

## **Free State changing the face of Early Childhood Development (ECD)**

Despite the increase in the number of subsidies to early childhood development (ECD) centres in South Africa, there is still a large number of children that are not exposed to formal child care or education outside of the home. It is the responsibility of the government particularly that of the Department of Social Development to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children.

Since 1994 a lot of progress has been done to improve the state of ECDs in South Africa both quantitatively and qualitatively. However, the Free State Department of Social Development believes that much still remains to be done before we can say with confidence that the needs of our youngest children are being met.

The MEC for Social Development Me Sisi Ntombela has on numerous occasions indicated how important the development and safety of children is to the department and that the department is currently prioritising children.

The department in partnership with the National Development Agency (NDA) has since 2009 to 2015 established nineteen (19) new ECDs in impoverished communities in all five districts. Two ECDs for children living with disabilities were also constructed in Thabo Mofutsanyane and Fezile Dabi. In order to ensure that services reach children living in farming communities, the department initiated the Educational Mobile Units which are equipped with toys and equipment necessary to develop children.

So far five ECDs are complete and will be officially opened by the MEC for Social Development Honourable S.H Ntombela in 2016. The completed ECDs are in Petrus Steyn, Heilbron, Allenridge, Virginia and Viljoenskroon.

The department has set aside R192 million for the development of 48 675 children in ECDs within the province for the current financial year. In her budget speech, MEC Ntombela announced that 26 new ECDs will be built this year with the assistance of the National Lottery Commission. She further added that the stipends of 2854 Free State ECD practitioners had increased with R551.00 which yields a total amount of R17 124 000.00 per year on practitioner. The matrons' stipends increased with R251.00 per matron. Free state matrons are 937 in total and this increment amounts to R2 822 244,00,00 in the 2016/2017 financial year. The daily subsidy for children has increased from R9.00 in 2009/10 to R15.00 in 2016/17. The Department of Social Development and the Department of Education are currently providing training on the new ECD curriculum framework to officials within the Department of

Social Development who are responsible for ECDs. The training will be extended to ECD practitioners at a later stage.

Social Development strongly believes that the improved state of ECDs in the province would not be where it is today if it was not for the commitment ECDs practitioners have. The standard of ECDs in this province is very high as we have recently witnessed an ECD practitioner, Me Dimakatso Margaret Seshaoka from Naledi ECD in Heilbron winning the Best ECD Practitioner award at the NDA National SA ECD Award which were held in Cape Town on the 04<sup>th</sup> of May 2016. The award for the Best ECD Program for children with Disabilities-Urban Category was also taken by another Free State ECD led by Me Elizabeth Mbhele.