

# Water crisis causes a stink, delays at Makhandanda court

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The wheels of justice are grinding exceedingly slowly at the Makhandanda magistrate's court

where a lack of ablution facilities and almost daily water outages have resulted in staff leaving by midday at least three times a week.

As the Eastern Cape moves into the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, staff at the court have for some time faced a situation where there are too few toilets for the number of people employed there.

This was worsened by the small city's dire water shortages. Some of the toilets are in disrepair, with broken seats or doors that don't lock.

Most were often also blocked due to being used but not flushed during prolonged water outages, said one source at the court, who did not wish to be named.

The department of justice has

confirmed the situation is dire.

It said in response to questions sent to it that the justice department was, to some extent, at the mercy of the department of public works (DPW) which was responsible for court infrastructure, and Makana municipality, which was responsible for water supply. The municipality is unable to treat enough water for the entire city and applies a "one-day-on-one-day-off" system.

This means most businesses and households go without water at least three times a week.

But the outages are often prolonged due to burst pipes or

cother issues at the water treatment plants supplying Makhandanda with water.

The court is a busy building with four magistrate's courts, one regional court, and numerous offices that house magistrates, prosecutorial and other staff.

The sanitation situation was particularly bad for female staff, the source said. The magistrate's court building has just three toilets for more than 50 female staff, and at least one is usually blocked and out of order due to lack of water.

The situation is reportedly even worse in the ablution facilities meant for the public. These are often locked on days when there is no water supply to avoid blockages. Even if the toilets are open, the situation is often disgusting.

Male witnesses, accused and complainants — who have no choice but to be there as they have been summoned to attend court — often resort to using the small garden courtyard in the middle of the court building. A sign on an office door at the end of a smelly hidden corridor which reads "this is not a toilet" tells its own tale.

The situation has led to staff being sent home early for

health and hygiene reasons. Only a skeleton staff remains.

This has reportedly led to many criminal matters being remanded time and again.

The justice department confirmed it had decided to step up to the plate and fund a backup water storage pressurised system to supply water to the entire building.

"Due to the urgency of the current crisis at [Makhandanda], we resolved to set aside funding for this project and implement it ourselves."

However, it said it had still required expertise from the DPW to develop specifications for the project and this, on its own, had taken over a year.

"We have to implement the project under their technical advice."

The department admitted productivity had been seriously affected by these "external factors" and said the court was trying to manage the situation.

"The installation of a water backup system is a priority and is being fast-tracked by the regional office."

In the meantime, the magistrate's court will have to continue to function with skeleton staff on days when there is no water.

**The justice department was, to some extent, at the mercy of the department of public works**