



# Crisis in the deeds office is bad news for those moving house



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***"Over 5 000 files wait as workers down tools over 'unsafe' office building."***



*Picture: Thinkstock*

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The Deeds Office in Johannesburg has ground to a halt with more than 5 000 property transfer files unattended as staff protest over unsafe working conditions in the Marble Towers building in the CBD.

For the past eight days, no work was been done in a standoff over their office building's conditions.

Katherine Gascoigne, an executive of the Joburg Attorneys Association, expressed concern over the lack of clarity and government intervention to resolve the unfolding crisis.

“We have received no official statements, and the lack of transparency is making the situation even more difficult to manage. “With no contingency plan in place, the risk of another sudden shutdown remains high,” she said.

“If a lift breaks down tomorrow, we could be right back at square one. The lack of planning is frustrating, leaving businesses and clients in the dark.”

### **Thousands affected**

The crisis highlights a major failure in planning and accountability, with far-reaching financial consequences, Gascoigne said.

“The Deeds Office provides a critical service and these disruptions are affecting thousands of people, businesses and the economy.”

Initially, an agreement between workers and unions was reached to process lodgements using the ground floor for limited processing of documentation, while addressing the building’s safety issues after its infrastructure has long been flagged as unreliable, with fire hazards and inadequate security.

A rotational work system was also introduced to prevent overcrowding.

However, last week all new lodgments were halted entirely in protest to the lack of department action.

### **How bad is the backlog?**

Gascoigne said the backlog was now a significant concern.

“We estimate an average between 600 and 700 deeds are processed per day. With an eight-day backlog, at least 5000 deeds are currently delayed.

“Given that month-end typically sees an influx of registrations, this will put extreme pressure on the system.”

By Friday, the office reopened for lodgments, as staff were reportedly instructed to return to work or face a “no work, no pay” policy. It is understood over 2 000 matters were lodged on Friday.

“The disruptions have had a severe financial impact on businesses, including conveyancers, banks, developers, and the public,” said Gascoigne.

“Since conveyancers only earn fees upon registration, their income has effectively come to a halt. Delays in lodging documents mean property transactions cannot be finalised, causing financial strain on clients, estate agents, and banks.”

A new Deeds Office is only expected to be ready in September.

### **Health and safety concerns**

The Public Servants Association (PSA) said government departments haven’t indicated what they will do about the concerns of workers.

The PSA requested the department of employment and labour to inspect the building in December and issued Prohibition and Contravention Notices to the Registrar with a 30-day compliance deadline.

Sibusiso Ndzala, Johannesburg provincial organiser for PSA, criticised the handling of the crisis.

“The employer was given 30 days to address these issues. In January, we were informed they had requested an extension, but the lifts were deemed unsafe and subsequently shut down.

“Without lifts, employees couldn’t access their offices, and we couldn’t allow them to use unsafe lifts where we are unsure if the building can safely support its 31 floors,” he said.

The PSA claimed that despite the hazardous conditions, the department had already allocated a budget exceeding R500 000 for renovations to the same building.

“We are still waiting for the employer to address health and safety concerns and present a clear plan,” Ndzala said.

“We have also written to the director-general and the chief registrar of Deeds. They have not responded.

“If they fail to meet with us, we will escalate this to the minister, as it appears they are not taking the issue seriously.”

### **Seeking an alternative**

Ndzala said employees should be relocated from the building and called for a special meeting at the Departmental Bargaining Chamber to demand answers.

“The structural integrity report has not been provided. If necessary, we will work with the department of employment and labour to ensure the building is completely shut down.

“The employer should act before it reaches that point by securing alternative office space to ensure service delivery continues,” Ndzala said.

The department of agriculture, land reform and rural development had not responded to questions sent to them concerning the matter.