

ANNEXURE E

Orientation and Mobility Action Group 4 June 2015

Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Training is basic to the wellbeing of blind people. It makes it possible for a blind person to get about freely, safely and independently. This training is also essential for the normal development of young blind children and for their later integration into family, community and work life. The problem is that the large majority of the over 700 000 blind people in South Africa do not have access to O&M Training. This includes children at schools for the blind. There are 22 such schools.

Out of concern for this situation, the Managing Trustee of the South African Mobility for the Blind Trust called a conference to discuss the future of O&M Training in South Africa and to look for a way forward. At that conference were the College of Orientation and Mobility and other prominent organisations in the field, schools for the blind, some prominent blind people, government representatives and Section 27.

Among the matters that the conference highlighted was the serious shortage of O&M Practitioners in South Africa and an equally serious shortage of posts for these Practitioners. These are the people who are qualified to do this training. It was pointed out that the government did not employ any O&M Practitioners, including at schools for the blind, and that the NGO sector alone could not meet the enormous need. It was agreed that one of the obstacles to the government's employing O&M Practitioners was that they were not registered with a recognised body such as the Health Professionals Council of South Africa (HPCSA). This is a prerequisite for the employment of professionals by government. Finally, the conference appointed SAMBT's Managing Trustee to take forward the issues raised. This led to the convening of the Orientation and Mobility Action Group in June 2013. The purpose of this was to advocate for the expansion of Orientation and Mobility Training in South Africa. This would have to include a significant increase in the number of posts for O&M Practitioners and also, the training of people to fill them. The primary focus would be government and, in particular, the Departments of Basic Education, Health and Social Development.

At its first meeting, the O&M Action Group decided to approach the National minister of Basic Education by writing a letter to her expressing our concern about the lack of posts for O&M Practitioners at schools for the Blind and requesting a meeting. The response was that the matter would be brought to the Minister's attention when she returned from overseas. That was in November 2013. When nothing further was heard, a second letter was sent. The response was that the matter had been referred to one of the department's sections. And that is where things stood at the end of 2013.

The other issues that were taken up during that period were to assist the Orientation and Mobility Association of South Africa (OMASA) to lodge an application with the HPCSA for the registration of O&M Practitioners. That application was lodged in October. Also, a letter was written to the Principals of schools for the blind informing them of the formation of the O&M Action Group and inviting comment. In addition, a presentation was given on the Action Group at the biennial conference of the South African National Council for the Blind. Also at a breakaway session of that conference, the Action group presented an idea to create a one-year course in O&M aimed at teachers at schools for the blind. This is shorter than the current two-year diploma. That would help speed up the filling of O&M posts at these schools once they have been created.

In May 2014, OMASA's application regarding the registration of O&M Practitioners was approved in principal by the Occupational Therapy, Medical Orthotics / Prosthetics & Arts Therapy Board. This board falls under the HPCSA and that was the board applied to. We understood that final approval was still needed from the HPCSA and that they would be meeting in November.

In June 2014, Section 27, acting as attorneys for the O&M Action Group, wrote a further letter to the Minister of Basic Education reiterating the request for a meeting. A deadline for a response was given. There was no response by the deadline. Section 27 sent a further letter which asked for a response to specific questions about O&M Training at

schools for the blind. Again, a deadline was given for a response or consideration would be given to asking the court to compel them to respond. The result of that was a meeting in August 2014 between the National director of Inclusive Education, Dr Moses Simelane and the O&M Action Group.

At that meeting, Dr Simelane agreed that Orientation and Mobility Training for blind learners was essential and he and his Department would work with the Action Group to achieve this. The Action Group undertook to take further the idea of an O&M course aimed at teachers at schools for the blind. It was also agreed to meet again.

After that, members of the Action Group, including the College of Orientation and Mobility, met with the Education Department of UNISA to explore a possible partnership in developing and presenting a course aimed at teachers. A representative of Dr Simelani attended. UNISA were enthusiastic but were very slow to follow up. And so, the Department of continuing education at the University of Pretoria was also approached with the same view in mind. They were also slow to respond. It was then decided, in order to speed up the process, to bring together a group of experts to draw up a draft curriculum for the course to present to possible partners.

Also during 2014, the Action Group's convener worked to insure that the Group coordinated and collaborated with other relevant organisations on the issues at hand. He was asked to join the Education Committee of the South African National Council for the Blind and attended other relevant meetings organised by them. He also attended the Biennial General Meeting of OMASA in May 2015 where he was elected to their Executive Committee.

Earlier in 2015, follow-up's were made with the HPCSA to establish what was happening with the OMASA application. There was no initial response. Section 27 then undertook to write a letter in this regard. However, just before that letter was sent, a response arrived. We were informed that the application had to be viewed by the other boards that fall under the HPCSA to ensure that there was no overlapping of scope. The newly elected Chair of OMASA's executive Committee then wrote to them to ask for a time frame for that process. A representative of the Council then requested a meeting with OMASA's Chair and the Deputy Head of the College of Orientation and Mobility. This was scheduled for 18 June 2015.