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An uninhabited house in Waterkloof, Pretoria, that was meant to be used as a shelter for abused women and children. Picture: Alaster Russell

Shelters for abuse victims stand empty

By GILL GIFFORD

● For two years, six properties given to the Gauteng department of social development to be used as shelters for domestic abuse survivors have been standing empty and unused, with more than R1.9m having been spent on repairs, building work and gardening during this time.

Three of the houses visited by the Sunday Times this week appeared to be in fairly decent condition, in good, safe areas close to amenities.

A double-storey house in Pretoria's upmarket Waterkloof stood empty, fluorescent lights blazing on the downstairs patio and upstairs balcony. Some washing hung on a line and there was a covering of sorts over an upstairs window, but the garden was badly neglected – in stark contrast to the similar but meticulously maintained occupied house next door.

In Johannesburg's Observatory suburb a large facebrick house on a quiet street stood locked up and empty. There was a portable toilet in the front yard and two uniformed security guards – a man and a woman – were patrolling.

Another large house, in nearby Cyrildene, appeared well maintained and was also guarded by two uniformed security officials. They confirmed that the house was empty and that it belonged to the government, but did not know why it was standing empty.

These properties are among 16 owned by the department of public works that were handed over to provincial authorities to be used as gender-based violence (GBV) shelters. The departments of social development in the Western Cape and Gauteng received six properties each in early 2020.

In the Western Cape, all six of the properties are in use as emergency safe havens for women in need.

MP Alexandra Abrahams, a DA spokesperson on social development, has now written to social development minister Lindiwe Zulu, asking her to take action over Gauteng's failure to use the properties.

Public works & infrastructure minister Patricia de Lille has confirmed that the Gauteng provincial government is not using the properties.

De Lille gave a breakdown of the money spent on the Gauteng properties so far: R22,760 on the Observatory house, R424,466 on the Cyrildene house, R328,587 on a house in Pretoria, R165,182 on a second Pretoria house, R67,485 on a third and R30,900 on the house in Waterkloof, bringing the total to just over R1.93m. This did not include rates, utilities, security or any running costs.

Jeanette Sera, counselling services manager at People Opposing Women Abuse, said there were about 24 shelters in Gauteng, and no need for more.

"It's just a common knee-jerk reaction to talk about GBV and immediately assume there's a great need for shelters," Sera said. But the need for other kinds of accommodation is huge, she added, and these houses could work perfectly for the needs that exist.

"We need more 'transitional' or long-term housing for women trying to get on their feet or start over on their own rather than return to an abusive situation or be a burden to their families," Sera said, adding that another need was accommodation for LGBTI people.

Abrahams said another need was accommodation for children in the system who, when they turn 18, are no longer catered for and either have to go out on their own or return to the abuse from which they were removed as a child.

Motsemal Motlhaolwa, spokesperson for the Gauteng department of social development, said site visits by officials had found that the two buildings in Johannesburg were ready for occupation but additional security was needed. The three properties in Tshwane and two properties on the West rand needed to be renovated.

"Gauteng infrastructure development cannot conclude on the lease agreement for the sites pending the finalisation of the memorandum of understanding at national level," he said. He added that the lease agreement had changed from a 99-year term to just three years and that this was now a challenge for funding.

"Not all sites have municipal compliance certificates and the department of public works is still to appoint service providers to start the process," he said.

The sites could not be occupied without lease agreements in place and municipal approval on rezoning in compliance with bylaws pertaining to the intended use, he added.