

■ INEFFICIENCY

Outrage at Home Affairs chaos

Despite minister's 'war on queues' promise, animosity and crowded conditions persist

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LONG queues, off-line computers and broken air conditioners are some of the challenges facing staff and applicants at the Department of Home Affairs' Umgeni Road offices in Durban.

The Home Affairs Portfolio Committee said this was a national concern, and Pietermaritzburg was also among those branches hardest hit.

This is despite former minister Malusi Gigaba's announcement of a "war on queues" campaign during his visit to the Umgeni Road offices in April last year.

At the time, Gigaba told frustrated applicants that the campaign was an innovative intervention to improve services provided by the department.

He assured people that after his visit, client contact centres would work optimally; a solution for "unpredictable" walk-in clients and for front office space would be found; and the unstable computer system would be attended to.

Seventeen months later, both the staff and the public say they are yet to see the changes Gigaba promised.

"We have three photo booths, but only two work and with the number of people we attend to daily, we need that third booth desperately. The air conditioning system is broken. In this heat, we perspire until body odour dominates this building," said an employee who did not want to be named.

"Our computer system is a nightmare. It's offline more often than not, and we have to contend with angry people who don't understand why a department would operate with a system that breaks down all the time.

"These working conditions create animosity between the employees and the public," he said.

Another employee said visits by senior officials to the offices were for publicity purposes.

"Since he (Gigaba) visited here, all he provided was lip service and posed for pictures. This is what they do, all of them. In July, deputy minister Njabulo Nzuza was here offering promises he will never fulfil.

"This is so sad and frustrating because when things go south, we are the ones at the receiving end of insults hurled by angry residents."

During his visit, Nzuza also prom-

ised to turn the situation around. He said the visit was to understand what the challenges were as they had been hearing "a lot" about problems at the department.

"I viewed that as an insult to our intelligence. Are they working in silos at head office? How can he not know what the problems are while the former minister was here last year and made promises? This is disappointing given that Gigaba had said the department was finalising action plans to

deal with problem areas identified," said the employee.

Clients at the offices for services said delivery was still poor.

Ministerial spokesperson Siya Qoza had not responded to questions emailed last week by publication time.

Advocate Bongani Bongo, the portfolio chairperson, said: "(This week) we had resolved to engage Treasury to allow the employment of more people in the department. We want the department to be exempted from

Public Works and relook at the deal between the two entities. We've communicated with the minister to have this issue discussed in Cabinet."

Bongo said staff shortages lead to long queues and an ID application required at least five people.

"We are cognisant of the challenges caused by the unreliable network provided by the State Information Technology Agency, and this has to be addressed with urgency to deal with the system being off line so often."