

Mahlangu, Hlongwa elected to top Gauteng ANC body

By [Laura Lopez Gonzalez](#)

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Former Gauteng health MEC Qedani Mahlangu, who presided over the Life Esidimeni tragedy, has been elected into the Gauteng ANC's provincial executive committee (PEC). She joins the PEC alongside controversial Chief Whip and [former Gauteng health MEC Brian Hlongwa](#).



Qedani Mahlangu. Photo: Andronica Nedzamba

Mahlangu takes up the position following a two-day elective conference this weekend, [radio station 702 reports](#). The ANC's PEC is the party's [top body](#) in a province and leads the party provincially.

Mahlangu oversaw the transfer of almost 1,700 mental health patients out of state-funded private [Life Esidimeni](#) facilities largely into mainly unlicensed and ill-equipped NGOs. At least 144 patients ultimately died and almost two dozen remain missing.

She joins the PEC alongside Hlongwa, who was implicated in R1.2-billion of graft while at the helm of the Gauteng health department between 2006 and 2009. He was succeeded by Mahlangu between 2009 and 2010. She later returned to the office in 2014 before resigning the night before the release of a damning ombud investigation into the Life Esidimeni debacle.

Life Esidimeni families say they are outraged at the ANC's decision. In a statement, family representatives said that if the Gauteng premier had been serious about threats to haul Mahlangu in front of the ANC's integrity committee, this would have happened before this weekend's vote.

“Had the ANC shown serious intent to do the right thing, this process would have taken place immediately following the Life Esidimeni arbitration hearings [that concluded in March]. It would have sent a clear message that they were serious about the process itself and about dealing with corrupt officials within the Gauteng provincial government”, they say.

“We firmly believe that if someone is implicated in mismanagement and negligent or intentional decision making that leads to a tragedy on the scale of Life Esidimeni, they should not be eligible for election.”

In June, Bhekisisa [broke the news](#) that the Office of the Presidency had been in possession of an SIU report on Hlongwa and corruption for more than a year but had failed to act on it. This came to light after public interest law organisation [Section27](#) was able to obtain the report via a [Promotion of Access to Information Act](#) request.

The [National Prosecuting Authority](#) subsequently requested the Hawks to re-open their investigation into Hlongwa, [News24 reports](#).

The pair's election comes as the former national head of mental health services Melvyn Freeman has broken years of silence over the Life Esidimeni tragedy.

Freeman was the national health department's chief director of noncommunicable diseases at the time the Gauteng health department began transferring patients out of Life Esidimeni facilities. The department health ombud report revealed.

Freeman has opened up about the experience in the [latest edition](#) of *The Lancet Psychiatry* medical journal:

“The owners of the NGOs were provided with ‘line-ups’ of mental healthcare users and were allowed to decide whom they wanted to take. This draws parallels with slave owners choosing their new ‘possessions’, he writes.

“The way people were moved... where they were moved to, how they were treated and even the handling of bodies after death, suggests that the coordinators and enforcers of the project perceived mental health users as lesser human beings.”

After the health department became aware of the Gauteng government's plans, the national health department's director-general Precious Matsoso also repeatedly requested that Gauteng mental health directorate and nurse Makgabo Manamela brief Freeman on the project. But Manamela never did, the [ombud's report found](#).

“It is especially worrying that healthcare leadership and professionally-trained health workers could permit such things to happen. A few healthcare workers refused to participate,” Freeman writes.

“No professional is obliged to carry out an instruction if it is unlawful in their judgement or is likely to lead to the death and injury of a person.”