



**MEDIA RELEASE FOR DISTRIBUTION ON 15 SEPTEMBER 2020**  
**DSD MEC VISIT TO MES IMPILO SHELTER**  
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**GAUTENG GOVERNMENT RECOGNISE THE VALUE ADDED BY MES TO THE INNER CITY AND HOMELESS COMMUNITY DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN**

**JOHANNESBURG; 15 September, 2020 – In response to the further easing of lockdown regulations, homeless shelters are facing the dilemma of how to sustainably exit beneficiaries who have been housed in the overnight shelters for the past six months. The MEC of Gauteng Department of Social Development (DSD), MMC of City of Johannesburg (COJ) and their delegation visited Mould Empower Serve (MES) yesterday (14<sup>th</sup> September 2020), where they expressed their gratitude for the good work MES does and discussed the way forward regarding the challenges facing the metropolitan cities in the province.**

According to statistics from the citywide outreaches conducted, it is conservatively estimated that Johannesburg has a population of at least 15 000 homeless people. The population that experiences homelessness in our city is a heterogeneous group, and includes single individuals, families with children (not visible and in small numbers) and unaccompanied run-away or homeless youth. Homelessness is a growing problem in the city and substance abuse within this constituency has put a strain on traditional responses, demanding the emergence of more innovative transformative responses that are community-based and driven.

The Gauteng MEC Dr Nomathemba Mokgethi highlighted: “COVID-19 is still here and people are still getting infected and still dying, so we need to ensure that we continue to comply with regulations until such time that it subsides. Everyone must play their part”. MMC of the COJ, Eunice Mgcina expressed thanks to the partners and also raised concerns about the homelessness in the city, stating that the COJ will look at ways to further engage with NPO partners on how best to handle the situation.

Both MEC and MMC raised key questions to the NPO partners present and agreed to set up a date for further engagement on issues such as funding, skills development and job placement for the homeless, as well as additional options for shelter expansion.

Nonhlanhla Mthimkhulu; DSD Regional Director presented the full report covering statistics on shelter occupancy, reasons for fluctuating numbers at homeless shelters, family reunifications, drug rehabilitation interventions, empowerment programmes, financial implications, challenges and recommendations. The MES shelters successfully served 195 beneficiaries at their peak and offered three nutritious meals per day, sanitation and beds, as well as health screenings for COVID-19. A special isolation centre was setup on the premises at Impilo to isolate beneficiaries who were found COVID-19 positive.

Facilitated by Bheki Sibeko, Acting Executive Head at COJ, the discussions were centred around a full report on progress achieved by MES and partnering NPOs during the lockdown period to date. “What is sad is that COVID-19 brought peace and serenity to the streets of Joburg – there was nobody begging. But with the levels relaxed, the streets are back to where they were and many people can’t distinguish between criminals and beggars. The city and the province is looking up to social development to do something about it,” said Sibeko.

CEO of MES, Leona Pienaar stated that one of the key challenges they faced was how to help beneficiaries with mental illness, which became a huge problem during the lockdown. She highlights however that COVID-19 was proof of the magnitude of impact that can be achieved when various partners pool resources together for a common cause. “It was to us a huge relief to have SANCA, Home Affairs and other partners journey with us so that we could collectively address this problem of homelessness in our city, because it is a multi-layered problem. We really want to express our thanks for all the support from the COJ and the DSD especially since the first day of lockdown,” she says.

According to MES, the communication and availability of DSD officials at both regional and provincial offices has been exceptional and they were physically available for any discussion or meeting even during level 5 and 4 of the lockdown. This enabled MES as an organisation to deliver the services to the homeless as expected and they have established solid relationships with both regional and provincial DSD offices.

