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Media Contact: Lerato Moloi

Tel: 011-482-7221

E-mail: lmoloi@sairr.org.za

Social worker shortage undermines effectiveness of social welfare legislation

There is a shortage of social workers working in the government and non-profit sectors, according to the South African Institute of Race Relations.

The total number of social workers registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) as at March 2012 was 16 740. This number includes social workers that work for the Government, non-profit organisations (NPOs), or the private sector, as well as those that are no longer in practice but retain their registered status.

Of these social workers, only 6 655 (40%) are employed by the Government and 2 634 (16%) by NPOs. This leaves 7 451 (45%) registered social workers that are either employed in the private sector or are not practising.

The national population to social worker ratio is thus 5 446 to 1, with the lowest provincial ratio being in the Eastern Cape at 4 903 to 1 and the highest in the Free State at 5 935 to 1.

According to the Department of Social Development (DSD), the current international norm for population to social worker ratio is 5 000 to 1. In its Integrated Service Delivery Model developed in 2005, the desired caseload per social worker is 60 cases, but the minister of social development, Bathabile Dlamini, concedes that owing to high levels of poverty, deprivation, and a high incidence of HIV/AIDS, the actual caseload per social worker is far higher.

<i>Province</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Social workers employed by the DSD</i>	<i>Social workers employed by NPOs</i>	<i>Population to social worker ratio</i>
Eastern Cape	6 829 958	998	395	4 903 to 1
Free State	2 759 644	333	132	5 935 to 1
Gauteng	11 328 203	1 398	553	5 806 to 1
KwaZulu-Natal	10 819 130	1 464	579	5 296 to 1
Limpopo	5 554 657	799	316	4 982 to 1
Mpumalanga	3 657 181	466	184	5 626 to 1
North West	3 253 390	399	158	5 841 to 1
Northern Cape	1 096 731	133	53	5 896 to 1
Western Cape	5 287 863	666	263	5 692 to 1
South Africa	50 586 757	6 655	2 634	5 446 to 1

Source: Reply by the minister of social development to parliamentary question 56/2012 by Mrs M C Dikgale (ANC – Limpopo), 8 May 2012

Lerato Moloi, a researcher at the Institute, said, 'According to the DSD's own costing, some 16 504 social workers are required to provide the social welfare needs of children in terms of the Children's Act of 2005. This accounts for 99% of all registered social workers, illustrating the shortage of social welfare skills given that social workers are also required to provide services related to substance abuse, older people, people with disabilities, crime prevention and support, and HIV/AIDS, among other things.'

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