MEDIA STATEMENT: COMMITTEE IS ASSURED BY MINISTER MKHIZE ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH’S READINESS TO IMPLEMENT COVID-19 VACCINES STRATEGY

**Parliament, Sunday, 7 February 2021 –**The Portfolio Committee on Health heard from the update it received from the Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize, that there is an Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) in place which is chaired by Deputy President David Mabuza. He said the over-arching purpose of the IMC is to oversee the implementation of the Covid-19 vaccines rollout strategy.

Dr Mkhize told the committee that, besides the existence of the IMC, there are other structures that are set up by the Department of Health’s Director General. He said the success of the national vaccine roll-out hinges on the involvement and coordination of social compact between critical stakeholders such as the government, labour, civil society, religious groupings, traditional leaders and the private sector.

The committee voiced its concerns about the strategy, arguing that the country is faced with a vicious crisis of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. They argued that the amount of doses that have arrived, are insufficient given the crisis they highlighted.

Dr Mkhize told the committee that there was no need to worry about the quantity of the vaccines that have arrived, as there are 500 000 more vaccines that the department is waiting for, and that are due to arrive later in February this year. He said, in spite of the huge global demand for the vaccines which makes it extremely difficult to secure vaccines, he informed the committee that the government has committed itself to vaccinating 40 million people in South Africa.

The committee told Dr Mkhize that from the updates it received from the provincial departments of health recently on their preparedness to implement their vaccines rollout strategies, it has observed that the provinces are nowhere near ready to commence with their vaccination programmes. Minister Mkhize said the department will meet with the provinces to assess and discuss their state of readiness and to strengthen their capacity.

He said South Africans must not anticipate a smooth sailing process. He said: “New lessons will be learnt, mistakes will be made and challenges will mount, but we will take all that in our strides.”

The committee expressed its deep concern over certain areas in the strategy, areas the committee said render the strategy vulnerable to fraud and corruption. It said the areas include tendering processes, storage and distribution of the vaccines and medical waste disposal.

It called upon the committee for daily updates on the rollout strategy like the department did with Covid-19 cases. Minister Mkhize concurred with the committee on that, and he said the department is moving towards vaccination report and to inform the public.

The committee requested a clear, comprehensive and codified plan with clear and concrete time frames of the entire vaccination strategy from the department. Furthermore, the committee said the department must indicate its intention to pay per vaccine and its targeted manufacturers. It told the department that it is going to call it to account if the rollout strategy of the Covid-19 vaccines fail to translate into vaccination of the people of South Africa according to the manner it phased them.

On the safety of the vaccines, the vaccines are proven to be safe. He said there will be cases, however, where there will be individuals who will react differently from the vaccines and more research is underway. He assured the committee that the department is on course in testing the efficacy and quality of these vaccines and the results of which will be made public in due course.

On when South Africa will develop its own vaccine, he said there is capacity in the country to develop a vaccine, but that will happen over a period of time. He Said: “Expertise in the country do exist to manufacture our own vaccine, however, it is important to focus on building capacity.” He added that the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Dr Blade Nzimande, is leading the stream on the manufacturing of a vaccine.

**ISSUED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNICATION SERVICES ON BEHALF OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, DR SIBONGISENI DHLOMO.**