

Restoring faith in Aboriginal service

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AN acting CEO took the helm at Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) last week and hit the ground running on a mission to reform the organisation and sign up new members.

On her first day in the job last Monday, Mildura-based barrister Jacki Turfrey visited MDAS Kerang with executive director Jill Gallagher, who has also been recently appointed to navigate through the organisation's current troubles.

Ms Gallagher, who is the head of the state's peak Aboriginal health services body, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), will work with Ms Turfrey over six months to build membership, implement governance reforms and restore faith in the organisation.

MDAS, which employs more than 200 people and has offices in Mildura, Robinvale and Swan Hill as well as Kerang, has been plagued with scandal over the past year.

In December, Victoria's Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission (IBAC) raided its Mildura offices and launched an investigation in response to "a range of allegations about corruption and misconduct" which is still underway.

In April, then-CEO Harold Rudolph Kirby resigned after admitting to sexually assaulting a woman in a Mildura nightclub in March.



Acting CEO Jacki Turfrey, with executive director Jill Gallagher and Kerang and Swan Hill corporate services director Mel Lane.

The new acting CEO has extensive legal and governance experience and has worked for both Aboriginal and corporate organisations.

Ms Turfrey, who is of Palawa descent, was optimistic about the organisation's future.

"We've got an interim leadership team at MDAS at the moment and my job is to stabilise the organisation,

help the board navigate through that and build the confidence of government and the community," she said.

"I'm really excited about it. I think it's going to be a great opportunity and a great space to be in.

"And at the end of the six months, I fully intend to throw my hat into the ring to be ongoing in the role."

Ms Gallagher said she thought problems at MDAS had been caused by a rapid expansion, which the "internal infrastructure" didn't keep up with.

While organisational problems flowed through to all MDAS branches, in Kerang the issue was primarily one of distance, she believed.

"Mildura's a long way away, so it's about making sure that the voices down here are heard and they're all part of that decision-making process and feel like they're in that," Ms Gallagher said.

The women said a membership drive launched three weeks ago in the lead-up to this month's annual general meeting had already seen member numbers triple, with most new recruits from Kerang and Swan Hill.

Ms Gallagher said there was excitement as well as some skepticism from the community about the fresh start.

"Aboriginal organisations run differently to mainstream ones. We're not just service providers," she said.

"MDAS is like the heart and soul of community and somewhere along the line we got that big that we just lost sight of that heart and soul.

"And we've got to get it back."

Kerang corporate services manager Mel Lane agreed that having their views heard would make a big difference to the local Aboriginal community.

"Because they haven't had a voice for so long," she said.

MDAS MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

A NEW leadership team at Mallee District Aboriginal Services is appealing for Aboriginal community members to join up and have their say.

"Membership of MDAS is free, it's open to every Aboriginal adult who lives in the Mallee region, and it's never been more important," acting MDAS CEO Jacki Turfrey said last week.

Ms Turfrey and MDAS executive director Jill Gallagher said members would be able to "help shape the future" and "strengthen community control" of their organisation.

"In the past, people might have felt they wouldn't be heard, or they wouldn't be welcomed," Ms Gallagher said.

"We want as many diverse voices and perspectives as possible within Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and we are welcoming everyone."

At the AGM to be held on Saturday, November 28, members will have the chance to vote for five new board members.

Nine current board members, including MDAS Kerang and Swan Hill corporate services manager Mel Lane, will continue in their roles.

To join MDAS, visit MDAS Kerang in Nolan Street or the MDAS website at mdas.org.au.

Membership applications close on Wednesday, November 11.