

# New board urged to remedy dysfunctional forensic labs

The Portfolio Committee on Police has instructed the newly appointed National Forensic Oversight and Ethics Board to urgently assist in finding solutions to the current dysfunctional state of the National Forensic Science Laboratories (NFSL).



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“In performing its oversight role, the board must ensure that permanent solutions are found to numerous longstanding challenges,” Committee Chairperson Tina Joemat-Pettersson said on Tuesday.

Joemat-Pettersson said that it unacceptable that NFSL currently has a backlog of over 172,000 cases.

She said the committee is hopeful that the new capable and experienced board will promptly work towards restoring NFSL’s functionality.

“Over the past two years, the committee has highlighted concerns about the backlog, which has a direct impact on the entire criminal justice value chain. We know that the board is reasonably new, but the current dysfunctional state of the NFSL demands action to aid the criminal justice system to deliver on its mandate.

“The fight against the scourge of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is compromised by the inability of the Forensic Science Laboratory to timeously conclude their analysis. The fight against GBV requires a Forensic Science Laboratory functioning

optimally to ensure that prosecutions are scientific, evidence-based and timely,” Joemat-Pettersson said.

## **Ineffective supply chain management systems**

Among the challenges raised by the committee include NFSL ineffective supply chain management systems and processes, leading to protracted delays in the procurement of buccal sample kits.

Another challenge include the shortages of buccal sample kits at police stations and service delivery points, leading to a growing DNA casework backlog, especially in GBV cases. Additional challenges arise from delays in the amendment of the DNA Act and IT challenges caused by the continuing FDA legal dispute.

“Another serious concern is that because of delayed laboratory results, families sometimes have to wait for two years to bury their loved ones who were victims of crime. This is highly reprehensible and unacceptable,” the committee chairperson said.

Police Minister Bheki Cele appointed 10 board members, in terms of Section 15V of the Criminal Law (Forensic Procedures) Act, No. 37 of 2013.

The committee congratulated the members on their appointment, saying it believes that they are capable and competent to achieve their mandate.

“The committee welcomed the board’s plan of action, which focuses on contract management, reduction of DNA (Genetic testing) case backlogs, establishment of a forensic investigative unit, software acquisition and resolving inadequate operational budget, among other things.

“As a result, the committee has decided to give the board space to implement the plan of action, but has asked for regular progress updates. The committee remains invested in ensuring the NFSL’s functionality to ensure evidence-based prosecution of cases,” Joemat-Pettersson said.

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