PLAN TO END SASSA QUEUES WILL BE PRESENTED TO COMMITTEE IN TWO WEEKS’ TIME

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The Department of Social Development has undertaken to give the Portfolio Committee on Social Development a detailed briefing in 14 days on plans and timeframes to end the queues at many South African Social Security Agency (Sassa) pay points. The department briefed the committee today on overcrowding at Sassa offices and the 210 778 temporary disability grants that have lapsed, among other issues.

The Chairperson of the committee, Mr Mondli Gungubele, said the committee wants to ensure that the department and Sassa implement measures that guarantee the dignity of beneficiaries and compliance with Covid-19 lockdown regulations. “This pandemic has presented the social cluster with the biggest problems, where thousands are losing their jobs and many businesses have had to close shop,” he said.

Appearing before the committee, Minister Lindiwe Zulu led a strong departmental delegation of Sassa executives, who she recognised were working under difficult conditions. “We have been visiting the hotspots and see how the pandemic is negatively impacting on our people.” While the socio-economic conditions of the people were not improving, the department’s revenue stream has been reduced. This makes the job harder than it was three years ago. “But the work has to be done. The dignity of our people has always been a central issue,” the minister maintained.

The committee heard that 2020 was a very challenging year, given that the economic disruption of Covid-19 grew into a poverty crisis. “It came with a lot of pain and a lot of opportunities to learn how better to service grant recipients,” said Sassa CEO Ms Busisiwe Memela.

Members asked questions about various things, including the quality of communication with beneficiaries, the water bombing of beneficiaries in Bellville in the Western Cape, implementing social distancing at pay points, poor call centre operations, disability assessments and the renewing of the temporary disability grant.

Committee member Ms Liesel van der Merwe said getting Sassa to move away from crisis mode is the top priority, while another member Ms Bridget Masango said Sassa’s capacity problems stem from poor planning. She wanted to know why no ministerial directive had been issued extending the 31 December cut-off date for social assistance. Ms Masango also recognised the increased strain Sassa employees are experiencing due to the growing number of walk-ins.

Replying to these questions, Minister Zulu committed the department to providing a concrete plan with deliverables and timelines in two weeks’ time. She noted that R15 billion has been paid to six million South Africans in special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grants. Over 16 000 temporary disability grants have been reinstated and R98 million will be allocated for this purpose. She also explained that the disability grants lapsed because the Social Assistance Act only allows for their provision for a period of six to 12 months.

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20 January 2021