

The DCS must increase its efforts to strengthen offender rehabilitation programmes

By **Werner Horn** - DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Justice and Correctional Services

The successful rehabilitation of sentenced offenders is one of the core functions of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS).

A number of factors however negatively impacts rehabilitation efforts in correctional centres, up to the point where it is not clear whether real rehabilitation is enabled.

While DCS insists that experts and professionals develop the content of rehabilitation programmes, the Annual Performance Plan does not contain any target aimed at measuring the efficacy of the content of programmes or the implementation thereof.

DCS uses the mantra that every official is a “rehabilitating official”, which on face value seems to indicate the seriousness with which DCS views this responsibility.

However, we all know that admin officials and some other officials, while maybe performing work essential to the functioning of correctional centres, never have direct contact with inmates. To include these officials when calculating the ratio of officials to offenders unfortunately prevents a reliable calculation and in no way accurately reflects whether the real human resources allocated to offender rehabilitation is sufficient.

Another issue is the involvement, or rather the lack thereof, of experts and professionals in the field of psychology, criminology and other social sciences to ensure proper implementation.

Firstly, there is an insufficient number of professionals on the staff establishment for correctional centres. In the face of further budget cuts the real question whether DCS is willing and able to relook at its staff establishment in order to ensure that this issue is addressed.

Secondly, the inability of DCS to prevent perennially high vacancy rates in respect of the already too small professional component of its staff establishment compounds this problem. Add to this the apparent inability of DCS to recruit sufficient numbers of artisans to ensure that all workshops operate at full capacity which in turn would also maximise the vocational training component of rehabilitation and it is clear Rehabilitation is also severely hamstrung by the overcrowding of facilities.

The reality is that the best rehabilitation programme in the world will fail in circumstances where inmates live in overcrowded facilities.

Overcrowding in our facilities remain very high despite the frequent early release of sentenced offenders. The reason: All capital projects to add additional bed spaces are invariably delayed, at a massive cost to the taxpayer.

Minister in your maiden budget speech in 2019 you announced that the addition of bed spaces through a built programme was to be a key component of the plan to address overcrowding. Yet, in terms of projects for new builds since then, only Parys, which will add less than 300 bed spaces, has commenced and Burgersdorp and Lichtenburg has been put on ice, due to what is called a “lack of funds”.

Meanwhile the Department confirms that only in the last year 2 000 bed spaces were lost due the fact that centres, or part of centres, had to be decommissioned because it has become so dilapidated that it had to be declared to be no longer fit for use.

While on the subject of funds: Apart from the budgets for build programmes always overrunning, if there is one project that clearly shows that this Department is still spending as if they are able to print their own money it is the Integrated Inmate Management System project.

Advised, at the time of awarding the initial R378 million tender to Integritron in 2016, by National Treasury, that not only was this company prohibited from doing business with government, but also that the project specifications were setting the project up for failure. The contract was nonetheless awarded, ran out and produced very little.

In the face of growing criticism the Department has on different occasions presented different future pathways. At first Integritron was going to complete the project without being paid another cent, then the project was to be completed by in-house specialists and of late other government entities is seemingly assisting. Targets on further development milestones and specifically roll out are however never met, but budget allocation remains a top priority of DCS.

Minister, under your watch we are not winning the war on overcrowding or prudent financial management, and consequently rehabilitation efforts is at best sub-par.