

NEWSLETTER

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Building bridges: Soweto community unites for Ex-Offender Reintegration



In the heart of Protea Glen, Soweto, on 4 April 2024, a significant event – the Reintegration of Ex-Offenders Programme – unfolded at the Assemblies of God church. Members of the Tshokollo ya Setshabeng Engaged Scholarship Project gathered alongside community leaders, activists and advocates committed to supporting ex-offenders. Hosted by Ms Phola Mahlaba Mokgethi, the Executive

Director and founder of the Non-Profit Organisation “Behind and Beyond Bars,” in partnership with Mr Reason Toli, founder of the “Ravens on Mission Community Projects,” the event aimed to address challenges faced by ex-offenders and their families.

Under the skilled direction of Ms Jabulile Mazibuko, the Programme Director, the event commenced with precision and passion, fostering reflection and dialogue

among attendees. Ward Councillor Ms Bawinile Magwaza set the tone with a warm welcome, paving the way for a day filled with inspiration and shared experiences. Throughout the event, heartfelt speeches and discussions emphasised the importance of community support for ex-offenders.

At the heart of the event was a simple yet profound truth: we need each other. Ex-offenders face numerous challenges upon reintegration, from finding employment to rebuilding relationships fractured by past mistakes. However, through collective efforts like this programme, communities can provide the necessary support, understanding and opportunities for a fresh start. Central to the discussions was the concept of restorative justice, which recognises the interconnectedness of victims, offenders and the community. Through open dialogue, participants explored pathways towards healing and reconciliation, underscoring the power of unity in overcoming adversity.



Ms Phola Mahlaba Mokgethi

The partnership between “Behind and Beyond Bars” and “Ravens on Mission Community Projects” symbolises a powerful union of empathy and firsthand experience. Ms Mokgethi's personal journey, marked by resilience and redemption, served as a source of inspiration. Having experienced extreme abuse and violence from her young age, she found solace in prison ministry, dedicating herself to facilitating rehabilitation programmes for inmates. Her commitment to restorative justice gave birth to “Behind and Beyond Bars,” an organisation that advocates for both victims of crime and offenders.



Mr Reason Toli

Similarly, Mr Toli's story is one of redemption and advocacy. Having spent 21 years behind bars, he emerged as an activist, fighting gangsterism and advocating for youth empowerment. His organisation, “Ravens on Mission Community Projects,” aims to steer young minds away from crime, offering life-skills programmes in schools and empowering marginalised communities.

Those interested in assisting or learning more about their initiatives can reach out to Phola at: pholamahlaba@gmail.com or Reason at: reasonlungisi12@gmail.com

Reflecting on the event, it is evident that reintegration efforts extend beyond second chances. They involve creating a society where everyone is valued and supported, regardless of their past. By embracing forgiveness and compassion, we can build a more inclusive future for all.



Pictured, from left, are Adv Unathi Poyo, Cllr Bawile Magwaza, Ms Pamela Mnguni, Dr Francois Louw, Dr Aaron Labane, Mr Joseph Hlatshwayo, Ms Nomalanga Mnisi and Ms Jabulile Mazibuko.

An outreach event for female parolees and probationers inspires hope and empowerment



On Friday, 19 April 2024, the Rethabile Community Hall in Mamelodi East was filled with an atmosphere of hope, renewal and empowerment, as female parolees and

probationers gathered for an outreach event designed to inspire, guide and support their reintegration into society. Hosted by Tshokollo ya Setšhabeng, an Engaged Scholarship Project of the

University of South Africa's (Unisa) College of Law, in partnership with Mamelodi Community Corrections office, the event's theme, "Vuka Uyibambe" (Get Up and Grab It), set the tone for a day of powerful stories, practical advice and heartfelt encouragement.



