

If we are to address serious social problem, serious attention needs to be paid to rehabilitation holistically

By **Janho Engelbrecht** - Shadow Minister of Correctional Services

I have no intention to repeat all the very nicely articulated points of the Department's vision, mission and mandate, as is so often done during occasions such as this. We are here to perform an oversight role and assess performance. Underperformance, understaffing and underspending (by R1.3 billion) are the major achievements of the Department, with key management positions remaining unfilled. The ratio of members to inmates remains decidedly unsatisfactory, with escapes being a regular occurrence, along with the significant risks and danger associated with it.

A very significant challenge Correctional Services has to face is the budget cuts necessitated by the prevailing economic climate and the declining State. In the Department's 22/23 Annual Performance Plan it is stated that, "The R11 billion budget reduction and reversal of the wage agreement over the 2021 MTEF will continue to have a negative effect on the funded establishment of the Department during the 2022 MTEF. The Department will be required to reduce its staff complement which will negatively affect new initiatives." I think this is an understatement to say the least. This budget allocation will add in preventing the Department from fulfilling its constitutional mandate effectively.

I don't know if the involvement of the Department in terms of state capture had a subconscious influence during the budget allocation process, but it can't be denied that the blight Bosasa left on Correctional Services was severe. Parliament would however only be able to deal with this once the Speaker ceases to stall the process. The sooner this can commence the better. The manner of how this is going to be dealt with will be a determining factor in assessing the credibility of Parliament as an institution by our citizens.

During a recent oversight visit conducted by the Committee, the majority of serious challenges the Committee came across can be ascribed to a failure by the Department of Public Works to fulfil its most basic function. It has progressed to the point where Correctional Services had to make alternative plans to try and do maintenance work on facilities where

they could. This trend will continue and probably be expanded upon in future, because the one thing every department is certain of when it comes to Public Works is that it cannot be relied upon. This might be a blessing in disguise, to quote the Honourable James Selfe “prisons work where prisoners work”. Instead of paying Public Works to do shoddy maintenance, skilled prisoners can be utilized to maintain the facilities and do something constructive. I can’t think of a single reason that would motivate the continued existence of Public Works as a Government Department. Those prisons visited during recent oversight where prisoners worked, were in a much better position than those where all inmates had to do all day was to hang about with little to no exercise and nothing constructive to occupy their waking hours.

Rehabilitation is a core programme of the Department. The White Paper on Corrections (2005) states that “rehabilitation is at the centre of departmental activities”. Yet the Rehabilitation Programme is the second smallest allocated programme in this considerable budget and comprises only 9 per cent of the total allocation for the Department in 2022/23, amounting to R2.319 billion. With notable exceptions, little is offered in the way of improving the skills-set of inmates, making a mockery of the rehabilitation aspect of the Department. While most of us do not want to hear this, it is a fact that inmates have very little chance of leaving prison a better person that they were upon entering prison. While rehabilitation remains the responsibility of DCS, little or nothing is done, nor planned to be done, about the gang culture predominating in our Correctional Facilities, and the fact that inmates have little choice but to conform to this culture, or suffer the often-fatal consequences is ignored. Few inmates leave prison armed with a new, improved social conscience and skills with which they could arguably earn a living, if they could find employment. Finding employment upon leaving prison is understandably difficult, since little to no rehabilitation has taken place.

If we are to address this very serious social problem, then a lot more needs to be spent on the rehabilitation programme, and serious attention needs to be paid to rehabilitation holistically. Currently, South Africa has a very high reoffending rate, according to NICRO 87%. For as long as we ignore rehabilitation as an imperative part of the DCS responsibility, this will not come down, and this will also continue to drive the crime rate up.

The prison system suffers under overpopulation. Apart from erecting new facilities, the granting of parole, if a decent policy is in place, can offer much needed relief to a massively overpopulated prison system. In the foreseeable future there will probably not be funds available for new correctional facilities, as demonstrated by the recent number of deferred construction projects. Therefore it is fair to assume that relief for overpopulated prisons by building new ones is not going to happen.

This leaves as one of the only other measures, parole, but this is rather problematic because we don't have a decent parole policy in place. There can be no doubt that the current parole system is problematic.

The percentage of absconders is alarmingly high, resources that, as a result thereof have to be allocated in tracing and apprehending absconders can be ill afforded. Adding to the problem and serving as a demonstration of its shortcomings, people out on parole that commit serious crimes, adorn the front pages of newspapers far too often. This damages the reputation of the department and must be prevented. The only way to achieve this is to fix the parole policy. It needs urgent attention. By allocating a meagre 4.6% of the budget to social reintegration will surely not assist in improving the situation.

These are but a few of the biggest challenges I have identified, given the time available. I truly hope that the Bosasa affair, we still have to deal with, would be the last we see of political meddling and its devastating consequences for our country. I wish the officials of Correctional Services all the best.