

Limpopo NGO is fighting eviction

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The national public works department is going ahead with plans to evict a centre offering counselling to rape and abuse survivors in Thohoyandou, Limpopo, despite a senior government official's intervention.

Robert Sirwali, an executive manager in the Vhembe district's health department, last week sent a letter to public works pleading with it not to evict the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme (Tvep). He said he had yet to receive a response.

Tvep has been helping rape victims for more than a decade. It is housed in a property in Sibasa that used to be the South African ambassador's home to Venda Bantustan during apartheid.

Sirwali asked authorities to consider suspending execution of the eviction order until new facilities were found. He said that without a base from which to operate, Tvep would have to close all 14 of its projects, including trauma centres at the Tshilidzini and Donald Fraser hospitals.

According to court documents, Tvep entered into a lease agreement with the department in 2008. A year later, it asked to occupy the space rent free.

Thohoyandou High Court Acting Judge Antolize Lamminga issued an order in November last year evicting Tvep from the department's premises. This followed a six-year battle.

Tvep had to date helped 24 000 people, mainly women and children, at its trauma centres and empowered close to 400 000 with its campaigns.

Following the order, Tvep asked the district health department and Limpopo premier Stanley Mathabatha to intervene. Mathabatha's spokesperson, Kenny Mathivha, said the premier was talking to the department.

"It is unfortunate that the request comes as an urgent one. Government institutions do not receive free services from state institutions. For example, all government offices pay for electricity and water." He said the NGO needed to seek help from other institutions, not only government.

National public works department spokesperson Thami Mchunu said they had not heard from Sirwali or the premier's office.

He said internal departmental processes were underway to determine when Tvep would be evicted. He said there were no plans to find alternative accommodation.

Tvep board of trustees chairperson Mashudu Davhana-Maselesele, said they were appealing the judgment. They would ask for Legal Aid as they could not afford private lawyers.

"Other countries are copying what we do and we get funding from international organisations and little from the department of social development. Our work is recognised. The government cannot expect us to pay rent when people voluntarily render services to communities."