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Paramedics pushed to breaking point

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Paramedics pushed to breaking point Bay's overstretched emergency workers pay heavy price for not being able to reach patients on time Lynn Spence Senior Reporter 04 April 2022 HEALTH EMERGENCY: Physically and mentally exhausted paramedics and ambulance service workers are bearing the brunt of the cash-strapped health department's inability to fill all the vacant positions Image: WERNER HILLS Physically and mentally exhausted — that is how paramedics and ambulance service workers in Nelson Mandela Bay describe their situation due to crippling staff shortages, with many now at breaking point. There are only 234 government emergency medical services workers in the Bay, which has a population of more than 1.2-million people, forcing them to deal with up to 150 emergencies a day. Of the 234, many are office workers doing administrative work or operating in the fleet control room. It takes a metro ambulance, on average, between two and five hours to arrive at a call-out location. Nelson Mandela Bay Emergency Medical Services (EMS) workers are furious at the Eastern Cape department of health's inability to fill the seven posts left vacant since April 1 2021. "People vilify us for arriving late, not knowing the struggles we have to face every day," an EMS employee, who did not want to be named, said. "We go to work every day despite the challenges because we are passionate about what we do and the people we serve, but seeing people die because we can't get to them is taking its toll emotionally." Losing colleagues due to Covid-19 and retirement, along with the department ending the contracts of more than 2,000 contracted health workers across the province three months ago, has worsened the problem. About 100 contract workers had been deployed to the metro to assist the EMS. The understaffing has led to medics having to juggle call-outs in order of

importance, while emergencies pile up by the minute. The medics say that if they are unable to work overtime, there is not a full staff complement to serve the metro each day. Frustrated ambulance workers, who spoke out on condition that they were not named, slammed the department for “letting people die” and not employing more workers. Another employee described how some of them would work overtime on their days off, saying this was done out of sympathy for their colleagues. “If staff are unable to work overtime to help out a colleague, they know that it is going to be hell to pay on the roads,” he said. “Without members on overtime, staff complements will never be full. “On a good day, there are about 11 ambulances with two crew members each on duty. “In the past, there have been instances where there were only four crews available.” According to paramedics, EMS has more than 40 vacancies dating back to 2019. This is due to workers retiring, resigning or dying. “The assistance of the contract workers was a huge relief, but then the department abruptly ended their contracts and left many of them out in the cold. “The few staffers that are left do not solely tend to emergencies. “Patients have to be transported to hospitals, among other things. “The fact that we have been complaining about this problem for years without anything being done shows that the department does not care about the wellbeing of those they are meant to protect and serve.” Health MEC Nomakhosazana Meth’s spokesperson, Mkhululi Ndamase, said the department was not in a position to fill all the vacant posts. This, he said, was due to budget pressures and fiscal consolidation at a national level. “Our commitment has been to ensure that we are able to pay the salaries and benefits of our employees and [fill] posts as [the vacancies] arise, within the available funding envelope. “The department has had to consequently make some hard decisions, like not being able to extend the [contracts of] Covid-19 contract workers when they expired. “These decisions were not taken lightly, but financial discipline is required if we are to attain financial stability in the period ahead,” Ndamase said. The budget allocated for the 2022/2023 financial year did leave room for some critical appointments to be made, he said. “The annual recruitment plan balances filling critical clinical posts with those required in the support services. “Ultimately, the filling of these posts is intended to improve patient safety and experience of care, ensure a conducive work environment for our employees and promote cost-effective care.” Ndamase said four candidates had been successful in the recruitment process and were ready to be appointed. Public Servants’ Association of SA (PSA) provincial manager Madoda Maxakana said he was familiar with the EMS employees’ plight. The PSA had been engaging the provincial and national health departments on the issue for years but to no avail. “It is very sad what is happening. “People are dying as a result of the dire staff shortages. “You ask anyone in the city who relies on the metro ambulances and they will tell you that they have to wait for

two to four hours for an ambulance to arrive. “Those [workers] who passed away due to Covid-19 were never replaced. “The whole situation is a mess,” he said. According to Maxakana, the only way out of the crisis was for the National Treasury to intervene. “The minister of finance [Enoch Godongwana] and the minister of health [Joe Phaahla] need to pay a visit to the Eastern Cape to see what these workers have to deal with,” he said. HeraldLIVE Next Article Would you like to comment on this article or view other readers' comments? Register (it's quick and free) or sign in now.... [View the entire article here](#)

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