

Minister lauded for securing the wellbeing of 'incarcerated' babies



Correctional Services Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula (centre in floral top) surrounded by DUT Interior Design students, her officials and colleagues from other government departments.

Correctional Services Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula launched the second of five Mother and Child Care Units at the Durban Westville Correctional Centre on Friday 26 August to see her dream of putting children incarcerated with their mothers out of the confines of prison walls, coming close to a touching distance.

The biggest hallmark of the minister's dream of wanting to see all South African children including those living with their mothers behind bars growing in humane conditions, took shape when she launched a similar facility and the first of its kind in South Africa and Africa on the 18th of this month at Pollsmoor

Correctional Centre in the Western Cape region. The minister expects to launch three more similar facilities in three regions namely; Gauteng, Free State, Northern Cape and Eastern Cape.

Plans are already afoot to prepare for the additional establishments in those regions. What is of greater importance in the days leading to the opening of the first and second units at Pollsmoor and Durban Westville respectively, is the fact that the department collaborated with external stakeholders and that, officials and offenders took charge of preparing the set up.

At the launch ceremony of the Westville facility, the minister commended the active participation of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) Interior Design students for raising funds for amenities and designing the look and feel of the mother and child unit. The minister was more pleased that youth are starting to buy in and are beginning to understand the importance on the functions of correctional services in society.

Unlike the establishment in Pollsmoor which is situated within the officials' quarters, the spacious Westville facility is located within the Durban Female Correctional Centre where the DUT students transformed it beyond imagination.

Apart from the students, the Deputy Minister in the Presidency Ms Dinah Pule was also in attendance. She said the presidency fully supports the minister's initiative for securing the future of the innocent babies who have not wronged anybody and for restoring the dignity of women during Women's Month. She gave the minister the green scorecard which is the highest accolade given to ministers who have done their jobs by the president during their assessments.

Dr Nonhlanhla Mkhize, the Director General of a department tasked with the wellbeing of children (The Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities), also applauded the minister work. She said, "We are proud of you minister as a woman and a mother. There are many good things you are doing and you have changed the mindset of how people look at correctional services. You are indeed implementing a caring government that well looks after in citizens and as a department that deals with the needs of both women and children who are the beneficiaries of this milestone, we fully support you".

Minister Mapisa-Nqakula, who was also forcefully separated from her first son when he was two, said she was encouraged by the people's reaction across the country following the successful launch of the first new generation Mother and Child Unit at Pollsmoor. The facilities have been designed with the interest of the child in mind and the decision to create these dedicated units was motivated by the need to protect the wellbeing of the child and was also based on the high principle that there is no need to punish the child because the mother made a mistake.

Empathising with inmate mothers who in the past had to either live with their children in sterner conditions of incarceration or separate with them at an early age to give them a better life beyond bars, the minister said the pain of mother and child separation is the same behind bars and elsewhere. "We want you to bond with your babies at their crucial stage of development (the first two years). We have become sensitive to the plight of children behind bars with their mothers who are serving time. What better way to demonstrate our seriousness about the predicament of babies than to significantly change the conditions under which they live while in our care," she related.

She told the offenders that everything the department does for them was about second chances. The minister was encouraged by the fact that more and more women are furthering their studies and doing more than just hairdressing and anger management courses.

Giving credence to the praised she received from her colleague in government and the support from the stakeholders, particularly students, the minister said in conclusion that "the call of a public servant comes with the understanding that at all times everything that we do is about giving practical expressions to the rights of our people – making it possible."