

# Limpopo trains nurses, but ‘too broke’ to employ them

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More than 400 newly qualified nurses are sitting idle in Limpopo, despite having been trained at taxpayers' expense and the province experiencing a shortage of medical professionals.

The nurses' four-year training course with the provincial health department included accommodation and food.

They were recently informed the department would not be able to employ them since it is broke. It would need about R333 million a year to afford their salaries.

The training agreement between the nurses and the department entailed them providing community service duties for 12 months and later being absorbed into provincial health facilities. But that was not to be for the 444 nurses.

Limpopo chairperson for the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (Denosa) Lesiba Monyaki said yesterday it was ironic that the department was broke when it got the second-biggest budget in Limpopo.

“It is also surprising that the same department is renegeing on the contract, never mind the millions lost during training.

“What is more critical is that Limpopo has adopted a 24-hour service plan. Most of these clinics, especially in far-flung rural areas, do not operate 24 hours, as planned. When asked why, the department claimed they are short staffed,” Monyaki told The Citizen.

“How then does it plan to roll out the National Health Insurance [NHI] plan, if clinics do not have enough nurses? That means the NHI, believed by many to be the remedy to a mountain of other health-related problems, is doomed before it even starts”.

According to Monyaki, only about 20% of the clinics in the Vhembe district operate on a 24-hour basis, and 30% in Mopani, while Sekhukhune and Capricorn have 40% of their facilities open for 24 hours.

Early this year, provincial health MEC Phophi Ramathuba said appointing the nurses and other graduates would cost the department an additional R333 million a year. She said the department was only able to appoint 142 people, who were medical officers.

“We are now left with a group of about 444 unemployed healthcare professionals in different categories. Of these, almost 400 are bursary holders,” said Ramathuba, adding the provincial treasury advised the department to wait as there was no budget.

Yesterday, Denosa said an urgent meeting with departmental bosses had been arranged tomorrow to try to iron out the impasse.

“We believe that now the new financial year started this April, the department's purse is big enough to absorb all the nurses.

“Our plea is that all primary healthcare facilities operate 24 hours in preparation for the rollout [of a] fully operational NHI system,” said Monyaki.

Health department spokesperson Neil Shikwambana was not available for comment by the time of going to press as he was apparently in a meeting with Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi.