

SPEECH BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE LEGAL AID BOARD OF SOUTH AFRICA, JUDGE DUNSTAN MLAMBO DURING THE LAUNCH OF SOSHANGUVE JUSTICE CENTRE: 31st MARCH 2009

Board members of the Legal Aid Board

Chief Executive Officer of the Legal Aid Board, Ms Vidhu Vedalankar

Chief Operations Officer, Mr Jerry Makokoane

Regional Operations Executive, Ms Wilna Lambley

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Protocol observed

Today marks the beginning of a new chapter in the lives of the residents of Soshanguve and surrounding areas. We are here to celebrate the birth of a new baby; a baby that will ensure that access to justice in this community is not something that they hear about, but it is something that they witness.

The opening of this centre (Soshanguve Justice Centre) is a sign of commitment by the Legal Aid Board that we are indeed delivering on our Constitutional mandate, that of granting legal representation to all deserving and vulnerable people of South Africa.

We are gathered here today at the City of Tshwane to reap the rewards of a diligent and hard work that began more than ten months ago, with this, we can all look back with pride and say; *mintirho ya hina ya vulavula!*

This launch today, brings to a total of 15 Justice Centres in Gauteng Limpopo Region under the stewardship of the Regional Operations Executive, Ms Wilna Lambley.

Across the country, the Legal Aid Board distributes its services through 63 Justice Centres, 51 satellite offices. The path leading to a realisation of our 2020 vision has earnestly began, with sufficient budget allocation, I am certain that we can roll-out more justice centres to ensure that even those citizens residing in the outskirts of the country do have access to justice.

The Constitution of the republic requires that all citizens, especially those who are unable to afford their own legal representation or a lawyer, be afforded such at a state expense. This is one public service that the Legal Aid Board has done so well and will continue to grant quality legal services to ensure justice for all.

This is indeed one amongst the many memorable days of my life. As I stand here before you with renewed hope, I am certain that we will all agree that the opening of this justice centre will alleviate poverty in various ways; for instance, you will not be spending your hard earned cash to travel to Pretoria Justice Centre or elsewhere to access Legal Aid Board services, you will use it wisely to meet your other socioeconomic needs. If the launch of this Justice Centre brings job opportunities to the people of Soshanguve, seize the opportunity and use it effectively.

Ladies and gentleman, I am pleased to announce that a revised Legal Aid Guide is in effect. Some of the improvements contained in this guide is the increased of income that will be considered during means test in all legal aid applications. In the past, an applicant earning an amount of R2500 a month or less stood a chance of qualifying for legal aid assistance. This has changed; an applicant or a household income has now been increased to R5, 500 a month.

This is indeed a commendable step. We envisage that even more South Africans will now have access to the courts. It is important that I remind you that the South African courts are also there to serve the poor and vulnerable people. They cannot operate in isolation without the involvement of the Legal Aid Board because that will be in tantamount to gross injustice. Together, we ensure fair a trial to all accused, justifiable or adequate outcome, be it a guilty verdict or acquittal.

Gone are the days where accused went through the entire trial without legal representation. This opened room for unfair trial and improper sentencing. All courts have a responsibility to advise the accused about their right to state funded legal representative because the courts are also there to serve the poor.

To the community of City of Tshwane, this is your property too; protect it against any possible vandalism. Make sure that it remains in tact so that it can continue to serve its purpose.

Let me take this opportunity to convey my appreciation to the entire team at the Legal Aid Board national office who made sure that our footprint is increasing; the CEO Ms Vidhu Vedalankar; National Operations Executive Mr. Brian Nair and many more which I

can't mention by names. I thank you all for your hard work and unselfishness, extra hours you have put in in ensuring that we continue to deliver quality legal services.

To the members of the Board, I can't find suitable words to describe my gratefulness for your immense contribution to the effective administration of the Legal Aid Board. Your thoughtful and robust discussions on the matters of the organisation will not go unnoticed.

I thank you all.