

## **Budget Expenditure Monitoring Forum Condemns the Arrest of over 100 Community Health Workers and Activists in the Free State**

The Budget Expenditure Monitoring Forum (BEMF) condemns the arrest of over 100 community health workers and activists outside Free State Department of Health Bophelo House in the early hours of this morning. The community health workers (CHWs) and activists had come together to highlight the plight of community health care workers. In addition, the peaceful protest also intended to draw attention to the desperate state of overall health care services in the province.

BEMF recognises that those taking part in the sit-in were exercising their constitutional right to speak out against the failings in and collapse of the Free State health system. The peaceful protest illustrates a well documented phenomenon of civil society monitoring that has taken place for a long time. Citizen based monitoring and engagement is an accepted policy framework meant to enhance performance management of public officials. TAC activist Macobane Morake was allegedly assaulted by police during the arrests and has bruises on his face. The TAC and COSATU have condemned the police for the excessive use of force in arresting the peaceful protesters. BEMF joins them in demanding their immediate release and dropping of all charges.

BEMF supports the critical role that community health workers play within the health service. BEMF calls on the Free State to ensure that there is sufficient budget for the employment of community health workers given their role in the provision of health services. The vast majority women, CHWs work in the homes of the poor bringing basic wound care, TB and HIV treatment, empathy, care and rehabilitation to those in desperate need in the Free State and across the country. It is well established internationally that community health workers are the foundation of successful primary health care systems.

In addition, The National Department of Health places Re-engineering of Primary Health Care at the heart of the plans for the South African health system both in the Free State and nationally. Furthermore, the National Development Plan (NDP) also emphasizes the importance of CHWs in ensuring *health for all* in South Africa. Given the centrality of these government policies, it is inexplicable that the MEC for Health in the Free State is not prioritizing the work of community health workers in the province. Rather we believe that the MEC for Health Benny Malakoane could have drawn on the lessons from the work of the Eastern Cape Health Crisis Action Coalition (ECHCAC) and responded to calls of health activist which were responded to in a more dignified manner than that of the Free State Health Authorities.

In a province like the Free State with an enormous burden of disease, very poor health indicators, a crisis of unemployment the MEC for Health in the Free State should see community health workers and all those providing health services in the Province as essential. The continued devaluing of the

role of community health workers, the current financial crisis affecting service provision is a direct and real threat to the successful implementation of the NHI proposal and specifically the plan to re-engineer primary health care in the Province. We cannot build a healthy nation by exploiting and abusing our frontline carers and letting our health services collapse.

BEMF call on the following:

1. The Health Care workers and activists be released NOW!
2. The Free State Department of Health must come clean about its financial problems. The public has a right to know how the Department is spending money - especially in the midst of a crisis like the current one.
3. All leaders of all spheres of government must work together to ensure that important primary health care services can be made accessible through trained and adequately compensated community health workers and health professionals.

**For more information & to arrange interviews contact:**

Thokozile Madonko – Coordinator BEMF – 083 710 3440

**This statement was endorsed by the following BEMF partners:**

Rural Health Advocacy Project (RHAP)

Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII)

Black Sash

SECTION27

Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM)

Alternative Information Development Centre

Sonke Gender Justice Network

For more information on the latest developments please follow @TAC on Twitter and #FSHealthCrisis #FireBenny for continuous updates from the scene in Bloemfontein.

**ENDS**

## **ABOUT BEMF**

BEMF (Budget and Expenditure Monitoring Forum) started in August 2009. BEMF draws together individuals, civil society, academics, government, and unions. BEMF aims to ensure that sufficient money is budgeted for and appropriately spent on health and basic education services