



**Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe
Chairperson of SANAC**

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11 November 2013

Dear Deputy President Motlanthe

World AIDS Day event to be held in Mkhondo, Gert Sibande District: Addressing our concerns at the state of health care in Gert Sibande

We, SECTION27 and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), in Gert Sibande district municipality are writing with regard to the abovementioned subject.

SECTION27 and TAC welcome the plan to hold the World AIDS Day event in Mkhondo. But, while we support the decision to locate the World AIDS Day event in the most HIV affected district in the country, we wish to draw your attention to some of the critical health problems faced by this district which must be urgently addressed and resolved in order to have an effective response to HIV.

TAC, SECTION27 and other civil society organisations are currently mobilising around these issues. We intend to use World AIDS Day draw attention to these matters and we request a response from you by 25 November 2013 as to how these problems at Gert Sibande will be solved. We require a clear plan with adequate budgeting and reasonable timeframes for implementation.

The issues we would like to draw your attention to are:

1. Water

The communities in Ermelo and Standerton do not have access to clean, safe drinking water. In Ermelo people have to buy bottled drinking water because the tap water is contaminated. This is particularly dangerous for infants, children, the elderly and People

Living with HIV. The community in Standerton has not had access to clean drinking water since March 2013 and has been advised that the problem will only be resolved by March 2014.

Safe, clean water is a source of life and a constitutional right, not a privilege. We call on the government to tell the community how it intends to solve the water problem in this district as a matter of urgency.

2. AIDS Councils

The non functioning of AIDS councils is inhibiting an effective response to the spread of HIV and TB in many communities. Lekwa municipality does not have an AIDS Council at all. In general, municipalities are under-budgeting or failing altogether to establish intervention programmes that address the spread of HIV. Further, we note with concern that most municipalities lack the capacity to develop their own programmes and are fully dependent on the Department of Health to initiate interventions.

We need strong political will and leadership in order to ensure functioning District and Local AIDS Councils that lead the response to health issues in the district.

3. National Health Insurance (NHI)

Gert Sibande district municipality was chosen as one of the NHI pilot sites in South Africa. The Government's intention is for NHI to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich regarding access to health care services. The main aim is to build a unified health care system which caters for all, regardless of personal income.

We are concerned with the lack of public engagement on the NHI piloting and planning process and the lack of consultation with civil society regarding the identification of important interventions that could strengthen local health care systems. In order to address the current lack of transparency on NHI activities there is a need to develop reporting mechanisms on NHI and to improve communication and sharing of information with civil society and the public.

We therefore request that provincial government conducts three consultation meetings per year to meet these requirements.

4. Health Facility/Hospital Service Deterioration

We have seen several cases that indicate a lack of commitment to the improvement of health facilities in Gert Sibande district and across Mpumalanga Province. We are concerned about the lack of quality in health care service provision, as highlighted by cases such as the woman who lost her life due to negligence at kwaMhlanga hospital (as reported recently by the Mail & Guardian) and the food crisis reported at Ermelo Hospital.

As users of the public health care system in Gert Sibande we do not approve of the conditions under which health care professionals are expected to work and the quality of services that facility users receive at hospitals and local health centres. We have noted an increase in under-spending of the health budget in the province and district and we would like to hear from the Department of Health as to why available funds are not being spent on necessary refurbishment, equipment, infrastructure and maintenance of health care facilities.

5. Vacancies in Critical Health Posts

We are concerned about the substantial shortage of health care workers at clinics, CHCs and hospitals and the amount of time it takes to fill critical vacant posts such as those of specialists, doctors, nurses and health care managers.

Further, we have received several complaints from doctors in Mpumalanga regarding their working conditions. These complaints include issues of corruption within hospitals and the Department of Health. Challenging working conditions accelerate the departure of health care professionals from the Province in an effort to look for better working conditions elsewhere in the country.

We would like to hear from the Department of Health on what their strategy is to improve the human resource situation in the province in terms of attracting, hiring and retaining health care staff.

6. Emergency Medical Services

Emergency Medical Services in Mpumalanga are largely inaccessible. Ambulance services are inadequate and the response times of emergency medical services are poor. These contribute greatly to unnecessary deaths and infant mortality in the district.

Ambulances in Mpumalanga are centrally stationed which exacerbates delays. It can take ambulances up to two hours to arrive at the scene of an emergency. Some communities are as far as 50 kilometres away from the nearest hospital. We demand that ambulances be stationed at local health facilities in order to ensure better and more timely access to emergency services for people in need.

Transport shortages also include vehicles required by doctors to visit clinics. This leads to doctors have to use their own vehicles or not visiting clinics at all.

We all have to provide strategic support, participation and better monitoring in order to ensure the successful provision of health care services and programmes in our health care system.

We would appreciate it if our concerns could be attended to and be treated as urgent as they concern human life.

Kind regards,

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