

MEDIA RELEASE	COVID-19: PSA warns Public Service departments about capacity and readiness for return of workers
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The Public Servants Association (PSA) is extremely concerned about some government departments' readiness to resume work following the announcement of some easing of lockdown restrictions.

The PSA, which represents some 240 000 public servants, pointed out that many government departments prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic already failed to meet basic standards as dictated by the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. A prime example is head Office of the Department of Health in Pretoria that was declared to be uninhabitable by inspectors of the Department of Employment and Labour. Even without the added pressure of the pandemic, departments showed little urgency in addressing these health and safety concerns.

In dealing with the return of workers following the easing of lockdown regulations, most departments have theoretical plans to accommodate employees but, in practice, these plans are not ready for execution to ensure a safe environment. Despite most departments indicating that they have the necessary face masks and sanitisers, in terms of the regulations, much more needs to be done. Most departments have already started to recall a third of workers in the absence of a proper analysis. Crucial issues such as workers' ability to continue remotely with duties, floor space that accommodates social distancing in offices and proper questionnaires to track employees' inter-provincial movements are lacking. Some departments have made provision for only one mask per employee and are still busy procuring other essential personal protective equipment.

Some departments, including the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) do not have proper screening devices in place to manage the return of staff and client-service areas do not have proper floor markings to ensure social distancing. When the PSA questioned SASSA's readiness, the Agency decided to postpone the return of its staff. The office of the Department of Home Affairs in Phuthaditjhaba has no running water.

The Department of Defence has, for example, recalled all its civilian staff without having a proper plan in place and an assessment of the critical nature of employees' duties. These employees have since the start of the lockdown been performing their duties from home, which defies the reasoning for their recall in the absence of proper safety measures. Simply providing mask to employees returning from other provinces is a recipe for disaster. Many of these employees are general workers whose services are not regarded as critical. The PSA has called for an urgent meeting with Departmental officials to ascertain the state of readiness and if a proper plan is not in place, the Union will caution its members not to return to the workplace until it is safe to do so.

Departments that performed adequately whilst employees were in lockdown have no reason to recall employees in the absence of practical arrangements to ensure their health and safety. Non-compliance with such requirements

will wipe out the gains achieved to date. The PSA warns departments not to prematurely rush employees back to work until practical plans are in place to ensure their safety in the interest of sustained service delivery.

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