Social work top priority

A rigorous campaign has been launched to make social work the career of choice for SA's youth. LUMKA OLIPHANT reports

SOCIAL workers are fast becoming a scarce skills resource in South Africa, with the country losing between 50 and 60 social workers to overseas countries every three months. The UK, followed by Australia, New Zealand and Canada are said to be the main poachers of South Africa's social workers.

Now the social development department has launched a rigorous campaign to retain and make social work the career of choice for SA's youth.

To this end, Social Development Minister Zola Skweyiya will offer student social workers bursaries and has increased the Social Work Bursary Scheme from R106 million to R210 million.

Skweyiya said his department was also committed to improving the working conditions of social workers and would engage academic institutions on the challenges faced by student social workers, because, he said: "We are not producing these professionals at the rate and pace of our social demand."

The department notes that the 17 academic institutions that offer the degree produce only a third of the number of graduates that register in their first year.

In 2000, 1 566 students were registered collectively but only 502 graduated four years later, with the University of the Western Cape having the highest number of graduates at 77.

The object of the recruitment and retention strategy is:

- To provide a framework for the recruitment and retention of social workers as learners and professionals who will be committed to rendering services where they are needed most in the country;
- To reposition the social work profession to meet the challenges of the 21st century;
- To promote a positive image of social work as a career of choice;
- To address the concerns and conditions of service that impact negatively on service provision; and
- To promote occupational safety standards within the workplace and improve the service conditions of social workers.

"This is one of the urgent concerns that we need to address by engaging with academic institutions offering social work qualifications. We need to ensure that social work education and practical skills are constantly informed by the changing demands of practice," Skweyiya said.

Iveda Smith, chief executive of
the South African Council for Social Service Professions, said the country needed at least 16 000 social workers, but just over 14 600 were registered with the council.

"That number sounds like a lot but compared with the challenges of child abuse, drug abuse and HIV, the industry needs more social workers and cannot rely on auxiliary workers to render a good service," said Smith.

She said even though the number of social workers leaving the country was still high, it had dropped compared to 1994 and 1995.

"We used to process 94 to 100 social workers leaving a month."

She attributed the drop in numbers to improved salaries in government and that overseas countries offer two-year contracts to social workers.

Smith noted that while government was making strides to stop the poaching of social workers by overseas countries, something needed to be done to stop government from taking non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) staff.

The NGOs are doing a great job in training our social workers because they work directly with the people on the ground and we cannot afford to lose them," said Smith.

Wilhemina Bodibe (55), who runs 14 child welfare centres in Ekurhuleni, said last month she had 10 social worker vacancies and only two were filled by social workers. The remainder were filled by social auxiliary workers, who assist social workers and have only completed a one-year learnership course, whereas social workers have a four-year university degree.

Bodibe said the government subsidy allocates R8 500 to social workers, R3 000 for administration and R6 500 for their actual salaries.

"I have had to give them the whole R8 500 and run short on administration money because I cannot afford to lose my social workers," she said.

Bodibe said she only has four social workers for all 14 centres.

She said government needed either to increase the subsidies allocated to NGOs for salaries, or find a way of working together because "at the end of the day, we are all working towards the same goal".

Log on to www.citypress.co.za to view the video

**Political appointments 'inhibit service delivery'**

AVELA Ngentsu is a 33-year-old social worker from the Western Cape. She qualified as a social worker 10 years ago and has been working in the same province ever since.

From 1999 to 2004 she worked in one of the satellite offices, but since then she has moved to the provincial district office, which services 16 district offices.

All 16 offices are serviced by five social workers who have to travel to the rural areas of Western Cape once a week.

"You find that you have to drive for three hours to get to your destination and can only see a few clients because you still have the three-hour drive back home," said Ngentsu.

She said ideally she would want to see at least 10 clients, but most of her days were spent travelling to remote areas.

"We do not have enough staff and one person ends up doing the work of three," said Ngentsu.

She said most social workers really loved their jobs but their working conditions were not conducive to the work they did.

"We are sometimes short of cars to travel to our people and most of our offices are open-plan, even though we are dealing with vulnerable members of society who need all the privacy in the world," she said.

Although Ngentsu did not want to divulge her salary, she noted that there were staff with 30 years of experience who were still not managers.

She said the biggest problem in Western Cape was that most district managers were not social workers but "teachers or nurses" — and often people were allocated positions only because they belonged to the "right" political party.

Ngentsu said social workers felt they were not appreciated and that political appointments were stifling service delivery to many South Africans.

"We are demoralised because we are viewed as unimportant, but the work we do is so important for the greater good of the country."
FOR more than 33 years Dukie Mothiba has been working as a social worker for non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

She is the national director of the Family and Marriage Association of SA, but says she earns less than a chief social worker employed by government. This, she feels should change.

She believes the levelling of pay for NGOs and government is an issue the Department of Social Development should address as a matter of urgency, because NGOs lose staff to government.

"As NGOs we are the very people who assisted government in this recruitment and retention strategy, but it looks like government is going to benefit, not us," Mothiba said.

The strategy made no mention of how NGOs were going to be assisted or benefit from recruitment, she added.

"It does not say in any way whether we are going to get a percentage of the social workers they will be recruiting," Mothiba said.

NGOs could not render a good service if they had to rely on social auxiliary workers rather than on qualified staff.

"You find in some places more auxiliary workers than qualified social workers, but we are expected to render the best service for our people. It is impossible."

She said there were times when she had to beg staff not to leave their organisation, but "people have to earn a living wage. Our job is very fulfilling, but we cry when we get our salaries. We also understand that if we close down, our communities will suffer."

"Let there be parity in salaries," Mothiba said.

NGOs could not render a good service if they had to rely on social auxiliary workers rather than on qualified staff.

"You find in some places more auxiliary workers than qualified social workers, but we are expected to render the best service for our people. It is impossible."

She said there were times when she had to beg staff not to leave their organisation, but "people have to earn a living wage. Our job is very fulfilling, but we cry when we get our salaries. We also understand that if we close down, our communities will suffer."