

## Minister launches a 'model' Mother and Child Unit



***The beneficiaries listening attentively to what Minister Mapisa-Nqakula has to say***

Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula marked yet another significant milestone in Correctional Services when she launched a model Mother and Child Unit to improve the conditions of children living with their incarcerated mothers and give them a better care that heightens their development. She launched the unit at the Pollsmoor Management Area in the department's Western Cape Region on Thursday 18 August. She named the facility Nontsikelelo Albertinah Sisulu, after the late iconic woman cadre.

The new Mother and Child Unit is the first of its kind in South Africa and Africa and will be rolled out to all the facilities that detain mothers with babies. She will be launching a similar establishment at the Durban Westville in Kwa-Zulu Natal on the 26th of this Women's Month.

This model establishment offers a dedicated medical facility for both mother and child, has a kitchen that mothers can use to prepare meals and warm milk for the babies, a fully functional nursery and facilities where the women can attend rehabilitation programmes. It is spacious and will offer the children freedom of movement and expose them to basic necessities such as fresh air, grass, trees, direct sunlight and all of which were considered luxurious to all babies growing behind bars.

While presenting the facility to its new housemates, the minister said, "I am excited that we are meeting here for the official handover of the first new generation facility dedicated for women who are serving sentences with young babies in our centres. We shall open more facilities in other regions over the remaining period of this Women's Month."

She said the opening of the unit profoundly expresses in practical terms the imperative of the now six years old White Paper on Corrections to incarcerate offenders for rehabilitation in safe custody and with the respect of their human rights. "We want these children to be able to touch sand, to feel the grass, to know dirt and to be able to see the blue sky during their early childhood. We do not want their early memory of their mothers to be that of a person in chains," said the minister while reiterating that the facilities have been designed with the interest of the child in mind.

The programme itself will keep the mothers with their babies for a period up to when the child is two years, after which the child will be surrendered to the care of a family member or guardian chosen by the inmate mother who will then return to the female cells. In the event where there is no suited guardian, the child will be placed in a foster care unit which is accredited by the department. The child would still maintain the psychological and emotional contact with the mother through arranged visitations.

One such continuous psychological and emotional contact is that of Sisanda Yamile, the mother of four months old Ndiphile and she just loves their new home. "I feel very happy to be here. My baby will grow up well here and has a playing field. I love this place, the cupboards, the floor, the roof and there is space to do everything like in a home environment," said the delighted Sisanda who is due for release in September for theft conviction.

Vuyiseka Ngxiki, also the mother of four year old Likhona, her excitement is on the realisation that her child will be growing in an enabling environment as her imminent release is not guaranteed. She is also due out this year but she has another case running in court.

The Mother and Child Facility in Pollsmoor is located in the heart of a residential area for correctional officials. It has a bed capacity of 15 mothers with their children. This automatically means that all nine mothers incarcerated with their babies at Pollsmoor will be relocated to the new facility. Pollsmoor has a combined total of 519 women offenders and 264 are sentenced while the latter 255 are awaiting trial. Negotiations are ongoing with five mothers incarcerated with their babies at Oudtshoorn in the Western Cape to be located to the historic care unit.

Commissioner Tom Moyane described the launch of the Mother and Child Unit as a "moment of joy". He showered praises to the Regional Commissioner of the Western Cape, his management team, officials and offenders whose labour was used to refurbish the facility, for a job well done.