

## Minister's Imbizo edges community closer to making corrections a societal responsibility



*Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula with some of the TV personalities who helped galvanise support for the Ministerial Imbizo. Among them are Senzo, Matthew and Zamani, cast members on the soap Generations.*

In celebration of Correctional Services' programme of showcasing the department's pockets of excellence called Corrections Week, Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa Nqakula embarked on a journey to establish partnerships with communities in an effort to ensure greater success for offenders' social reintegration, get society's buy-in to take an integrated effort to fighting crime and to defeat reoffending.

In view of that, the minister called an Imbizo at the Grace Bible Church in Soweto on Wednesday 28 September where she addressed over 2000 concerned community members, most of whom appreciated the minister's descend to her constituency and

for speaking and listening to the masses.

Part of the minister's call for the Imbizo was to introduce the Halfway Houses programme which the department aims to establish and run in partnership with the communities. Halfway Houses are release centres located in the communities to aid parolees who do not have firm addresses to return home to, and most of whom find themselves on the re-offending radar caused by survival challenges.

In her address, the minister also told the Soweto communities of programmes such as the Offender Labour Workforce, the recently launched Mother and Child Unit, electronic monitoring tags, Youth Dialogues (between young offenders and their mothers), victim participation in the parole of offenders and more other flagship projects which could flourish with the community participation.

Explaining her rationale for community participation, the minister said, "I am here to interact with you on any views and comments you have about our work and I invite you to engage with us without reservation.

"For many ex-offenders who have found themselves back in our centres, despite the various and useful skills they've acquired through our training programmes, it has been difficult to sustain a straight and narrow path to self-development because of understandably hard attitudes of the community and mistrust against those who once wronged us."

She said the department is championing the restorative justice between victims and their perpetrators in the process of finding healing and acceptance. "Real and complete justice demands the respect and dignity of those who've been touched by crime to be intimately involved in this process too. Victim involvement in the process of considering release on parole of offenders is critical in the delivery of justice as this encourages reconciliation and the successful reintegration of the ex-offender back into the community. It is our hope that together we can defeat re-offending by ex-offenders and in the long term, through public education render crime less attractive than it is today," said the minister.

"I am making a call to the public to support our parolees and ex-offenders. Without you we cannot stem the tragedy of our youth making up the majority of the offender population in South Africa. Your support will in part be the determinant of whether offenders get a second chance at life or whether they will return to a life of criminality or not," appealed the minister.

She said the department will do everything to ensure that they participate in programmes that give them skills and prepare them for a productive life on the outside. However, if the community rejects them, they may not succeed in sustaining their stay outside prison. The Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Corrections Mr Vincent Smith re-emphasised the minister plea in saying that, "it is not a DCS challenge to correct offending behaviour of inmates. It is everyone's responsibility. We must together empower them to make them less vulnerable when they are released."

He also supported the minister's call to engage with the judiciary to make imprisonment for serious crime offenders and that there should be alternative sentencing to petty crimes.

During the interactions, parolees who dominated the session cried foul about stigmatisation and being shunned by potential employers because of the criminal record they have. Others went as far as saying that it was much difficult to function in the community than to survive in custody because there you are guaranteed meals and shelter. Of grave concern was the fact that government expects the business sector to employ ex-offenders while it discriminates them on the basis of having criminal records and does not employ them.

Mothers whose children are incarcerated raised concerns about the limited visitation time and there they were not consistent in other facilities. The mothers also cried foul that their children are not treated humanely.

In response, the minister told the community members that they must recognise that officials are also their children and therefore their wellbeing must also be considered, not only those of the offenders. "Officials are stabbed by offenders as part of their sick initiation. Not all officials are corrupt and abusive. We have committed members who sacrifice their family time to care and develop these offenders." Commending a parolee who has started a shoe making initiative though facing financial difficulties, the minister said, "We need the Vuku'zenzele (self starters) type of parolees, people who can take initiatives to better their lives. We want to start a project to deploy skilled ex-offenders to go back to correctional facilities to reinvest their skills by teaching other offenders."

To appease the community, the minister told them that she is in discussion with her fellow ministers from the Justice, Crime Prevention and Safety Cluster to discuss ways of not discriminating against ex-offenders because it is the government that had skilled them and should be able to harness those skills.

In closing the minister applauded the participation of Soweto based celebrities who went out and about to mobilize support for the successful Imbizo. Among them were Senzo, Mathew and Zamane, known characters from the soap Generations.

The minister together with her senior leadership and officials have been on the ground since the start of Corrections Week on 26 September and will be in various communities across South Africa with offenders and dedicated officials till the closing of the 6th annual programme on 02 October 2011.