

MEDIA RELEASE COVID-19: PSA demands testing of all Correctional officials and

offenders

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The Public Servants Association (PSA), representing more than 13 000 employees of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), following a spike in COVID-19 infections at correctional centres, demands that the DCS tests all employees and offenders for infection.

A recent outbreak at the Heilbron Correctional Centre resulted in the transfer of all offenders to various Correctional Centres in the Free State. This measure by the Centre management resulted in no offender testing positive even though at least six officials tested positive and 29 are still in self-isolation. The first confirmed COVID-19 case was reported at the Potchefstroom Correctional Centre last week. Offenders in the Centre demanded to be tested. Despite continuous talks to arrange for testing, this has still not been approved. On 26 June 2020, some offenders owing to frustration broke out of their cells and set the Centre alight. The Area Commissioner's swift action ensured that an emergency support team, fire brigade, police and medical services were dispatched immediately. The Area Commissioner personally took charge of the situation, resulting in order being restored and limited damaged to the Centre. The fire, however, resulted in a decision that all 600 offenders be transferred to various Correctional Centres and 160 offenders being released on parole immediately. This tremendous task had to be performed by officials near the end of their shift and resulted in them having to work for more than 24 hours. The PSA wishes to thank every Correctional official and first responder who assisted with no regard for their own safety.

The PSA's continuous requests to implement a reduction of staff per shift to limit the spread of the COVID-19 amongst officials and offenders have, along with other proposals, been ignored by the DCS. This has resulted in numerous Correctional Centres that confirmed their first positive case in a shortage of staff as employees who came in direct contact with infected persons are quarantined. The PSA also proposed that a second layer of defence be implemented in shift patterns to ensure that if an outbreak occurs, the prison will not be short staffed and further compromise employees' safety and increase the risks of escapes. The Minister of Justice and Correctional Services should understand that a reactive approach to the spread of COVID-19 in Correctional Centres will not save the lives of officials or offenders. The Minister needs to work on proactive solutions that should be implemented immediately. By simply releasing offenders on parole, the onus is on communities to care for parolees. With an unemployment rate of more than 30% and communities still struggling to recover from the impact of the lockdown, it will only be a matter of time before these parolees will return to crime in to sustain themselves.

The crisis at the Potchefstroom Correctional Centre could have occurred at any of the country's 250 Correctional Centres. The PSA structures continuously report that offenders demand to be tested or be

released. The PSA therefore calls on the Minster to ensure that all Correctional officials and offenders are tested for COVID-19 without delay to avert a looming national crisis.

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