

Minister fired up to get parole boards working effectively

The CSPB members started a new five year term last month. The Minister said the newly appointed chairpersons and deputy chairpersons should sign performance agreements and be held accountable to the conditions of their contracts “like we all are”.

Fair expectations

Minister Mapisa-Nqakula was clear about her expectations for the performance of parole boards: “I have signed a performance agreement with the President and I have to account on the work that I am tasked to do. We must all be accountable and be judged against our work to ensure that decisions of the parole boards are well reasoned. I also account on issues of recidivism (reoffending) to the President and I rely on you to make sure that the right offenders are released on parole or sent to community corrections.”

The Minister addressed systemic challenges in parole administration. She gave examples in which parole boards in the recent past did not provide thorough documentation, did not make thorough consideration, did not adhere to all the prescripts of the law and made no extra efforts to involve victims of crime in parole hearings.

The importance of thoroughness

She explained why she, in the last three months, overturned the parole board recommendations for offenders serving life sentences in more than 70% of the cases she had to consider. “The main reasons for not agreeing with the recommendations of parole boards were because they did not always apply their minds to all the facts contained in the offender profiles, did not provide reasons for their recommendations and did not take a holistic view of all the factors contained in a profile.” Minister Mapisa-Nqakula was frank about the need to restore public faith in the parole system. She went into some of the details she would expect from parole board recommendations and from the documents that accompany parole board decisions. She cited the importance of meticulously considering the details in the reports of social workers and psychologists in an offender's case file. Such reports could indicate possible risks of violent behaviour or repeat offending.

Parole boards should also consider the sentence remarks made by the judge at the time of sentencing. “I have not, amongst the 269 profiles (of lifers) which I have considered since April 2011, come across a single recommendation by a parole board that referred to the contents of the sentencing remarks. If you do not consider the violent nature of the offences committed, then you cannot make an informed decision about rehabilitation,” she said with conviction.

Improving case management

The Minister acknowledged that the department cannot have a stronger parole board system if case management is in shambles. She advised the new arsenal to occasionally do research on the internet as some cases are featured prominently on certain websites and valuable insight can be gained from such research. The CSPB members will be subjected to further training as the results of their decisions have wide reaching impact on communities and on crime in general.
