
Shelter for Knysna's homeless a top priority

Knysna Municipality has earmarked a council-owned property as a potential homeless shelter site. "The intention to utilise erf 1343 at 14 Church Street will be advertised for public comment," assured Acting Municipal Manager Dr Louis Scheepers. "Establishing a permanent alternative to the temporary shelter at Loerie Park is one of our top priorities."

The temporary shelter was established in response to the nationwide lockdown imposed on 26 March. "Residents are housed at the clubhouse and in tents," said Dr Scheepers. "The current situation, while no comparison to living on the streets, is far from ideal."

Vagrancy is, however, not a new problem. "We had conducted a comprehensive survey amongst the homeless persons in Knysna and Sedgefield in 2016, in an attempt to trace their origins and to reunite them with their relatives. Our Social Development Section conducted another survey of homeless persons in Knysna prior to lockdown," Dr Scheepers continued. "This survey, which did not include other areas within Greater Knysna, identified more than 60 persons living in open spaces. It is now approximated that more than 80 persons live in open spaces in Knysna alone."

"We have partnered with The Haven Night Shelter in Mossel Bay," Dr Scheepers announced. "They are in the process of training a fieldworker to assist at the Loerie Park temporary shelter and will pay a stipend towards the worker. This assistant will also engage with all relevant stakeholders to accelerate the establishment of a permanent shelter for the homeless people of Knysna."

"It is remarkable to see the difference made in the lives of the people hosted at Loerie Park," said Dr Scheepers. "Many people had their dignity restored by having access to ablution facilities and food security – things that many of us take for granted. Those who need identification documents have been identified and are being assisted. Very necessary alcohol and substance abuse and dependency counselling is being provided. Other counselling and health services are being provided. Some persons have even been reintegrated with their families."

"None of the work being done at Loerie Park would be possible without the incredible support from our partners," Dr Scheepers thanked all stakeholders. "From national, provincial and local agencies to private and corporate sponsorship and donations, from social development and support organisations to our local churches and all volunteers, we appreciate all your selfless efforts, assistance and donations. We all have a social responsibility towards these most vulnerable members of our community and this municipality is grateful to you for working with us in this regard."

"Homelessness continues to be a challenge faced by communities across South Africa and the rest of the world," he concluded. "This is especially true in developing countries where people are content with living in extremely poor conditions in the hope of gaining access to meagre social care and economic opportunities. The rising rate of unemployment and increased levels of abject poverty exacerbate this phenomenon and Greater Knysna is no exception. It is of great importance that a sustainable solution to this problem is developed as soon as possible. With buy-in from all relevant stakeholders and the continued support of our partners and our community, Knysna Municipality aims to open Knysna's first homeless night shelter in the near future."

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