Crime experts in favour of DNA bill in parliament hearings

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DESPITE concerns expressed during public hearings on the “DNA Bill” in Parliament this week, most of those who presented their opinions supported the “vastly improved” legislation.

The Criminal Law (Forensic Procedures) Amendment Bill will make it mandatory for the DNA of everyone arrested, as well as convicted offenders, to be entered into a DNA database so they can be checked against profiles collected from crime scenes.

This week, several interested parties made their submissions to Parliament on the bill, among them private forensics companies and Durban rape survivor Jessica Poord.

All threw their weight behind the legislation.

Acting head of the portfolio committee on police Annelize van Wyk said various stakeholders had said the new version of the bill was a “vast improvement on the previous version”.

Remaining concerns included the testing of family members’ DNA to make matches.

But Van Wyk said the IT structure that supports the bill would “make or break it”.

The bill will increase the chances of matching perpetrators to their crimes, and of identifying serial offenders earlier. It will also confirm or rule out suspects immediately, based on the DNA evidence, which will save time and resources.

Vanessa Lynch, founder of the non-profit organisation the DNA project, which has been pushing the bill since 2005, said it would dramatically improve on current legislation.

“South Africa has one of the highest crimes rates in the world, but also one of the lowest conviction rates. It also has one of the highest re-offending rates. With the DNA database in place we will deal a serious blow to crime, and finally match up to the global standards of DNA use in crime fighting,” she said.

Legendary detective and serial killer expert Piet Byleveld said the bill would make it much easier to catch criminals, as it would save time and money in accessing DNA samples.

“My only concern is whether the police will be trained properly,” he said.

Additional reporting by Bianca Capazorio