

MEDIA STATEMENT - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NEHAWU STATEMENT ON THE TESTIMONY OF THE FORMER GAUTENG HEALTH MEC

Tuesday January 23, 2018

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union [NEHAWU] refuses to be used as a scapegoat by the former Gauteng MEC for Health, Qedani Mahlangu, in her testimony yesterday at the Life Esidimeni arbitration hearing.

In her testimony, the former MEC mentioned a meeting she had with the Premier of Gauteng in relation to the issue of NEHAWU members losing their jobs due to the relocation of patients to NGOs. While trying to implicate the Premier in the death of 143 patients, she by extension also indirectly implies that NEHAWU should also shoulder the blame for the deaths. We reject this claim outright and demand that she withdraws her claims with immediate effect.

The national union wishes to confirm that indeed we did meet the former MEC on the 11th May 2015 to discuss issues related to the closure of both Life Esidimeni and Clinix Selby. In the meeting we raised concerns about outsourcing and its implication to the job security of our members. The meeting should not be used to justify her actions and recklessness in the handling of the Life Esidimeni matter which resulted into the death of patients.

After the meeting she made a commitment to absorb all workers who were to be affected by the closure of the two centres but failed to fulfil up to that promise. A task team was appointed to deal with the absorption of staff members from both centres. It was after the meeting with the Premier on the 15th November 2015 that workers were eventually absorbed by the department. Currently, 80% of these workers are located in the Gauteng Department of Health while 20% remains unemployed.

NEHAWU on numerous occasions tried to warn the former MEC about the dangers of moving patients to unlicensed homes that did not have the required skills or resources to care for patients with chronic mental illnesses but our calls fell on deaf ears. If she is genuine and remorseful towards the families who lost loved ones and willing to help the hearings to get to the bottom of the truth including to help unravel the wrongdoings that took place during the relocation of patients, we call on the former MEC to stop distortion and finger pointing.

The relocation of patients took place even though the Gauteng Department of Health was well aware of the impending disaster and nothing was done to try avert the tragedy. At the centre of the relocation was the issue of cost cutting by the department. The department outsourced the care of mental health patients which is a core responsibility of the department as part of caring for those who are vulnerable in the society.

NEHAWU has always highlighted the pitfalls of outsourcing and the Life Esidimeni tragedy is a prime example. Throughout the years it has been proven beyond reasonable doubt that outsourcing is often prone to corruption, exploitation of vulnerable workers and the cutting of corners which ultimately compromises public service delivery.

The national union calls on the national Department of Health to intervene on the financial crisis that continues to engulf the Gauteng Department of Health. The financial crisis in the department has resulted in the cutting of phone lines, the attachment of property of the department by the sheriff of the court and the delaying of the training of student nurses amongst others service delivery challenges.

A sound and immediate financial turnaround strategy is needed in order to save the department from complete financial ruin. Failure to deal with the financial crisis both decisively and instantaneously will lead to more tragedies. It is in the best interest of the working class and the poor who rely on public health centres for medical attention that matters of this nature are resolved urgently.

In this regard, the national union decided to resuscitate its national public service delivery campaign focusing as a starting point to public health sector working with components of the alliance and communities in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State Province in particular.

Issued by NEHAWU Secretariat

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