Ms Nomalanga Mnisi, the Programme Director, expertly guided the event, ensuring each segment carried the message of hope and transformation. Pastor Victor Tswayi began with a powerful opening prayer, emphasizing the importance of words and their impact on

our lives. His message was a reminder that while words can destroy, they also have the power to build, uplift and heal. The Ward Councillor for Mamelodi East, Mr Hendrick Mashao, welcomed the attendees with warmth, describing the women as beautiful flowers and reinforcing that they were valued members of the community. He encouraged them to seek educational and employment opportunities, quoting Mother Theresa's poignant poem "Do it Anyway," which inspired forgiveness and kindness despite life's challenges.

Prof Kevin Sibanyoni and Dr Francois Louw outlined the purpose of the day: to empower these women and remind them that they are not defined by their past. They distributed gifts of appreciation to the female parolees and probationers, a small gesture that carried a significant message: they are valued and supported.



Social worker Ms Monelle Moodley then took the stage to discuss "Empowerment



Through Business,” providing a comprehensive framework for starting a business. She broke down the essential components of a business plan, shared insights into marketing and financial management and encouraged the women to invest in themselves. Her insights on business development sparked enthusiasm among the attendees, who shared their own business ideas, ranging from catering to gym services, demonstrating their readiness to create a new future for themselves. Her message was clear: with the right mindset and determination, anyone can succeed in business.

Dr Reshoketswe Leshilo from the Kalafong Psychiatric Unit shifted the focus to mental

health awareness. She invited everyone to dance, emphasising the role of music and movement in releasing endorphins and reducing stress. She discussed the importance of mental health, coping mechanisms and maintaining a balanced lifestyle. Her advice on identifying toxic relationships and practising self-care provided valuable insights for the women to navigate life's challenges.

One of the most moving moments of the day came from Ms Phola Mahlaba-Mokgethi, who shared her life story of overcoming trauma and hardship. Despite enduring unimaginable abuse and violence, she found the strength to forgive and transform her life. Her organisation, “Behind and Beyond Bars,” works with both offenders and victims, exemplifying the

power of restorative justice. Her testimony, coupled with a soulful gospel song performance, left the audience in awe of her resilience.

Ms Yoliswa Keswa from “Imbokodo Support for Restorative Justice and Reintegration” delivered an inspiring message about starting afresh. She encouraged women to embrace their dreams, ignore the critics and soar like eagles. Her words inspired the women to rise above adversity and believe in their potential.

The motivational speaker, Ms Morwesi Theledi, shared her story of incarceration and how it became the beginning of her transformation. Despite facing a 10-year prison sentence while pregnant, she chose to turn her life around, pursuing education and eventually becoming a successful actress and businesswoman. Her story encouraged the women to break barriers and not let their past define them. Her closing line, “My name is Morwesi Theledi, I am a prisoner,” was a powerful reminder that our past does not dictate our future.

The event concluded with a heartfelt vote of thanks by Mr Dumisani Khanyile, Head of Mamelodi Community Corrections office, who expressed gratitude to everyone involved and highlighted the

importance of community support in facilitating successful reintegration.



The outreach event was a testament to the power of community, resilience and empowerment. It showed that despite past mistakes, every person has the potential to rise to heal and to create a new chapter in their lives. As the women left the hall, they did so with renewed hope, ready to “Vuka Uyibambe” – to get up and grab hold of their future.



Building stronger partnerships in community corrections

Community corrections play a pivotal role in the Criminal Justice System, serving as a bridge between incarceration and successful reintegration into society. At the Mamelodi Community Corrections office, which is part of the Baviaanspoort Management Area within the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), Mr Dumisani Khanyile, Head of Community Corrections, leads a team of 12 officials.



Together, they are currently responsible for supervising and monitoring 531 individuals in the community, comprising 482 parolees, 45 probationers and 4 individuals awaiting trial.

