

**10 SEPTEMBER 2019**

**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTED TO ERADICATING THE FOSTER CARE BACKLOGS AND NOTE WITH CONCERN MISLEADING MEDIA REPORTS**

The Department of Social Development is committed to clear the foster care backlogs and has noted with serious concern misleading media reports regarding the North Gauteng High Court on foster care orders that are due to lapse at the end of November this year.

As the deadline for the implementation of the North Gauteng High Court order on foster care approaches, both the National and Provincial Departments of Social Development reiterated their commitment to work with speed to ensure that no child in foster care placement falls through the cracks.

The Citizen article is inaccurate as no foster care order has lapsed to date. The figures presented to Parliamentary Portfolio Committee are projections of foster care cases that provincial departments are working hard to extend before the foster care order lapses at the end of November.

The article was written and published with the malicious intention to taint the name of the Department and to cause panic amongst vulnerable children and foster care families. The article conveniently and blatantly ignores to mention the progress the Department has registered with regard to the implementation of a long lasting comprehensive legal solution to the foster care system as directed by the North Gauteng High Court.

In its presentation to the Portfolio Committee, the Department highlighted that it had submitted the Children's Amendment Bill of 2019, which was approved by Cabinet in March this year for tabling in Parliament. Key amongst others, the Bill seeks to amend Section 159 of the Children's Act to make provision for discretion to extend lapsed foster care orders or issue interim orders while clause 60 seeks to make provision for quality assurance of child protection services.

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The Bill has been submitted to the Leader of Government Business as part of this year's legislative programme. In addition, the Department has developed the Child Care and Protection Policy to strengthen the existing child care protection system in South Africa.

The article also blatantly ignores to mention the progress the Department has registered in addressing the acute shortage of social work professionals to address the backlogs and also to deal with new foster care cases. To date, the Department has absorbed 566 social work graduates who benefitted from its social work scholarship programme. In addition, the Department engaged social work veterans to provide ongoing supervision to new recruits especially on foster care related matters.

The Department's report to the Portfolio Committee showed that provinces are currently working through the Children's Courts to extend foster care orders, inclusive of new Children's Court enquiries which are not affected by the November deadline. Other initiatives to clear the backlogs include closer cooperation with the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development and the setting up of dedicated Children's Courts to expedite the extension of foster orders that are due to lapse.

In 2017, the Gauteng North High Court granted the National and Provincial Departments of Social Development and the South African Social Security (SASSA) an interim order for the continued payment and management of over 200 000 foster care orders that were due to lapse in November of the same year. The order will lapse at the end of November this year.

The report further showed that provinces which are predominantly rural such as KwaZulu Natal, Eastern Cape Limpopo and North West have a high volume of foster care cases that must be finalised before the end of November 2019. Contributory factors include the high ratio of social worker to clients. The ideal ratio is 1 social worker to 3 000 people, but in vast and rural provinces the ratio is as high as 1 social worker to 10 000 people.

As a result of these systemic issues, South Africa's foster care system faces many challenges. Key amongst these is the shortage of social workers which results in high cases loads and a workforce struggling with burn out and a high turnover as well as lack of tools of trade. Foster care is cyclical by nature, as the Court orders must be extended after every two years. Noting the progress report and plans to mitigate the remaining challenges, the Portfolio Committee directed both the National and

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Provincial Departments to expedite the legislative processes and to develop a long term foster care turnaround strategy.

The Committee also proposed a meeting with the National Treasury to explore mechanisms for the expansion of the conditional grant to absorb all social work graduates who benefitted from the social work scholarship programme as part of the long term measures to address foster care backlogs. The Department will continue to provide regular reports to the Portfolio Committee on how it intends to comply with the court order and to improve the foster care system beyond the court deadline.

## **ISSUED BY THE NATIONAL DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

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