

MUNICIPALITY INVESTIGATE SOLUTIONS FOR THE HOMELESS AND VAGRANTS

The number of vagrants and homeless people in the Garden Route has increased exponentially over the last few years, and Knysna is no different. Municipal Manager, Dr Sitembele Vatala, said that the list of reported cases of vagrants is alarming, and needs intervention.

“We are inundated with calls from businesses and property owners who experience problems with loitering vagrants on a regular basis. The Law Enforcement Unit reacts on complaints received and intervenes where they can, but often it is a police matter.” He said joint operations are regularly conducted with SAPS, the Red Ants and SA National Parks (SANParks) focusing on hot spots like the Waste by Rail area, Costa Sarda and Cathy Park.

There are no formal shelters in Knysna and that should be a first priority. We have been in discussion with the Department of Social Development since 2014 to find solutions, but it is a multi-faceted problem and to deal with it effectively we will need the buy-in from them, businesses and private organizations. The first step will be to identify suitable premises that can be utilized for a shelter. An interim stakeholder forum (internally and externally) must be established and if we really want to decrease the number of homeless people, we must ensure that we include a skills development initiative as part of the problem.”

He said that in the interim they have started to profile and setup a comprehensive database of homeless people in the area with up to date information. “A recent survey conducted by the Municipality indicated that there were approximately 63 homeless people living in open spaces such as Die Punt, Knysna Station, White Bridge, Cemetery, Railway Bridge, Loerie Park, Waterfront, Angling Club, Taxi Rank and Cathy Park. It is anticipated that the above number has grown to approximately 85 due to seasonal migration.”

Other information included in the survey was that the age group varies from 18 to 66 years old and that the majority of homeless people were born in Knysna, but some moved here from neighboring towns and some from other provinces. “They sustain themselves by catching fish and doing piece-meal jobs such as parking attendants and begging at prominent businesses in town. Some of the homeless people are experiencing illnesses, e.g. tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and hypertension. The recent fires during 2017, contributed to the increase of homeless people.”

Vatala said that the homeless issue can be seen as both a social dependency issue and a lack of sufficient housing. “We are committed to find a long term, sustainable solution for the problem. The first step is to find suitable premises to be used as a shelter – temporary or permanent and if anyone has any suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact my office.”

ENDS
