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1 April 2020

Honourable Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo  
Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee of Health

Dear Dr. Dhlomo

#### **OVERSIGHT FUNCTION BY THE HEALTH PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE**

South Africa recorded its first confirmed case of COVID\_19 on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. Coincidentally, this case was confirmed during the Debate of National Importance taking place in Parliament on that day. Since then, the country has confirmed 1380 cases and five fatalities by the latest statistics revealed by the Minister of Health last night. More critically, the President has declared a national state of disaster and a 21 day-national lockdown all in aid of preventing the spread of the virus.

We can all agree that the South African government has waged a valiant fight against this pandemic in difficult circumstances. To that end, it is important that the legislative arm of the country does not abdicate on its responsibility of executive oversight and representing the interests of the people of South Africa.

While we may not be able to convene physically as a committee, it is important that we make use of technology to deliberate on a number of issues that have become pertinent during this time. The reality is that the Department of Health is the lead department in the fight against this pandemic and we too need to take the lead of executing our parliamentary obligations on that basis. These are unprecedented times in our country. We have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership, take up the challenge of innovating to conduct the business of Parliament and table workable solutions to the Minister and his teams across the country.

In addition to being part of the solution, we need critically analyze the effectiveness of the strategy being used at this time; receive verbal or written feedback from the Minister, his deputy or the department and send back key issues that South Africans are facing on the ground. Our role is

directly linked to the people that we are meant to serve. It is also designed to hold the executive to account while they deliver critical services to our citizens.

In carrying out our role, it is important that we do not divert much-needed focus on the work that the Department is carrying out by summoning them to whole day meetings. We need the Minister and his team to focus on the task at hand. That being said, the national legislature must fulfill its obligations too to ensure that the interests, rights and wellbeing of South Africans are upheld. The doctrine of separation of powers that is at the center of our constitutional democracy is not a 'nice-to-have'. It bestows responsibility on us as individual Members of Parliament and as a committee.

To that end, I would like to propose we urgently convene a virtual meeting with the portfolio committee to receive a verbal or written report from the Department of Health on the following matters:

- The number of tests conducted, the results published, the methodology of compiling the report and the associated backlogs of tests and figures;
- Real time projections of the infection rate and not just the reporting rate. In other words, what is the projected daily infection rate and not the number of cases that are confirmed and reported;
- Readiness of each province to deal with the potential rise in infections, expanded testing capacity, quarantine sites, informal settlements strategy and bed availability;
- The availability of personal protective equipment per province and the strategy to deal with the global supply issue;
- The scope of the 10 000 persons testing teams that are being rolled out across the country, what will be their focus areas and how are they linked to local facilities to guard the integrity of the data;
- Report per province of the readiness of each provincial disaster management coordination team. In some provinces this is non-existent. How do we ensure that this is rectified;
- Which quarantine sites have been identified per province and their readiness to receive South Africans who may require quarantining;

This information is critical so that we, as a committee, are able to track progress on certain life-threatening matters in real time and not after the fact. Responsive legislatures have aided the fight against COVID\_19 and not hampered it across the globe.

In addition to the oversight function, we need to ensure that we are also playing our role as lawmakers, particularly in a critical time like this. Outside of the briefing we should receive from the Department we should deliberate as a committee on the following:

- The public communication campaign in the various communities that has been rolled out; is there a role that Parliament can play and how we can champion that as a committee;
- The impact of the COVID\_19 pandemic on the current health system and where the weaknesses are. This will be critical in a post COVID\_19 environment when we conduct oversight on the health system and deliberate on critical pieces of legislation;

- The impact of the pandemic to the Department's budget and how this will need to be factored in during the parliamentary budget process.

As various models have indicated and international examples have shown, the next coming weeks will be critical in the fight against this pandemic. This is why it is important that we take the responsibility that this committee and by extension Parliament has.

I look forward to your favourable response.

Regards,

**Siviwe Gwarube MP**  
**Democratic Alliance**