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Union hurdle

Jail fails to 'embrace' human rights ethos

By Noel Towell
Chief Assembly Reporter

Former chief minister Jon Stanhope says guards at the territory's jail have failed to embrace the project's human rights ethos.

Mr Stanhope has re-entered the public debate with an impassioned plea in defence of a needle-and-syringe program at the ACT's jail.

The program looks further away than ever this week with Mr Stanhope's successor, Katy Gallagher, saying she would not "bulldoze" the policy through in the face of opposition from prison guards.

But Mr Stanhope, responding to an editorial in *The Canberra Times*, said a needle-exchange program in the Alexander Maconochie Centre was a public health issue and not a matter of law and order.

He conceded the Government had failed to install a human rights culture in the jail's staff.

"Our prison officers were employed in the expectation that they would play a major part in delivering the Government's decision for a truly progressive and human rights compliant prison," he said.

"I fear that the signal that we're getting from the Alexander Maconochie Centre workforce hasn't com-

pletely embraced that culture and, in that respect, we've failed in one of our main aims."

Mr Stanhope, who stepped down in May, said prisoners were entitled to the same rights to have access to clean needles extended to addicts living in the community.

But CPSU ACT branch secretary Vince McDevitt rejected Mr Stanhope's comments, saying the AMC's guards had done a remarkable job, in light of the difficulties faced.

The guards and their union said they would not countenance a syringe program, even in the form proposed by former health minister Michael Moore, where corrections health staff would administer it.

Mr Stanhope argued a "preventative health measure" widely available throughout Canberra should be extended to the jail population.

"Needle-and-syringe programs are broadly supported in the community, without people being subject to a charge of condoning illegal behaviour," he said.

"Why should one of our most marginalised groups ... prisoners, be denied access to the same preventative health measure?"

Letter to the editor - Page 26

Katy Gallagher must stand on principle when making her decision whether to proceed with the needle and syringe program in the Alexander Maconochie Centre ("Needle decision pricks at Govt", August 31, p18).

She must, in addition to the Public Health Association of Australia report, thoroughly consider all the submissions, not just the one received from the Community and Public Sector Union, which represents the prison officers. And she must base her response on what is the best health outcome for prisoners and the wider community.

After all this is what the NSP is about - better health outcomes, which should be a priority in a human rights prison.

The PHAA report has fully addressed the concerns of the prison officers. If Gallagher bows to the pressure of the union, she compromises herself and leaves herself open to similar tactics, from this and other unions, in the future.

Whether most of the community believe that there should be a needle and syringe program in the prison or not, they are more likely to respect a politician who bases decisions on evidence and principle.

M. McConnell, Higgins