

Private sector ready to help the state fix SA healthcare, says Busa - BUSINESS DAY 19 OCTOBER 2018

Speaking at the presidential health summit, the president and Business Unity SA commit to improving SA's embattled healthcare sector

Business is ready to partner with the government to improve SA's healthcare, Business Unity SA (Busa) CEO Tanya Cohen told delegates at the presidential health summit on Friday.

The summit highlights the importance President Cyril Ramaphosa is attaching to healthcare, and follows a summit he convened on National Health Insurance (NHI) in August. He also emphasised healthcare when he announced his R50bn economic stimulus package, saying the government spending would be reprioritised to increase spending on health, including filling 2,200 critical posts.

"As with land, mining and energy, we regard health and education as key policy areas that need to be tackled if we are going to improve our collective prospects," said Cohen.

SA is at a crisis point, with the majority of South Africans unable to access decent healthcare, she said, citing the collapse of state oncology services in KwaZulu-Natal, medicine shortages, and Gauteng's scandal when mentally ill patients were moved from Life Esidemeni's care to unlicensed NGOs, which led to the deaths of 144.

Only 8.87-million South Africans, or 15.61% of the population could afford private healthcare via medical scheme cover in 2017, according to the Council for Medical Schemes, leaving the rest of the population dependent on public health services.

Cohen said the private healthcare sector is highly regarded worldwide, but acknowledged it had challenges of its own. Busa is committed to ensuring the concerns identified in the final report of the Competition Commission's health market inquiry are addressed.

"The private sector is a key building block in ensuring our broader participation in the health sector, alongside that of other social partners," Cohen said.

The two-day summit has gathered top leadership figures from across the spectrum, including senior executives from SA's private hospital groups, pharmaceutical companies, the medical scheme industry, as well as unions, activists and academics.

Deputy president of the National Health Education and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) Mike Shingane said workers who belong to medical schemes confront the shortcomings of both the public and private sectors. "Many of us have medical aids that cannot take care of us all year, or all our dependents. We end up taking out of our pockets [for relatives] in the townships and in the rural areas. We represent both the employed, and the suffering people of our community," he said.

Shingane urged government to speed up the development of the state-owned pharmaceutical company Ketlaphela, saying it would reduce SA's reliance on imports.

The summit has nine commissions, which are expected to discuss SA's key healthcare challenges, ranging from human resources to the management of public finances. Cohen

said it is important for the summit to conclude with a clear roadmap for action, and a process for monitoring progress.