

MEC Dhlomo encourages 268 community service officers to step out their comfort zone to serve the poor; ('comm serve' programme having a major healthcare service delivery impact in rural areas)

05 February 2019

KZN Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo has encouraged hundreds of young health professionals not to be afraid to leave their comfort zone, but rather be prepared to go out and help their fellow compatriots in some of the province's most rural and poorest areas.

The MEC was speaking in Durban today, at a workshop for the orientation and induction of 268 students who originate from universities around the country, who began their 12 months' community service at the beginning of January.

This 2019 cohort of community service officers includes dentists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and audiologists. The introduction of compulsory community service in health started during the 1998/1999 financial year, under then-President Mandela's government. Although it initially focused on doctors and dentists, it was introduced to other cadres of health care workers, including therapists and nurses.

"I felt I should come and encourage these community service officers. It is important to motivate them, so that if some of them were feeling discouraged, they must be assured that we value their support. We also wanted to thank our government for making this decision to have a policy that says, 'before you could go and complete your studies, please give us just 12 months of community service in your respective profession.' In that regard, you able to then give respect and love to your people in the far-flung areas," says MEC Dhlomo.

"Most of the services offered by these therapists are hardly ever there (in rural areas). You don't see them. The mere fact of allowing these young people to go into these areas decreases the need for people who have suffered the consequences of hypertension, diabetes, stroke, to have to come back to the urban areas where there's a majority of these professionals. The value-add of them going there is enormous. It will have a huge impact in the quality of life of our citizens even the rural areas."





The MEC says that exposure to different cultures and languages for the community service officers will be beneficial and help make them more culturally aware and well-rounded citizens.

Dentist Frieda Maritz, from Tshwane, studied at the University of Pretoria. She was initially placed at Ekhombe Hospital, before being transferred to Hlengisizwe Clinic. *“I’m quite happy to be outside of Durban. Ekhombe was rural, but it’s been an experience. I’ve learnt a lot in terms of my work. I’m looking forward to learning to speak IsiZulu, and to getting to know the community better, and make a difference.”*

Nombongo Ntswayi, an audiologist from Cape Town, has enjoyed her first few weeks at Christ the King Hospital at Ixopo, where she’s been placed. *“As community service officers, we appreciate the MEC taking his time to come and speak to us, and make us feel welcome. We do feel welcome in KZN province. KZN is different from Cape Town. It’s a bit of a stretch. So, working with people from the community of Ixopo... the place is quite rural, so you get to see the other side of life and appreciate the people. Being able to provide health services to people who don’t have access to them is quite rewarding.”*

Another audiologist Thobeka Maphumulo, originally from Harding, is placed at Greytown Hospital. She says she’s looking forward to making a difference in her new community. *“I’m looking forward to being innovative. The people are very happy to have us, and that encourages us to continue working hard.”*

Yashnita Ramsunder, an occupational therapist who studied at UCT, is based at Gamalakhe Clinic, outside in Port Shepstone. *“I’m really happy where I’m placed. I service nine clinics. What I’m looking forward to the most this year is helping the poorest of the poor, and helping the people who are really disabled to gain independence in communities, and raising awareness about mental health and disability, because that’s what I’m passionate about.”*