



**Speaker's Notes for the Deputy Minister of Justice and Correctional
Services Mr Thabang Makwetla, MP**

Ex-Offenders Conference

St. George's Hotel, Tshwane

23 July 2015

Programme Director

The National Commissioner of Correctional Services: Mr. Z.I. Modise

The Chief Deputy Commissioner for Corrections: Ms. Pumla Mathibela

The Acting Regional Commissioner of Gauteng: Mr. Mandla Mkabela

Our Distinguished Chief Deputy Commissioners and Regional
Commissioners

Other Senior Managers from the Ministry and Sister Departments
Present

Our Partners and Service Providers in the Corrections Business

Community Leaders and Activists

Our Ex-Offenders, Parolees and Probationers

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

The founding father of our democracy, the late President Nelson Mandela, said: "The deep concern that we all feel about crime - and particularly about violent crime - calls for creative strategies of many kinds to rebuild the nation's soul. Such strategies can only be devised when all South Africans join hands to create the kind of society we want for our children - a society where people feel safe to roam our streets freely; where they do not lack basic human needs like food or employment; and where they treat fellow human beings with respect and dignity".

Every year, during July, South Africans, and the international community, honour our former President, and international icon, through the Nelson Mandela International Day. President Jacob Zuma declared this year as the Year of the Freedom Charter and Unity in Action. Government has called on all sectors of society to come together and work for a better South Africa, as we mark the 60th anniversary of the Charter.

The 2015 Mandela Month is, therefore, a call to action for the nation to work together for the continuous development of humanity through the attainment of basic freedom, in line with this year's message - ***"Take Action - Inspire Change - Make Every Day a Mandela Day"***. The message encourages everyone to be an active citizen, and agent, to attain change and what they want to see. As a champion of change, Mandela was instrumental in reconciliation and ensuring that Africans come together to defeat all challenges which characterised their lives - like apartheid, poverty and wars, among others. This theme encourages us to take responsibility to change attitudes, and ensure peaceful co-existence in our communities and human solidarity.

July is also known as Social Cohesion Month, which encourages South Africans to become active citizens who work together, to develop a cohesive society. This entails promoting the Constitutional principles, and values, of non-racialism, non-sexism, justice and equality for all. It is

also an opportunity to do more to build an inclusive society and economy.

It is, therefore, significant that we are hosting this Ex-Offenders Conference during this important month of July. There is no better way to honour the founding father of our democracy than being dedicated to the service of our fellow human beings, and by actively helping to change their circumstances. To this end, this conference will provide a platform for ex-offenders to share their experiences about their reintegration into society, their trials and tribulations.

Government is doing, and must do, everything possible to break the cycle of crime in our country by, among others, making sure that those released from correctional facilities do not re-offend. The Ex-Offenders Conference will provide government with an important insight into how those who have gone through rehabilitation processes, in correctional centres before being released, were being integrated into society. We want to find out how former inmates have been able to make new beginnings, and how they have been able to use the skills they acquired through education and training programmes whilst in custody, in their everyday life. We also want to hear from those who have not been so successful in their reintegration, and see what can be done to assist them. The issue of jobs for ex-offenders armed with skills is high on our agenda.

We want to better understand the challenges faced by the ex-offenders' community and to mobilise them to play a more positive role in crime prevention and crime combatting. We have numerous cases of successful rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders. Some ex-offenders who gained critical positive life skills while in custody have established business enterprises and, in turn, help other parolees with jobs and opportunities for personal growth and development. On the sensitive issue of jobs, government and the private sector must step forward, and lead the way, in encouraging the employment of ex-inmates. Government and the private sector must play a leading role in giving ex-offenders a second chance. One of the issues that could be looked at is how ex-offenders can be assisted to form co-operatives to exploit opportunities in business. DCS, in partnership with other departments, must play a role. It should be possible that, in the

adjudication of tenders, more weight be placed on entities owned by ex-offenders. We are here to initiate the building of support systems for ex-offenders, because we are serious about the desire to eradicate lumpen-proletariat in our communities in defence of our transformation.

We must discuss the negative impact of criminal records, as a stumbling block to new employment opportunities, for ex-offenders. Various non-governmental organisations, as well as government departments, will hopefully present programmes aimed at assisting ex-offenders at this conference. While we appreciate the important role that NGOs play in dealing with ex-offenders, this sector must be properly regulated and coordinated.

I challenge this conference to sponsor dialogue, among others, about how former inmates can play a meaningful role in strengthening government's efforts aimed at preventing and combatting criminality. More importantly, we must also discuss the niche role ex-inmates can play in promoting spiritual care and support to both remand detainees and sentenced offenders, whilst simultaneously educating society about embracing the rehabilitation, and reintegration, of inmates back into their individual families and respective communities. All of the above are important matters that require focused deliberations, researched themes, academic input, benchmarking with other countries and resolutions among social partners of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), so we may develop a South African roadmap, and blueprint, about the role of former inmates within broader society. The significance of such initiatives, and the contribution they will make in enhancing the social reintegration of former inmates, cannot be overemphasized. DCS intends to strengthen such partnerships through many other programmes available in its Incarceration and Community Corrections streams. So we are here today not because we bring with us solutions to the challenges of the rehabilitation mission of the DCS, but we are here to launch another tributary of the broad mission to reform our society, to transform our society and to regain Ubuntu. One struggle leader, and a companion of the South African youth who stands out for giving character and content to our democracy and freedom, the former President of the ANC Oliver Reginald Tambo, said the following about a free South Africa and how it shall and should treat her youth: "We shall have a South Africa in which the young of our country shall have access to the best that mankind has produced, in which they shall be taught to love their people of all races, to defend the equality of the people, to

honour creative labour, to uphold the oneness of mankind and to hate untruth, obscurantism, immorality and avarice.” Unquote.

On 4 October 2014, in partnership with Greenhouse Prison Ministry, we participated in a female Ex-Offenders Conference at the Orlando Community Hall in Soweto. The conference on ex-women offenders in Orlando spoke to the theme of God’s miracle, grace, and power to change what man himself would have thought impossible to modify. It is my hope that events such as this will go a long way in educating the public about the need to afford ex-offenders a second chance in life.

Our constitution and democratic order is underpinned by the ethos of reconciliation over retribution, and the architects of our freedom had it in their hearts that even those who are in conflict with the law, must be given another chance to succeed in life once they have served their sentences. I urge communities to resist the temptation to impose a life-long punishment on ex-offenders by stigmatizing them, ostracizing them, and perpetually judging them instead of assisting them to be fully integrated in our communities upon release. In the book entitled, *Rethinking Corrections*, the authors Gideon and Loveland argue that, “The people we love to hate are those we know very little about. Most of us admit that we know very little about offenders but simultaneously argue that they should be locked behind bars. Very few lay persons are familiar with current policies or the difficulties released offenders often encounter upon their release.”

Ladies and gentlemen, I also want to make an impassioned plea to all Correctional Officials to remember that according to the White Paper on Corrections, each one of them is, first and foremost, a rehabilitator and a nation-builder. It is disappointing to learn that there are instances where staff perceptions of incarcerated offenders remain governed largely by unfavourable, stereotypical images of the offenders. Similarly, we should all join hands in dispelling the myth that a life behind bars where your freedom is severely curtailed is a desirable life. A community activist and ex-offender, recently reminded me that those who perpetuate the myth that prison is a five star hotel, “either they have never been in a prison, or they have never been in a five star hotel.” Indeed, the individuals who can lead such a public education campaign to discourage criminal behaviour are offenders, ex-offenders, and parolees themselves.

I appeal to all offenders in our correctional facilities to use all the time they have to turn their lives around, develop themselves educationally and to acquire vocational skills. The majority of offenders are among the poorly educated members of our communities. Just as academic skills are needed to succeed in life, vocational skills are a must for inmates wanting to provide for themselves and their families after serving their sentences.

As inmates are released back into society, much of their success depends on obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment. Research also shows that one of the most immediate areas of concern for ex-offenders upon their release is job-seeking skills such as the filling out of application forms, developing a resume, and preparing for interviews.

For a very long time, numerous communities throughout the world showed that they were ill prepared to accommodate those released from Correctional Centres, and that they did not have the knowledge and support to do so. Offender reintegration into society has, however, become a popular topic in recent years. Our country can draw lessons from the Americans about how they are assisting ex-offenders to be reintegrated back into society through enabling legislation and funding for specific programmes. One major advance that has been made regarding rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders in the US is the Second Chance Act, signed by President George W Bush in April 2008. In his 2004 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush said, "America is the land of the second chance, and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life". For the first time in decades, Congress was poised to pass a bill that aims to make current offenders' and ex-offenders' lives easier by allocating federal funds for rehabilitation and re-entry [reintegration] programmes. "Invisible punishments" have been imposed on offenders who are reintegrating back into their communities, putting a wall between the ex-offender and society. For instance, in the US, ex-offenders are denied benefits such as student loans, drivers' licences, welfare, food stamps and public housing eligibility.

The Second Chance Act is aimed at providing jobs, education, drug treatment, and other types of aid in the hope that offenders can help themselves, support their families, and improve society overall. The Second Chance Act expands federal support for adult and juvenile offender re-entry projects and supports post-release drug treatment. This bill and similar legislation is aimed at improving offender reintegration. Research shows that “re-entry [or reintegration] programmes enhance public safety, help prepare offenders for transition to responsible citizenship, can help reduce future criminal behaviour, remove barriers that make it difficult for offenders to re-enter their communities, and develop necessary support for the community.”

In conclusion, it was President Mandela who reminded us that offenders are part of society’s problem, and rejecting them is not going to solve crime. Corrections is a Societal Responsibility. Therefore, let us build a society that is home to all. We must do more to break down the artificial barriers that still divide us. This generation must continue to work towards a society free from racial, social, economic and class barriers. We must strengthen the common ties that bind us rather than focus on that which divides us. Government will not rest until all South Africans enjoy the fruits of our liberation and our democracy. Together, we can ensure greater daily interaction on an equal basis which will build social cohesion and common understanding.

I wish you and the organisers of this conference two days of constructive, ground-breaking, successful discussions.

THANK YOU.

