

## Corrections is a societal responsibility

by Sibusiso Ndebele

On Friday (6 July 2012), the current special remission of sentence process ended. On 27 April 2012, in keeping with the spirit of celebration of 18 years of freedom, and in line with established international practice, in terms of section 84 (2) J of the Constitution, President Jacob Zuma granted a special remission of sentence to specific categories of sentenced offenders, probationers and parolees. This happened for the first time under the current administration. Those who pose a serious risk to society, particularly offenders declared to be dangerous criminals, were excluded from remissions. All offenders, bar those lifers who are refused parole, must inevitably return to communities at the end of their sentence or when paroled. The Department of Correctional Services is aware of the risks of reintegration into society, and has put in place appropriate pre-release interventions.

Of the 42,914 probationers, parolees and offenders released, 25,338 were already in communities and released from Community Corrections, and 17,576 were in Correctional Centres. As at 28 June 2012, 0.2% (87) rearrests were recorded. Of these, 11 were re-sentenced, and eight have been released. It would be optimistic to expect none of these offenders to be rearrested, or even that everyone benefits from programmes in prison.

Following my appointment to Correctional Services on 12 June 2012, we visited the Westville Correctional Centre in KwaZulu-Natal on June 15 as part of a series of visits we are undertaking nationwide to acquaint ourselves with the state of affairs at Correctional Centres. We also visited the Westville Correctional Youth Centre. That children as young as 17 have committed serious crimes ranging from murder, rape and theft should make society question where we have failed in protecting our children. We need to accept that crime reflects the failures in society and is not a direct consequence of the failures of the corrections system. Preventing a life of crime begins with the family, social fibre and the opportunities for growth that children can access. The Department has increased the number of youth centres participating in youth dialogues. Parents are encouraged to visit their children and encourage them to participate in rehabilitation programmes.

The Department is fully committed to our shared vision of a caring and just society to afford even those who err against it the opportunity to correct and mend their ways under humane conditions. We are going all out to rehabilitate and create conditions for those seriously seeking opportunities for change in their lives to access them. We are passionate about galvanising understanding and support for our transformative agenda from prisons to corrections, and preparing offenders to become functional members of society. Corrections is an essential part of the Integrated Criminal Justice System and the value chain in the fight against crime.

We have certainly moved away from the legacy of the past of serving solely as an instrument of retribution to actively pursuing lasting solutions to the societal challenge that is crime by showing those in conflict with the law that there are alternatives to a life of crime and self-destruction.

The White Paper on Corrections enjoins us to pursue this objective by changing the circumstances of those entrusted to our care through not only offending behaviour altering interventions, but educational development and training opportunities.

We are all too aware that, apart from the sadistic criminal mind, which society must be protected against, many in our society come in conflict with laws because of the reality of poverty in our country.

Lack of education and adequate skills to penetrate the job market or lack of opportunities for the unskilled to start businesses often forces some to engage in criminal activity to provide for needy families.

Unfortunately, this route to satisfying an immediate desire to stop hunger in families and to overcome the conditions of squalor that many of our people find themselves in will almost always lead to their arrest, conviction and incarceration.

Skills development and educational opportunities offer us immediate solutions to providing those who are serving time to at least attain a new set of tools for better tackling the challenges of life once released.

However, social reintegration is no easy feat. Societal support for those who have served time in a correctional facility is critical to the process.

Society is guaranteed a victory against crime and re-offending if we all begin to understand the role we must and should play in helping those who are vulnerable among us lead positive and productive lives.

In essence, we are talking about a partnership between the Department and communities to assist in preparing all inmates for successful reintegration.

(NDEBELE IS MINISTER OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES)