

SPEAKING NOTES OF THE MEC FOR HEALTH HON
SASEKANI MANZINI - WELCOMING OF GERT SIBANDE
MENTAL HEALTH REVIEW BOARD

12 June 2020, Friday

Chairpersons and Members of the mental health review boards in all our three districts, HOD and all other departmental officials present in this virtual meeting receive my humble greetings.

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to this meeting were in the main we are welcoming the recently appointed Mental Health Review Board members for Gert Sibande District and to establish systems that will improve the communication lines between the Boards and my office. I must indicate that we are joined here today by representatives of both Ehlanzeni and Nkangala mental health review boards.

We are meeting today against a backdrop of the widespread coronavirus pandemic commonly known as COVID-19. This virus has brought panic, anxiety, horror, insecurity and grief around the world. Furthermore the introduction of COVID-19 globally has brought about both desirable effects and none desirable ones. One of the positive outcomes is that we have learned to utilize the innovations of the fourth industrial revolution which in my thinking this initiative is here to stay, because it actually makes life much easier for us all of us to meet anywhere. It allows for efficient, effective and economical communication.

As a Province our fight against COVID-19 has been an intense one and our strategy is mainly on active identification of cases through community

screening and contact tracing which has been led by our frontline health care workers and community healthcare workers. This has been the most effective effort in our fight against this global pandemic. This strategy has helped us in making sure that we contribute to Government's fight against COVID-19 and making sure that as we curb the spread of the virus we also flatten the curve.

Our frontline workers have been working tirelessly to make sure that we fight this together and we have been offering moral support to make sure that they motivated emotionally and mentally strong in the fight against the COVID-19. As the department in the province we have put all the measures which ensures that we put lives of our people first.

We are proud of the thousands of healthcare workers who are working ceaselessly to fight this faceless enemy and heal the minds of many as they cope with the pandemic. Their dedication and stamina is an inspiration to all of us and quite commendable.

Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus the Director-General of the World Health Organisation clearly stated that COVID-19 is public enemy number one and our response to the pandemic has been directed by this declaration and we are treating it as such, "public enemy number one".

Our country is being tested as it has never been tested before, so we must carry forward the fight against COVID-19 with all the energy we can muster.

The South Africa government has taken some critical steps forward to strengthen its mental health system including reforming the Mental Health

Care Act 17 of 2002 (MHCA), the development of the South African National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2013–2020 (MHPF) and the adoption of the National Health Insurance (NHI) Policy (2017) to promote equity in health service delivery towards Universal Health Coverage.

In keeping with international human right standards, the Mental Health Care Act introduced Mental Health Review Boards (MHRBs) and prescribes that a Member of the Executive Council responsible for Health Services in a province must, after consultation with the Head of The Provincial Department concerned, establish a Review Board in respect of every health establishment providing mental health care, treatment and rehabilitation services in that province.

The welcoming today is not by default but a direct implementation of the Mental Health Care Act no. 17 of 2002 and marks a significant step on the road to understand mental illness and combating the stigma and discrimination that surrounds it.

With the appointment of the boards, we hope to break the vicious cycle of neglect to raise awareness of mental health issues at the highest level of decision and policy making.

The international human rights accords play an important role in promoting and protecting the rights of people with mental illness including through improvement in mental health care. Furthermore the inclusion of mental health among the highest health and development priorities for investment in the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations represents a global commitment and it was a great achievement.

At the same time, good mental health is what enables us all to be optimistic, to move on and to continue the struggle to create a meaningful and worthwhile life even during difficult times. The recent outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has reaffirmed and strengthened the importance of good mental health between our people and within communities; I'm saying this because as we fight this "public enemy number one" we must be in a good mental health status to avoid unnecessary panic and anxiety.

I must also highlight to members of the Mental Health Review Boards that, issues of mental health are receiving serious attention from the Province, hence a decision was taken by the Executive Council to construct a Specialised Psychiatric Hospital in Emalahleni and, six (6) mental health units in KwaMhlanga, Mmametlhake, Bethal, Middelburg, Themba and Mapulaneng hospitals, with an aim of improving the quality of care that has to be given to our Mental Health Care Users.

This decision was taken because people do not get the care they need. Mental disorders impose a range of costs on individuals, households, employers, and society as a whole, ranging from the cost of care to the cost of lost productivity. A great deal of this suffering is unnecessary.

We know, for instance, that some of those who are suffering from conditions like depression can fully recover if treated. However, not all of those affected receive treatment for a variety of reasons including stigma and discrimination. The Boards, as we welcoming you today must look into this and other factors that will ensure that all who suffer from a mental health illness receive treatment.

In terms of the revised Act, Mental Health Review Boards were set up incrementally across provinces from April 2005 onwards; hence in 2018 the Province took a decision to have 3 MHRB in the 3 District (Ehlanzeni, Nkangala and Gert Sibande). In 2018 two MHRB were appointed in Ehlanzeni and Nkangala, and the Department acknowledges that it took a long time for Gert Sibande MHRB to be appointed. However, today we are welcoming the new board members for Gert Sibande District.

We must continue to work together as a province to tackle the great problems that affect the future of humanity, and sustain the impetus for freedom and democracy so that all people can live and grow together.

Mental illness is not a personal failure. If there is failure, it is because of the way we have responded to people with mental disorder. I hope the Members of the Boards will help us dispel the long-held prejudices and mark the beginning of a new era in the field of mental health care. Now more people know that physical and mental health are inextricably linked to each other and to the well-being of individuals. The global toll of mental illness is staggering.

Let me put an emphasis that the Boards are governed by an Act. The Act makes provision of powers and functions. As the Department we are expecting all members of the Mental Health Review Boards to do their work without fear or favor when evaluating compliance in different facilities, to report all wrongs found in facilities to this office, to perform its oversight role to ensure the Department complies with provisions of the Act when providing Mental Health services to the people of Mpumalanga.

The Act further makes a provision for the rights of individuals affected by mental illness- that they are also entitled to equal rights, without discrimination. So I rely on you, for our Mental Health Care Users to enjoy equal rights like every other patient and this we can only achieve if you are willing to offer your services in ensuring that the lives of our Mental Health Care Users are protected and their rights are upheld.

The Department is fully aware of the number of challenges the two Mental Health Review Boards have come across over the years when supporting our facilities in the provision of mental health services (non-adherence to the Act when patients are admitted, shortage of professional staff to treat patients, infrastructure, referral system, etc.) and the Department is working towards closing these gaps.

Allow me to welcome the members of the Mental Health Review Board of Gert Sibande District, Mr Z Mhlongo (Chairperson), Dr M Dlamini (Mental health care practitioner), Ms L Mabele, Ms Mvambo, Mr A Zulu - community members.

The Department also welcomes Ms M Nkambule, who is a replacement for Ehlanzeni Mental Health Review Board as a community member, also welcome Dr Z Nxumalo whom I have not met since your appointment.

I hope we will work together to improve the quality of life of our patients. I look forward to a healthy and prosperous working relationship. I would like us to meet at least once a quarter especially now that we are still trying to improve the conditions in our facilities to be able to provide the health care that our MHC Users deserve, so that I personally get the report on what is happening in our province and avoid by all means the Life Esidimeni saga.

We must adopt to the new understanding of mental disorders and how to treat them effectively; this will signal a new hope for the sufferers, families and communities and I hope our engagements do not end today.

I wish you all well as you perform your different duties.

Thank you