

MEDIA RELEASE	PSA demands increased funding and exemption from cost-cutting measures to rescue KwaZulu-Natal's collapsing healthcare system
DATE	19 November 2024
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The Public Servants Association (PSA) is alarmed at the escalating financial crisis facing the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health.

Premier Thami Ntuli's stark warning of a projected R4.7 billion overspend by 30 September 2024, exposes a public health system at breaking point. This crisis, rooted in systemic neglect, chronic underfunding, and unfunded national wage agreements, has pushed the Department into a perilous position where healthcare delivery, workforce stability, and patient outcomes are critically endangered.

The PSA attributes this crisis to several interrelated factors, including government's failure to support wage agreements with corresponding financial allocations. The 2024-wage agreement, which adds a R1.9 billion liability to the province's budget, exemplifies this disconnect. Instead of receiving dedicated funding to meet obligations, the provincial government is forced to divert money from critical service delivery. This pressure compounds a R3.362 billion shortfall in the compensation of employees budget, driven by a longstanding failure to fund vacant healthcare posts. These unfunded posts, covering essential roles such as doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals support staff, have left the Department unable to meet even basic staffing requirements.

Historical budget reductions have further exacerbated this crisis. Over the years, austerity measures have stripped the Department of its capacity to invest in vital infrastructure, expand services, or address growing healthcare demands. The ripple effects are catastrophic with mounting surgical and clinical backlogs, longer waiting times for treatment, inadequate ambulance services, shortages of critical medications, and healthcare facilities in various states of disrepair. This decline disproportionately affects rural and underserved communities, widening healthcare inequities and deepening public frustration.

The PSA is extremely concerned about the Department's proposed cost-cutting measures, which risk exacerbating the crisis. Freezing the employment of healthcare workers and curtailing essential services are not sustainable solutions. These actions will further strain the system, endangering healthcare workers and patients. To prevent a complete collapse of the healthcare system, the PSA urges National Treasury to urgently intervene by providing a comprehensive financial rescue package. This must prioritise funding to cover the wage agreement deficit, fill critical healthcare vacancies, and stabilise service delivery. The PSA also urges the Department of Health to develop and implement a strategic recovery plan that includes recruitment drives addressing the chronic understaffing in hospitals and clinics by fast-tracking the employment of healthcare professionals, especially in rural and underserved areas.

There must be infrastructure and equipment investments allocating resources to upgrade dilapidated facilities and procure essential medical equipment. The Department must ensure enhanced financial

oversight by establishing robust systems to monitor and manage departmental spending, ensuring accountability and preventing wasteful expenditure. Additionally, stakeholder collaboration is key. Unions, healthcare workers, and civil society must be engaged in transparent consultations to craft sustainable solutions that address worker welfare and patient care.

The PSA emphasises that this crisis is a national emergency requiring immediate and decisive action. Failure to act will compromise the constitutional right to quality healthcare and further erode public trust in government institutions. National Treasury must step in without delay to provide the resources necessary to stabilise and rebuild the Provincial Department of Health. This entails managing a budget, safeguarding lives, protecting the dignity of healthcare workers, and fulfilling the constitutional promise of equitable healthcare for all South Africans. The PSA will continue to advocate for meaningful change and stands ready to hold leadership accountable at every level to ensure that the health and well-being of the Province's citizens remain a priority.

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