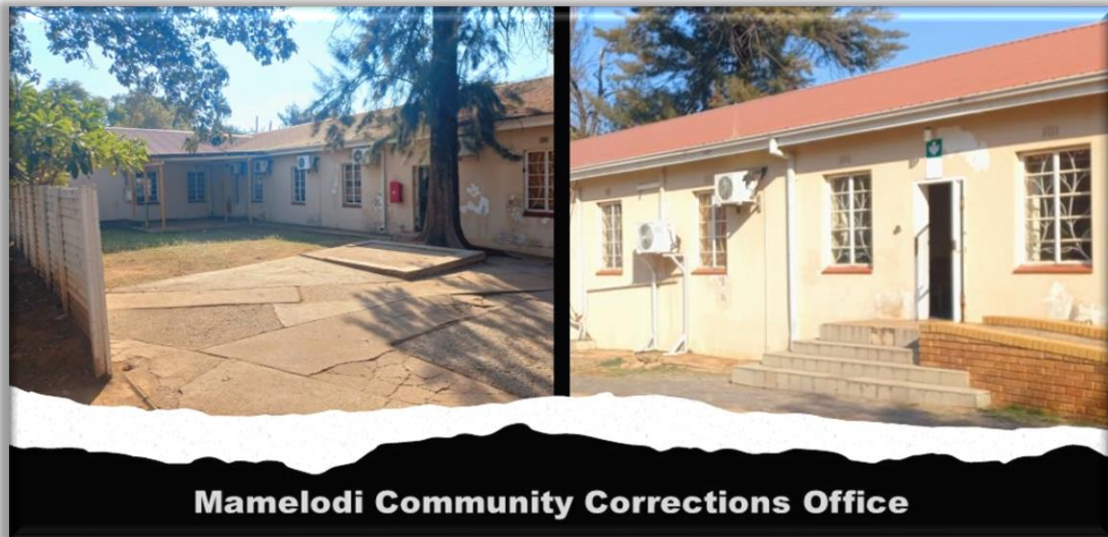
The Tshokollo ya Setšhabeng Engaged Scholarship Project has formed a partnership with the Mamelodi Community Corrections office through an operational agreement and *Letter of Intent*. This collaboration is more than just a formality –

It is a shared commitment to making a real difference in the lives of those transitioning back into society and in the communities that welcome them.

Reintegration can be a daunting journey for individuals who have spent time in correctional facilities. The transition from a controlled environment back into society brings its own set of challenges, including employment barriers, social stigmas and the risk of reoffending. By joining forces, Tshokollo ya Setšhabeng and the Mamelodi Community Corrections office aim to address these challenges head-on.

Together, our focus is on practical solutions that promote restorative justice and community corrections practices. This partnership strives to reduce recidivism by providing parolees and probationers with the tools, resources and support they need to successfully reintegrate into society.

Our collaboration involves various initiatives to support individuals at every stage of their reintegration journey. Through community corrections workshops, outreach events and community service projects, we aim to build bridges between parolees, probationers



and the communities they rejoin. Additionally, our joint organisation of workshops, conferences and projects will create opportunities for dialogue and understanding. Events like Public Victim-Offender Dialogues (VODs) and Imbizos offer valuable opportunities for meaningful interactions between parolees, probationers and community members, fostering reconciliation and healing.

At the heart of our collaboration is the belief that community engagement is essential for successful reintegration. By inviting Community Corrections officials as guest speakers in online classes and sharing success stories in our Biannual Newsletter, we hope to inspire others to embrace a more compassionate and supportive approach to reintegration.

The partnership between Tshokollo ya Setšhabeng and the Mamelodi Community Corrections office represents a new approach to community corrections. By working together, we can achieve more than we were alone. Our combined efforts can create a positive ripple effect, reducing recidivism and promoting a safer, more inclusive society.

As we move forward, we invite you to join us in supporting this important work. Whether you are a community leader, business owner, or concerned citizen, there are many ways to get involved. Together, let's build a future where everyone has the chance to thrive.

Stay tuned for more updates, success stories and ways in which you can make a difference. Thank you for being part of our journey toward a brighter tomorrow.