

The Star, 04 May 2020

Release prisoners to stop spread of virus

HOSIA SITHOLE

THE PROPOSED release of non-violent inmates from overcrowded rehabilitation centres should not only serve to stem the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic at these facilities but ineluctably ushers in sweeping changes to critical sectors such as water and sanitation.

The water and sanitation sector is one that has experienced an acute shortage of critical skills to deal with the demand for universal access to water. Placing former offenders in community service programmes could give both the former offenders and the country a much-needed opportunity to find lasting solutions to a number of water-related challenges.

The extent of our water challenges is such that we cannot afford to ostracise anyone with a keen interest in helping find lasting solutions. The protection of the people is of cardinal importance to obviate the possibility

of an unparalleled loss of life.

A number of former offenders have shown an appetite to replace their transgressions with engaging constructively in community building projects.

Hence, becoming part of the water and sanitation sector provides a platform for them to right the wrongs of the past. Our societal structural system, however, stigmatises former offenders and renders them helpless to make something good of themselves following their release from prisons.

The result is that they fall back to their wayward ways in order to make ends meet. Sadly, this also stacks up the odds for defying recidivism, making them a perpetual burden on the prison system.

We need to move away from certain aspects of these structural systems that engender negative attitudes towards former inmates. In this way, we will open doors to former inmates to be successfully integrated in our

communities while allowing them space to participate in sectors that are crucial for sustaining our lives.

Former inmates should do community service in the water and sanitation sector by becoming plumbers and water agents, fixing leaking taps and burst pipes to ensure there are no water losses during Covid-19 and beyond.

The country would in time see would-be offenders avoid the most severe and onerous sentences imposed on people found guilty of stealing or damaging water infrastructure.

Unlawfully removing life-giving water infrastructure from communities is a particularly serious crime carrying serious consequences.

One is therefore not being melodramatic in equating the seriousness of theft of water infrastructure to causing harm, which could result in many deaths during this pandemic.

Providing water is one of the sure ways to shield communities from the

viciously spreading Covid-19. So the inability of communities to wash their hands frequently using water and soap is tantamount to effectively throwing them to the wolves.

In light of this, the call made by various people and organisations for the release of inmates to alleviate overcrowding in prisons to curb the spread of Covid-19 should be viewed in the most positive light. The rationale behind it is to protect the lives of both the inmates in correctional centres and members of the community.

Accordingly, the request for the release of targeted inmates, including those over 60 years old, the frail and terminally ill and those who satisfy the test for lack of propensity to commit serious crimes, should be supported by all.

Sithole is a communicator at the Department of Water and Sanitation, Gauteng region



31/05/2020