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Editorial | Our View

Ige should lead through openness

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Doing a good job in elected office requires hard work, and part of that involves letting the people who elected you know what you're doing.

To his credit, Gov. David Ige seemed to have recognized that reality, at least in theory, back when he was seeking the state's top office in 2014. Transparency in government was front and center in his campaign platform.

It seems that part was harder than he thought.

Ige's fallen far short of his stated goal to host weekly press conferences. While that schedule may have been too ambitious, they should be happening more frequently than they are — even including the sessions that have followed the briefings on homelessness in recent months.

The media represent the general public and need the means to ask the governor about the myriad issues that concern Hawaii residents.

He's also failed to fulfill the promised quarterly community meetings with department heads, which would afford people their own opportunity to get answers.

Even his posted schedule includes little of the real work of the executive branch beyond the ceremonial.

Particularly distressing, the ranks of those left out of the loop seems to include his own second in command. Lt. Gov. Shan Tsutsui told Honolulu Star-Advertiser writer Sophie Cocke that he has been sidelined in the Ige administration, not involved in nearly as many strategic meetings as he had been under former Gov. Neil Abercrombie.

Tsutsui, like Brian Schatz before him, had been given assignments fitting for a member of the executive team. Since the upset victory that put Ige in charge, all that has changed. The former Maui legislator wasn't even informed about the status of the negotiations over the privatization of the public hospitals and clinics on his home island, just to cite one example.

Granted, the lieutenant governor's principal mission is as a backup should something happen to the governor. But there's little hope he could fulfill that role if he's kept in the dark about what's going on across the way on the Capitol's fifth floor. And the taxpayer surely hopes that the No. 2 office-holder delivers substantive work in return for his or her salary.

Ige spent years as chairman of the state Senate Ways and Means Committee, and as a part of the leadership in the chamber, he's more accustomed to the behind-the-scenes work of budgets and lawmaking.

Certainly, there are public hearings in the Legislature, but much of the final shape is hammered out in small conference meetings. Things tend to remain under wraps until it's time for the big reveal.

However, that is not how it's supposed to work when you're the governor. The governor has the position and opportunity to shape outcomes by making preferences known, and sooner rather than later.

For instance, the public had to wait for weeks to learn where Ige stood on the Mauna Kea Thirty Meter Telescope controversy. The homelessness crisis seemed to fester for too long without any inkling of how the administration would tackle it.

These are the sorts of issues that require leadership — and forceful, direct communications from the governor himself are critical components.

Ige said he doesn't intend to keep the public at bay. There are sometimes privacy reasons some details can't be disclosed, he said, citing scheduling difficulties for lapses in holding community meetings.

However, such hurdles should be overcome by anyone with a stated intent to make transparency a hallmark. Ige expressed the concern that too-frequent exchanges would mean "we wouldn't sometimes have anything to say."

Not a problem. There always should be lots for him to say — as long as people get the chance to ask their questions.