

Workers told to leave unsafe building

Hundreds of social development, economics staff moved after gas leak

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“It is not possible to work in this condition as it directly affects oxygen in the building.”

This was a warning sign welcoming employees arriving at the offices of the Eastern Cape department of social development on Wednesday.

The health hazard notice by the department’s head, Ntombi Baart, followed a gas leak that forced officials to evacuate hundreds of employees from the building on Tuesday morning.

“The department of social development provincial office is closed for the day, 2019-02-12, due to gas emissions triggered by the fire suppression system. Evaluation of the situation will be done on 2019-02-13 to reconsider operations,” the notice reads.

The Beacon Hill Office Park houses 437 social development employees and hundreds of employees from the department of economic affairs, who were also evacuated.

Social development spokesperson Mzukisi Solani said they were still waiting for a report from technicians to determine the cause of the leak. “Every building has all sorts of gases that serve different purposes, either for air conditioning or fire prevention.

“But because of the constant electricity outages it could have caused the fault.

“A report will be available when technicians have completed their investigations.”

In November, the Daily Dispatch reported on how the employees had voiced their frustrations with the working conditions they had to endure.

Government reports seen by the Dispatch raised major safety concerns about the building, including that the temperatures



ALL OUT: Social development workers at the provincial headquarters had to be evacuated on Tuesday because of a gas leak.

Picture SUPPLIED

could cause heatstroke and kill people.

The Dispatch also discovered that the landlord of the building has been engaged in protracted discussion with the departments of social development and public works about the state of the building and that this had led to delays in renovation.

Public works spokeswoman Vuyokazi Mbanjwa said the gas leak had nothing to do with the general condition of the building.

“The department has been made aware that the uninterrupted power supply batteries at the server room on the social development side leaked acid which triggered the fire suppression unit to kick in.

“The department and the landlord are dealing with this and the service provider is already on site,” she said.

National Education, Health and Allied Workers’ Union chairman at the department, Simphiwe Nkatsha, said some officials in the building had experienced difficulties breathing and had to be taken to hospital.

“The building was declared non-compliant by the department of labour, [environmental safety and sustainability company] Nosa and BCM [officials]. The building is an occupational hazard and officials get sick while performing their duties as there is no cross-ventilation,” Nkatsha said.

Gas leak had nothing to do with the condition of the building - official