



For immediate release

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Legal Aid SA lauded for excellence during Debate on Justice Budget Vote

The Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Justice and Constitutional Development has hailed Legal Aid SA as the centre of excellence within the justice family, 'for executing its work with excellence.'

Legal Aid South Africa once again drew praises this year for its excellent performance, leadership and governance during the Debate on Justice Budget Vote held recently at the National Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Justice Portfolio Committee, Mr L Landers was the first to laud Legal Aid SA, saying: "In the same way that we dish out brickbats and criticism when we find reason to do so, we should also give recognition to that which is good and laudable. Legal Aid SA is a centre of excellence within the justice family. This is the unanimous view of the portfolio committee. The Portfolio Committee on Justice and Constitutional Development commends and congratulates Legal Aid SA for its role in drafting the United Nations principles and guidelines in providing legal aid assistance in criminal matters."

Echoing the Portfolio Committees sentiments, Deputy Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development, Mr Andries Nel, who addressed the debate on Budget Vote, said Legal Aid SA's success ought to be measured by the milestones it has attained in helping the poor and vulnerable to access justice. The Deputy Minister also recounted the hurdles Legal Aid SA has had to overcome in its formative years: "Twenty years ago, in 1993/4, the Legal Aid Board, as it was then known, was an organization on the precipice of disaster – a legal Titanic on a collision course with a constitutional, administrative and budgetary iceberg.

The Board was unable to cope with the explosion in the demand for legal representation that followed the adoption of the interim Constitution. The Board handled only 79, 501 matters by paying private lawyers to represent indigent people, mainly in criminal matters. Its affairs were in chaos. Budget deficits and qualified audits were the order of the day”.

Nevertheless, the Deputy Minister noted the worth of Legal Aid SA under the current era. He thanked the Chairperson of the Board, Judge President Dunstan Mlambo, and Chief Executive Officer, Ms Vidhu Vedalankar for leading a Legal Aid SA team that continues to execute its mandate admirably.

Legal Aid South Africa provides coverage at all criminal courts through a national footprint of 64 Justice Centre and 64 Satellite Offices. For the financial year 2012/13 Legal Aid SA, provided assistance in about 730,000 matters. This includes legal representation in about 440,000 criminal and civil matters and advice in a further almost 300,000 matters, including through a national legal aid call-centre the *Legal Aid Advice Line*.

Just over 55,000 new civil matters were registered during the 2012-2013 financial year, representing a growth of 75% over the last two years. “The organisation has also reviewed its policy to ensure that vulnerable women are given greater access in maintenance matters,” says Legal Aid SA spokesperson, Mpho Phasha.

Providing general legal advice is an important part of our service delivery programme. This is done through the dedicated paralegal capacity which is available at all 128 offices as well as the national call centre. “The call centre enables clients, particularly those in rural areas, to access legal advice through a toll free landline 0800 110 110,” says Phasha. The general advice service was rendered almost 300,000 clients, about 44,000 of which were through the call centre.

Through a partnership with the Master’s Office, Legal Aid South Africa assisted with the administration of just over 4,000 deceased estates in which children were beneficiaries and did not have the resources to engage a lawyer.

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Issued by the Communications Department of Legal Aid South Africa. For more information, please contact the National Spokesperson, Mpho Phasha on 011 877 2081. Visit our website at www.legal-aid.co.za or call the Legal Aid Advice Line on 0800 110 110.