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MILLIONS SPENT ON 'EMPTY SHELLS'

## Government under fire over R11m paid for security at vacant state properties

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THE government has come under fire for spending R11 million on providing security for five unoccupied state-owned properties that were supposed to be used as shelters for victims of gender-based violence (GBV) and remain unoccupied in Gauteng.

The security costs were revealed by Public Works and Infrastructure Minister Sihle Zikalala in response to parliamentary questions from DA MP Alexandra Abrahams.

Abrahams enquired about the reasons why the five buildings his department handed over to the Gauteng provincial department in December 2019, to be used as shelters for victims of gender-based violence, were not operational.

The department, under former Minister Patricia de Lille, had embarked on a programme to prepare and release state-owned properties across the country for use as shelters of victims of gender-based violence by the Social Development Department.

In December 2019, five buildings were handed over in Gauteng.

The department reportedly spent R1 960 411 on renovations and garden services for the buildings that remain closed.

More than six buildings were handed over to the Social Development Department for use in the Western Cape and they are all in use.

In his written reply, Zikalala said a memorandum was prepared in 2020 but the Gauteng provincial government sent it back, wanting certain clauses changed.

He also said that when his department prepared a lease agreement in 2021, the province stated that it did not have a budget.

"The department in 2022 prepared a user agreement where it was going back and forth until the parties, Gauteng provincial government, Department of Social Development and Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, decided to sit together and draft (a lease agreement) in order to suit everyone," he said.

The province had apparently wanted the properties to be permanently transferred to its Department of Infrastructure Development.

Zikalala confirmed that all the

properties handed over to the Gauteng provincial government were not occupied as at last month.

"All five houses are not occupied presently and they are renovated but one is occupied and it is used as offices."

He revealed that his department had incurred costs of R11 694 927 for security between January 2019 and September.

"The projected monthly cost to the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure should the buildings remain closed, is approximately R259 887.25 to secure the buildings," Zikalala said.

Abrahams said the ANC government reaffirmed its indifference to combating gender-based violence during the 16 Days of Activism for No Violence against Women and Children.

"Instead of providing security in the form of shelters for victims of GBV, the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure has spent over R11m from January 2019 to September 30, 2023 on security personnel safeguarding closed properties in Gauteng."

She noted that one of the properties seemed to have been repurposed for offices.

