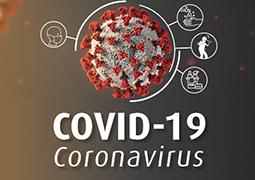
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH RECEIVES BRIEFINGS FROM EASTERN AND WESTERN CAPE HEALTH DEPARTMENTS ON COVID-19

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Members of the Portfolio Committee on Health told the leaders of the Eastern and Western Cape provincial departments of Health that people are choosing to die in their homes rather than to go to public hospitals, as many of them are death traps rather than places of salvation, according to members of the committee.

Crumbling infrastructure and poor service were cited as reasons for this attitude, especially in the Eastern Cape. The provincial departments were briefing the committee on the status of healthcare services in relation to Covid-19.

They updated the committee on, among other things, the availability of hospital beds, oxygen, medicine and personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as vaccination rollout strategies and plans. The Eastern Cape presentation included an update on circumcision and the exhumation of graves on cultural grounds.

The Acting MEC for Health in the Eastern Cape, Mr Xolile Nqatha and the Acting Head of the Provincial Department of Health in the province, Dr Sibongile Zungu, told the committee that as of yesterday, the province has 182 507 cases, 166 000 recoveries and 9 000 deaths. Although these numbers are still unacceptably high, the rate of infection has slowed in the province, particularly in the Nelson Mandela and Sarah Baartman districts after the implementation of the adjusted alert level three regulations.

The committee advised the two departments to improve their health facilities in preparation for the anticipated third and fourth waves. It told Mr Nqatha and Dr Zungu that the state of infrastructure in their province must be addressed to ensure optimal operations at healthcare facilities.

The committee noted with appreciation the approval of posts in the Eastern Cape’s Department of Health for the appointment of community service officers. It said this move should alleviate staffing shortages.

It further called on both departments to consider employing community healthcare workers permanently in order to provide assistance in municipal wards and to address staffing challenges that have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Regarding the vaccine rollout plan, the committee told Mr Nqatha and Dr Zungu that the Eastern Cape lacked a detailed and comprehensive plan and told them to address this issue. In welcoming the Eastern Cape update, the committee urged the province to ensure that during the first phase of the vaccine rollout, all healthcare workers in both public and private sectors in the province are prioritised.

In the Western Cape briefing, the head of the Provincial Department of Health, Dr Keith Cloete, told the committee that healthcare workers continue to experience significant physical and emotional strain. “We need to provide relief for our healthcare workers and their families,” he said. “It is essential to maintain a strong focus on behaviour change to ensure containment for six months, while we gear up to provide access to vaccines.”

Dr Cloete said the province’s objective with the vaccine is to reduce morbidity and mortality in vulnerable people, reduce community transmission through herd immunity, and protect the capacity of the provincial health system.

He explained that to flatten the curve of the second wave, the province is using law enforcement agencies to enforce the level 3 regulations in all hotspot districts, especially where there is a high degree of non-adherence to health protocols.

He told the committee that there are early signs that the province is reaching the peak of the second wave. “Our local teams remain on high alert,” he continued, “for surveillance and response to localised clusters that can be targeted for maximum impact, especially the vulnerable.” He also highlighted the poor supply of PPE in all health facilities in the province, as well as the shortage of staff.

The committee said staffing remains a challenge in all provinces, exacerbated by the deaths of some healthcare workers due to Covid-19. The committee welcomed the Western Cape Provincial Department of Health’s vaccine rollout strategy.

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