

## **Un-contracted CHWs Organise Sit-In at Gauteng Health Department**

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A group of 12 un-contracted CHWs, organised through the Gauteng Community Health Care Forum (the Forum), came together on 3 May 2022 to stage a sit-in at the Department of Health (DoH) building in Marshalltown, Johannesburg. The 'un-contracted' CHWs decided to organise the sit-in at the DoH offices to demand to meet the MEC for Health, Dr Nomathemba Mokgethi and to demand that the DoH address their demands.

The Forum and the un-contracted CHWs have written emails and letters to the Department of Health and Dr Mokgethi about how the un-contracted CHWs were unfairly dismissed and requesting an urgent meeting to deal with the matter but with no joy.

Doreen Mphela, who worked as a CHW at Attreridgeville Clinic said; "We are here to sit-in until we see the MEC and [until] we get reinstated back to work as we have been waiting for far too long for a response. I have responsibilities, I am a breadwinner that's currently failing to take care of my own family which hurts".

Upon arrival at the DoH, the group of un-contracted CHWs had to first strategise and decided to enter the building in pairs so the officials would not get suspicious. Once they were in the ground floor, the CHWs quietly sat down, some on the reception area chairs and some on the floor with their blankets. 2 CHWs were tasked with going up to the offices of the MEC for Health to demand a meeting.

After some time of silently occupying the ground floor reception area, a security guard asked why they were there. When the protesting CHWs told him why they were staging a sit-in, he told some of the reception staff, who were already watching and interested in what was happening.

The security guard then told the CHW group that half of them must stay outside but the CHWs refused and stood united. They were assisted later by another security guard who was familiar with the Forum CHWs, as this was not the first time that the Forum has organised a sit-in at the DoH building.

A junior Health Department official told the 2 CHWs who were tasked with going to the MEC's office that the un-contracted CHWs must set up an appointment with the MEC and Chief of Staff via email or phone as Dr Mokgethi was out of the office and he didn't know when the MEC would be back. Even when the un-contracted CHWs explained that they have been asking for a meeting and they never get any response, the Department official said the CHWs must come back after two weeks for a follow up.

This made the CHWs angry and they refused to leave the premises. The group of protesting CHWs decided they would sleep in the building for the night and the sit-in demonstration continued to the next day (4 May 2022).

On the second day of the sit-in, the Department junior official told the CHWs that a meeting at 2pm was set with some Department officials but when 2pm came there was no sign of anyone from the DoH to meet them. As the day went on, some of the CHW group had to leave, but a few continued to sit-in at the reception area.

The security guards continued to intimidate the CHWs and threatened to lock the public bathrooms so they would not be able to use them. After hours of waiting the Department junior official came down to tell the CHWs that the Chief of Staff and MEC were not answering their phones.

The security guard again told the CHWs to leave and this time, the group decided that it was best to do so and rather regroup. The CHWs left in the afternoon of Day 2 of the sit-in to go back to mobilise, strategise and plan another sit-in with more numbers.

Community Healthcare Workers in Gauteng were finally made permanent employees of the DoH in 2020 after a more than ten-year battle. But a small number of un-contracted CHWs were not absorbed into the system because of their refusal to sign contracts with Smartpulse Solutions in 2016.

Smartpulse was first introduced to Gauteng CHWs by the DoH in 2016 as way to avoid making the CHWs permanent employees. In an attempt to outsource CHWs, Smartpulse was hired by the DoH under a 3-year contract to pay CHWs. This was done instead of CHWs being paid directly by the DoH. In order to receive their monthly stipend, CHWs were forced to sign the Smartpulse contracts.

At first, the CHWs refused to sign the Smartpulse contracts. But then through discussion and debate, the majority of the Forum's CHWs changed tactics. The Forum decided that the CHWs would sign the contracts to receive their much-needed stipends but that they would continue to fight the DoH for permanence.

A small group of CHWs did not sign these contracts in protest against Smartpulse and were subsequently told not to come back to work. This small group of un-contracted CHWs were excluded when the rest of Gauteng CHWs were absorbed as permanent employees under the Health Department. Though the Department committed to reinstating all CHWs the un-contracted CHWs are still waiting.

"It hurts and I'm full of anger especially seeing my ex-colleagues being able to maintain and support their families whereas I can't"; said Pertunia Rapolai, one of the un-contracted CHWs.

"I tried working as cashier at Shoprite but I didn't last as I was mentally affected by the dismissal. I suffered a lot from stress, severe headaches and depression. My kids are suffering and I won't be able to better our situation at home until at least I get reinstated back to work. I hope to continue in this struggle until we are reinstated back to work", Rapolai said.

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