During lockdown, organisations such as MES that work with the community, have been better able to implement effective responses to the many social challenges with the support of partner organisations like SANCA, Home Affairs, National Development Agency (NDA), and the Department of Labour. The partner organisations committed to continued support and shared their lessons learnt:

- **NDA** – “We are here to help those who want to start earning a living by forming small businesses or cooperatives. We will find a way to help them with funding. The NDA will come back to the shelters engage with the beneficiaries and teach them how they can formalise their cooperatives, or get referred to other departments for assistance.”
- **SANCA** – “We need to document the new strategies that we came up with as we dealt with COVID-19 and create a model that caters specifically to the homeless community.”
- **Gauteng Home Affairs** – “We will continue to engage with the homeless community at the shelters to assist them with ID applications.”
- **Gauteng Department of Labour** – “We have recognised a need to prioritise the registration of people with disabilities in order to source employment for them as a marginalised group.”

The delegation was warmly greeted by beneficiaries from the various MES shelters and took a short tour of the Impilo facility which was set up in March as an emergency women’s shelter in response to COVID-19. Beneficiaries showcased their hand-made hats, scarves, gloves, bags and jerseys which they produced during the lockdown period to keep themselves warm and sell for an income once the lockdown regulations are lifted. MEC and MMC interacted with the shelter beneficiaries in a separate session where they openly shared their experiences and expectations of the actions they would like government officials to implement for them as a community.

MES appealed to DSD to consider adding shelters that cater specifically to mothers with babies, homeless people with mental illnesses and those with disabilities, as these proved to be groups that the NPO faced the most challenges with placement, reunification, care and specialised funding. Furthermore, they appealed to government to expand funding where possible in order to accommodate more beneficiaries – especially those who are in transition from being shelter residents to affording social housing – as the need to assist the homeless continues to grow in the inner city.

MES offered services to beneficiaries with the assistance of DSD, COJ and numerous other donors and partners. In addition to the Impilo DSD subsidy, food support was received from the Food Bank, and an additional social worker was placed at the shelter to assist with the needs of the beneficiaries. SANCA offered drug withdrawal support services and DSD offered regular fumigation services. “Special thanks to Stone for pro bono support with professional strategy, communication services and media liaison, and to Dr Sifiso Bulunga and his medical team from COJ, Doctors Without Borders, Dr Therese Maarschalk and Sr Hermien Owens-Collins who volunteer their professional medical services,” says Pienaar. “We would like to continue to support the roll out of the new strategy to address homelessness in the province. Together we can reduce homelessness and restore dignity to the most vulnerable. Some good did come from COVID-19,” she concludes.

**SHOULD YOU WISH TO SUPPORT THIS INITIATIVE, PLEASE CONTACT MES DIRECTLY PER THEIR DETAILS BELOW.**

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**For financial contributions of any amount, you may deposit your donation to:**

MES General

ABSA Bank Account number: 3240140208 - Branch code: 632005 - Swift code: ABSAZAJJ

Deposit reference: CovidHelp

As members of the community that live by the spirit of Ubuntu, we all have a role to play to ensure we protect those less privileged to do so themselves currently. Please ensure you alert relevant authorities should you find a homeless person whom you suspect to have the Coronavirus Covid-19.

**END**

(1307 words)

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**EDITORS' NOTES:**

Media statement issued by Willem Eksteen (MES Board member and Chief Executive of Stone) on behalf of MES.

Please direct all media enquiries and/or media interview requests to:

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## **MORE INFORMATION ABOUT MES**

MES is a Christian social development organisation that has been changing the heart of the city since 1986 and has been actively working towards providing sustainable solutions to pervasive poverty in the inner city of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Kempton Park.

The initial vision for MES was born in 1986 when the Johannesburg East Dutch Reformed Church started with an outreach programme that handed out food parcels to the homeless and unemployed community of Hillbrow. In 1989 the project registered as a Section 21 company (1989/004921/08) with an independent Board of Directors. Currently the organization is a registered Not for Profit Company (1989/004921/08), NPO (023 603), PBO (RG/0012/09/04) and has Section 18 A (tax benefit) status.

MES facilitates professional services to vulnerable or at risk individuals, families and communities. The core services are implemented in each branch depending on the need of the community and available resources. An integrated approach is followed ensuring holistic service delivery contributing to restoration and empowerment where a model of Intake/prevention; intervention and sustainable exit is followed.