and as long as they get to work on time at all times, notify if they are sick (and obtain medical certificate) and maintain good work practice. There is always a senior staff member on call 24 / 7 to support staff with any work issues so they do not have to take responsibility beyond their comfort level. (which increases over time)

Everyone uses a time clock, work hours are checked and pay deductions made for time shortages. This is not as unfriendly as it may sound. Sick leave and annual leave can be accessed at short notice in an emergency but once it is all used the only alternative is leave without pay. But with genuine reason, the job is always there to come back to. Staff are counseled to assist, if possible, with non work related issues and even financial matters. Salary sacrifice is explained and encouraged as a tool to budgeting as well as the monetary incentive.

Management at the day to day level is on an open door basis for all staff and clients. While there is obviously a management structure where duties and lines of management responsibility are clear, this is not an active hierarchy model. All staff are seen and treated as equal. Interaction and supervision is based on mutual respect. Respect does not come with position but rather from how individuals carry out their jobs.

This way of working does not suit everyone, nor is it perfect by any means. No staff member is always happy and fulfilled all the time. Not everything always works all of the time. Mistakes are made regularly but hopefully the same mistakes and failures are not repeated too often if at all. An action research model is used for all planning, strategising and training situations. This model is clearly explained to all staff, diagrammed and encouraged as a life skill.

And staff do respond to this approach. They respond to being given responsibility along with respect, to clearly stated and structured expectations and to fair reward along with accountability. It has worked at UACAC to date and we feel we are getting better at it. In the hope that this does not appear patronising, UACAC attempts to provide training in life's realities and possibilities alongside the attainment of work skills. It is this type of practice that requires constant, focused hard work.

There is a cost. Various training incentives help and would probably be sufficient in normal circumstances. But these are not normal circumstances and success of this dimension needs extra work, backfill wages and good study resources. Any means of supplementing existing incentives would help as other aged care programs suffer at present to pay for training. Funding backfill wages could be written into funding agreements based on levels of study, remote delivery needs and numbers of staff undertaking training, recognising the educational disadvantage with which most Aboriginal people from remote locations have to cope.

Other recommendations would include incorporating training and employment criteria in all funding agreements as part of a mutual obligation clause. In return for an agreed funding increase, an Aboriginal organisation would need to articulate a training component with appropriate performance indicators and policy back up. A stated employment policy containing understanding of organisational responsibilities would be part of this clause also. Once in place, accountability needs to be seriously monitored. Too often, effective, hard working Aboriginal organisations become disillusioned when they see what they perceive as dysfunction in others going unnoticed and no adjustment being made.

The rewards are worth the effort. None of the UACAC staff had any previous qualifications, now they all do, or are well on the way to attaining them. UACAC has well trained, local staff, related to the residents and therefore provides excellent care to a great bunch of Aboriginal Elders. Some of the personal stories of lives turned around, futures to look forward to and plain survival are inspiring and reward enough on their own.

This is obviously a brief description of what is a complex, ongoing training / employment policy that is still developing as needs and individuals change. The program needs more sustainability built into it so it does not suffer the fate of so many successful Aboriginal initiatives. That is the fragility that comes from dependence on one or a group of particular individuals who have initiated and built a program, only to see it disintegrate when key people move on. To avoid this UACAC is putting emphasis on succession planning as part of the overall employment/training policy.

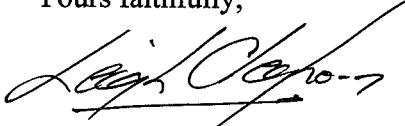
As can be seen, the success of this layered approach depends on close attention being paid to each part of the program. If one area is not covered the whole process becomes at risk. These areas can be basically listed as;

- Clearly defined and explained staff selection criteria.
- Individually tailored training courses.
- Effective mentoring.
- Employment at end of training.
- Use of CDEP.
- Comfortable, supportive workplace.
- Financial opportunity for staff.
- Clear expectations adhered to.
- Defined structure to work within.
- Understanding of social environment.
- Counseling.
- Responsibility and respect between all staff.
- Mutual obligation reward.
- Accountability.
- Sustainability.
- Clear succession planning.

Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact the UAC manager, Leigh Cleghorn by the phone or fax numbers on our letterhead or by e mail at uacmanager@bigpond.com.

Thanks again for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry.

Yours faithfully,



Leigh Cleghorn.
Manager.