

Address by the Deputy Minister of Social Development, Ms Bathabile Dlamini during the NACCW 17th Biennial Conference, Bloemfontein

It is a great pleasure to find myself in the midst of people who contribute daily to the improvement social well-being of families and communities throughout our country. I am glad that the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) is a long-standing partner of my Department. From the outset, and on behalf of the Department of Social Development, I would like to use this opportunity to pay special tribute to you all, for your commitment and solidarity in helping to improve the lives of those less fortunate. Your contributions are an essential part of our work as the Department of Social Development.

Thank you for this opportunity to come and address this important gathering on child and youth care work- a critical area in the care and protection of children. I find the theme of this conference: "Complementary Social Service Professions Integrating to Serve Children and Families", appropriate in that it captures the essence of what we all need to do in the social sector. Child and Youth Care Workers are important agents for development and deserve every support and recognition for their contribution to development efforts in our country.

Since 1994 Government has have passed comprehensive pieces of legislation regarding the care and protection of children. Key among these is the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the Children's Act 38 of 2005, the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 and the Social Assistance Act 6 of 2008, to name just a few. In addition, government has also ratified international instruments such as the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

In so doing, government committed itself to implementing the principles of "first call for children," where the rights of children are considered paramount in the development and review of policies, legislation, programmes and services. For us to fully implement all pieces of legislation that I mentioned earlier, we need to give equal recognition to all social service professionals and occupations – social workers, probation officers, community development workers, ECD practitioners, and last but not least, child and youth care workers.

The 17th NACCW Biennial conference gives us an opportunity to explore ways in which the social service professions can complement each other in strengthening social development. Such reflections in my view will allow us to correct the wrongs of the past whilst also charting a way forward which will ultimately leave a lasting impact on the lives of those who benefit from our programmes and services.

As practitioners in the development sector, you will be aware that the current economic climate presents us with a number of unprecedented challenges. Rising job losses, runaway inflation, rising food and fuel prices will exacerbate the prevailing socio-economic challenges and push many families into the poverty trap.

It is therefore, very important that there is a strong collaboration and integration of services at implementation level to protect families from vulnerability. The family is the primary source of nurturance and care for children. By strengthening families during these hard economic times, we will contribute to the prevention of other social problems such as child abandonment, child abuse and neglect. To achieve this, government need to work closely with the existing non-governmental organizations to develop the requisite skills to render quality services. For this reason, I find I find the work of NACCW intrinsically linked to the work of government. By training a cadre of Child and Youth Care Workers, the association contributes to the creation of a skilled workforce to the social service profession and thus alleviates the shortage of professionals in the sector.

In terms of the Integrated Service Delivery Model prevention is the primary level of intervention. Early Childhood Development service is one of the priorities of government targeted as a prevention measure for children. We therefore remain committed to securing Early Childhood Development (ECD) services for all our children. This we do because we believe that ECD services constitute a critical vehicle through which children can access all their rights.

To date we have registered a total of 12 293 ECD sites benefitting 667 231 children. Through ECD we will ensure that children are not deprived of their childhood and the opportunity to realise their personal aspirations. As government our belief is that all children, regardless of race, religion or family background, deserve the best start in life, and grow up free from the affliction of poverty, abuse and neglect.

South Africa has one of the highest prevalence rates of HIV and AIDS in the world. The high death rate of parents has increased the percentage of children who are orphaned from approximately 2,5% to about 20%, which can no longer be absorbed by the extended family as was the traditional practice. This has resulted in many households headed by children without adult supervision. Currently, the number of orphans is estimated to be 1, 5 million due to the death of a mother or both parents.

Although the prevalence rate is expected to plateau and the death rate should begin to decline with the national roll out of antiretroviral therapy, the numbers of children who are already affected is large and it is projected that it will continue to grow until 2017.

At this level statutory intervention has to take place. A large number of children have to be placed in alternative care although a large proportion of children who need foster care are taken care of by relatives, called kinship care. There is pressure from different quarters to use less intensive mechanisms to deal with their foster care placements. However, children in kinship care also need supervision services as the majority of these placements need support services.

The challenge is that only a fraction of these children are presently receiving foster care services from the Department of Social Development. Currently there are more than 487 000 children in foster care placements. These children require alternative care until they reach the legal age of majority or can live independently.

Innovative programmes such as the Isibindi Model have proven effective in addressing the needs of vulnerable children within the family and community context. The Children's Act makes provision for social service professionals such as child and youth care workers, social workers, auxiliary social workers and community development workers to deliver prevention and early intervention services as a team.

The Department of Social Development in collaboration with National Association of Child Care Workers and other service providers is working hard to improve social services to families and children. This includes the development of the Manual on Family Preservation Services. I am hopeful that social service professionals will benefit from this training to provide the most effective services to children and their families.

The Department of Social Development fully recognizes the important role that child and youth care workers play in the life space of children and in working with vulnerable families. They should be acknowledged and commended for their work with children in difficult circumstances including the quality of their professional responses to children.

In conclusion government acknowledges the role of civil society organisations like the NACCW in providing services to children. You will agree with me that through partnerships between government and civil society organisations, we have achieved a lot. However, much more needs to be done to spread programmes like Isibindi Model and other innovative interventions within communities, especially in rural areas, where the need for services still remain much greater.

I am looking forward to a meaningful engagement today and we hope that we can find consensus on the issues being presented to us today. I thank you.