

Walgett's disability enterprise Cafe 64 closes due to coronavirus impacts

ABC Western Plains / By Jessie Davies

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Cafe 64 has employed and trained people of all abilities and has been a special place for people to come together in Walgett. (Supplied: Martin Wren)

More than a dozen people living with disabilities in Walgett have been forced into unemployment as the town's Cafe 64 has closed its doors due to dwindling income revenue.

Its income was impacted by the government's social distancing measures, which prevented customers from dining in-store.

The not-for-profit had provided employment and training to people with disability for the past 25 years in the regional New South Wales town.

Operator Martin Wren said, sadly, Cafe 64 became unprofitable and income had dropped by "at least 75 per cent".

Mr Wren's decision came just one week after his own mother, who was based in London, died from COVID-19.

"It's a very difficult time," he said.

'Great workers'

Cafe 64 was an inclusive place and it employed people with a range of disabilities including blindness, mental illness and physical disabilities.

Mr Wren said he was "heartbroken" to let his employees go.

"Our staff have overcome enormous handicaps to achieve the results they have," he said.

Key points:

- Walgett Cafe 64 has been forced to close.
- The cafe's takings were down by 75 per cent due to enforced social distancing.
- The not-for-profit employed more than a dozen people with disabilities.

"We've tried everything imaginable to keep the café going for them."



Walgett's Cafe 64 had been operating for more than 25 years before its closure (Supplied: Martin Wren)

He said the calibre of his staff helped the cafe win numerous national awards.

"We were a real success story. Our reviews from our customers really showed that," Mr Wren said.

The café was one of few eateries in Walgett and Mr Walgett said he expected it would be missed by many.

"We were a meeting place, offering so much to the local population, particularly the Indigenous members of the community," he said.

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'We tried everything'

Like many western NSW towns, Walgett's economy has been battered by severe drought in recent years.

Mr Wren said the café's parent company, Nova Employment, had helped prop up the "struggling" business for years but its reserves had now run dry.

"The cafe came through drought, fires, floods and pretty much anything that was thrown at us," he said.

"But the pandemic hitting was the perfect storm to spell disaster.

"We found ourselves with more staff than customers."

Mr Wren said the cafe would need a large injection of private capital to recommence operating.

"A couple of hundred thousand dollars... that's the type of money we would need to get going again," he said.