



**MEDIA RELEASE FOR DISTRIBUTION ON 17 MARCH 2020
IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS COVID-19 OUTBREAK
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SERVING THE INNER CITY AND HOMELESS COMMUNITY DURING COVID-19 OUTBREAK

JOHANNESBURG – As our country grapples with the growing number of confirmed cases of people infected with the Coronavirus (Covid-19), non-profit organisations (NPOs) are faced with the challenge of how to operate in a very sensitive time. Inner city NPO Mould Empower Serve (MES), operating in Hillbrow, Cape Town, Kempton Park and Port Elizabeth, is facing these real challenges as they continue to serve the homeless and vulnerable inner city communities.

NPOs across the country are faced with a huge struggle to help fulfil the very basic survival needs of the homeless and vulnerable people in South Africa's cities with interventions for food, shelter, protection from harsh weather and overcoming other pressures in their daily living. "There is a whole community of people who might not even be aware of what is happening around them – the homeless community. They make up over 100 000 people in Johannesburg alone and are found at every street corner, every park and homeless shelter," says Leona Pienaar, Chief Executive Officer of MES.

In most cases, the homeless communities are often subject to many communicable or pre-existing illnesses already. They often include elderly people and very young children, and some are people living in conditions of utter desperation that make them vulnerable to a myriad of illnesses.

"MES faces the real tough choices of whether to quarantine the people they serve, the challenge on how to protect staff and volunteers, or whether to shut down operations completely until the pandemic subsides, says Pienaar. "It is organisations like MES that operate in the inner cities across the country whose mission it is to support the homeless and the destitute who are taking the initiative to answer these critical questions," she says.

"Even with the track record of looking out for the destitute for so many years, a pandemic like this new Coronavirus, makes it extremely difficult for us to do what we are called to do," states Pienaar. "In our care, we have little children in our ECD centres, we have learners in our Training Centres and After School Programmes, we have older people in our shelters, in our canteens we have volunteers serving meals daily," she adds.

“There are so many questions facing us as an organisation. I can imagine that so many of my NPO colleagues across the country are asking themselves the same questions,” states Pienaar.

In President Cyril Ramaphosa’s recent address to the nation, he emphasised that this is a time that we need to work together to get to a solution for this pandemic. If we are not strategic and quell the fears of our people, the Coronavirus will have a far-reaching impact on all of us, especially on those who are poor and destitute. MES is concerned with this impact and on what can be done to protect and educate the homeless community about Covid-19.

WHAT MES IS DOING TO MITIGATE THE RISKS

MES has been supporting the homeless, marginalised and destitute in the inner cities of South Africa through many flu seasons, where a number of this community is always at risk of infection and reinfection and those they come into contact with. With Covid-19 declared a national pandemic, our role becomes even more critical. For this reason, we have undertaken to do the following:

- Upscale internal communication initiatives to share hygiene and first-contact details for our staff, volunteers and clients.
- Hand sanitiser will be available at all entry points to all our facilities and in the bathrooms.
- All programme registers will be signed by use of fresh pens or there will be a sanitiser since we need to keep all records up to date of who attended what activity on what day.
- We will continue to provide nutritious meals served at the MES canteens under strict hygiene control and we will not have group meetings or discussion groups. Groups will be managed in smaller groups of less than 20 at different intervals. Where possible, food parcels will be distributed instead if they have access to food preparation facilities. Our aim is to keep the immune system boosted for the most vulnerable.
- If we suspect any infection, we will notify the relevant authorities and make available registers to assist with contact-tracing.
- Accessible, hygienic and affordable accommodation is available at our overnight shelters, with toilet and shower facilities for the people to get cleaned up. All our shelters accommodate less than 100 people. Everyone will be screened every night upon entry and if any symptoms are displayed, such clients will be isolated and the cases reported to health authorities.
- All our ECD centres will be closed from tomorrow, 18 March 2020, and re-opening on 15 April 2020. Upon subsequent correspondence received from the Department of Social Development (DSD), we have made arrangements with the parents to waiver the monthly school fee for the month of April, we believe this will assist our ECD parents the opportunity in utilizing the April

2020 fee towards the purchase of food for their children whilst they are at home during this time.

- Our after school centres, holiday programmes and training centres will be closed from tomorrow, 18 March 2020, and re-opening on the 15 April 2020. During this time, we will be providing healthy cooked lunch meals for the kids which they can collect at our centres with formal arrangements with the youth leaders to ensure immune systems are boosted.
- Spiritual support and social work services will continue to be offered to all individuals coming through our doors to ensure that the right information is disseminated and fears are curbed. Home visits will be limited to children at risk cases only. Telephonic interviews will be the first option.
- Our outreach meetings will be suspended until further notice.
- MES has a central email where staff, clients or volunteers need to report anyone who is suspected of having the virus or have tested positive to ensure contact-tracing protocols can be issued. A direct communication channel is set up with the parents of ECD and after school programme to ensure parents have access to accurate information and have a method of communication to MES to report any infections or concerns.
- A transport plan is being put into place to ensure staff in critical positions that need to use public transport, will rather be collected to minimise public transport risk.
- All the above measures will be re-evaluated on a daily basis according to updated developments.

HOW CAN THE PUBLIC GET INVOLVED?

As members of the community that live by the spirit of Ubuntu, we all have a role to play to ensure we protect those less privileged to do so themselves currently. Please ensure you alert relevant authorities should you find a homeless person whom you suspect to have the Coronavirus Covid-19.

You can also get involved by sponsoring or donating much-needed necessities that can help keep up the immune system like:

- Supply of any healthy fresh foods or food that does not require much preparation time and effort such as instant soups, 2-minute noodles, dried fruit, nuts, oranges.
- Supply of sanitisers, wipes, tissues, cleaning materials to assist with maintaining high standards of hygiene.
- Motivation or care packs, immune boosters and flu injections for staff to continue serving in these difficult times.

END

EDITORS' NOTES:

Media statement issued by Willem Eksteen (MES Board member and CEO of Stone) on behalf of MES.

Please direct all media enquiries and/or media interview requests to:

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MORE INFORMATION ON MES

MES is a Christian social development organisation that has been changing the heart of the city since 1986 and has been actively working towards providing sustainable solutions to pervasive poverty in the inner city of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Kempton Park.

The initial vision for MES was born in 1986 when the Johannesburg East Dutch Reformed Church started with an outreach programme that handed out food parcels to the homeless and unemployed community of Hillbrow. In 1989 the project registered as a Section 21 company (1989/004921/08) with an independent Board of Directors. Currently the organization is a registered Not for Profit Company (1989/004921/08), NPO (023 603), PBO (RG/0012/09/04) and has Section 18 A (tax benefit) status.

MES facilitates professional services to vulnerable or at risk individuals, families and communities. The core services are implemented in each branch depending on the need of the community and available resources. An integrated approach is followed ensuring holistic service delivery contributing to restoration and empowerment where a model of Intake/prevention; intervention and sustainable exit is followed.