

## CONDEMNED BUILDING

# Residents dig in their heels

Nosipho Mngoma

**D**OZENS of visually impaired and blind people have refused to moved out of a condemned uMlazi building where they live and work until they receive a guarantee from the government that it will be reopened after renovations.

The Department of Social Development announced last week that it was closing the Enduduzweni Skills Centre following the recommendation of the Department of Public Works because the building was “in a bad condition for human occupation, especially people with disabilities”. It said catering, water and electricity services had been discontinued in December.

Residents said they were handed letters notifying them to vacate by February 10, but they were worried that the centre, which provided them with their only livelihood, a stipend for crafting cane furniture, would be shut permanently. The centre has 11 workshops and two hostels for more than 50 people,

When The Mercury visited this week, it still had running water and electricity, but the need for renovations was evident. The roof of an unused section had caved in, while residents had propped up a collapsing entrance to a passage with a wooden plank. Spots of green mould could be seen on the dining room walls.

Despite the conditions, residents were determined not to move out as they said Enduduzweni gave them a sense of purpose without which they would be forced to “sit on their hands” at home.

A group of 37 visually impaired people stood in a corridor near the workshops where they used to weave cane furniture and baskets. They returned to work last month to find the workshop padlocked but have refused to accept the closure. Twenty-one of the dis-



Some of the 37 people who are adamant that they will not move from the condemned Enduduzweni Skills Centre, in uMlazi, which has been shut down for renovations. From left: visually impaired Duduzile Nkabinde, Themba Shiba, Ngilo Gasa, Thomas Mncwango (behind) and Mandlenkosi Duma, have spent the past month wandering the corridors of the condemned building, unable to continue working on cane furniture as the workshops have been locked.

PICTURE: ZANELE ZULU

abled, some who come from as far afield as Ulundi, uThukela and Gauteng also live on the premises.

But residents, including Themba Shiba, 60, who has lived at the centre for 30 years, were suspicious and said they would die rather than move.

“We know this is the department’s way of shutting us out of this place forever. We don’t trust the department. They waited until we were gone in December to phone and tell us not to come back in January because the centre was closing. We insisted on coming back to discuss this,” Shiba said.

Shiba said the residents suggested a partial shutdown but the department had not responded.

Ngilo Gasa said construction could continue while they occupied the premises.

“They did that when they were repairing last year. We used one side until they were finished and then moved to the other side until they were finished with everything. Then we went back to normal. That worked fine, so why can’t they do that this time?” said Gasa.

Sibongile Ndwandwe said she was concerned that the letter advising residents of the closure did not state whether they would continue receiving their stipends as they had during the previous shutdown.

The mother-of-two cares for her four nieces and nephews with her disability pension and stipend of R230 a day.

“The government is the first to teach us ‘nothing for us without us’ but they have gone and made decisions without consulting us. We are blind, but we are not rubbish – we have lives and responsibilities. If I don’t get the stipend my children will suffer. Why punish my children because I am blind?” she asked.

However, department spokesperson Ncumisa Ndelu said renovating the building while residents remained on-site was not an option.

“The building was condemned by public works at the end of last year which is why the process only started during the holidays. Once they (residents) have left, public works will come back and do

assessments of all the work that needs to be done and so on. There is no way of estimating how long the renovation will take,” she said.

Ndelu said the residents’ stipends would continue for now. However, it should be noted that this was normal pay for work done.

“The stipend is generated from the sale of the products made. Enduduzweni is a skills centre, they are not employed, if there is no production there is nothing being sold.”

Ndelu said once the centre closed tomorrow remaining residents would be considered to be trespassing.

She said the centre would remain closed until renovations had been completed.