

Union denies shutting down NC health facilities By Boipelo Mere - Nov 18, 2020 112

Nehawu in the Northern Cape on Wednesday denied that its striking members have shut down health facilities in the Province this week. Members from Nehawu protested outside of the Galeshewe Day Hospital today, where they barricaded the entrance of the building. They are demanding staff should be permanently absorbed. Pictures: Danie van der Lith THE NATIONAL

Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (Nehawu) in the Northern Cape on Wednesday denied that its striking members have shut down health facilities in the Province this week. Nehawu members in the Northern Cape have joined the union's national strike calling for the permanent absorption of community health workers (CHWs) into the Department of Health. On Wednesday, Nehawu members marched to their respective district offices in the Northern Cape and embarked on peaceful pickets. Nehawu denied accusations that its striking CHWs were responsible for disruptions at clinics and for sending patients home. A number of complaints were raised by members of the community this week, alleging that the CHWs were threatening the permanent staff and shutting down the facilities, leaving the patients stranded without any medical care. Allegations were also made that permanent staff members at some health facilities supported the protest action and had voluntarily walked out on the patients. With several facilities in Kimberley only providing limited services, like issuing chronic medication, many patients have flocked to the Galeshewe Day Hospital (GDH). A Public Servants Association of South Africa (PSA) shop steward at the GDH on Wednesday called on the provincial Department of Health to make arrangements that any non-permanent clinic staff members who are forced out of their workplaces be referred to the GDH to help with the influx of patients. The shop steward indicated that GDH staff members are now "even more overworked" due to the strike as the CHWs, who used to "fill the gaps", have withdrawn their labour. "We have always been understaffed and now it is chaotic as the number of patients has been increasing on a daily basis and we cannot turn the patients away," said the shop steward. The Northern Cape MEC for Health, Maruping Lekwene, has expressed concern "about the disruption of health services by Nehawu at some facilities across the Province, especially during the Covid-19 period". Lekwene appealed to the provincial leadership of Nehawu to allow health facilities to operate unhindered. The provincial department also stated that the national Department of Health continues to engage with organised labour in the public health sector at the Public Health and Social Development Sectoral Bargaining Council. According to the Northern Cape Department of Health spokesperson, Lebogang Majaha, the national department has "committed to make efforts in resolving this matter at a national level, on behalf of all provincial Health departments". National spokesperson Popo Maja confirmed that the issue of the absorption of CHWs is before the bargaining council. "The Ministry of Health has also

prioritised this issue because of the important role of community health workers in our primary health system,” said Majaha. He added that the MEC acknowledged “the immense value added to the department by CHWs by filling a gap left in the care of the sick and vulnerable people within communities”. “Their role in the primary health care system is essential in order to achieve the high quality of health care service delivery that the people of this Province deserve.” Majaha said that the MEC acknowledged the right to strike but condemned the closure of health facilities. “Everyone has the constitutional right to have access to health care services.” He added that the MEC has “appealed to the provincial leadership of Nehawu to co-operate and allow health facilities to operate unhindered”. “It must be noted that failure to adhere to this call will result in the department taking the necessary steps to protect the health staff, patients and communities requiring medical care,” he warned. Nehawu in the Northern Cape on Wednesday expressed dismay regarding “acts of desperation” by the MEC and his head of department “in their attempt to stifle the ongoing strike”. The provincial secretary of Nehawu, Steffen Cornelius, accused the MEC of lying and misleading union members in stating that there are ongoing negotiations. “This is an utter lie from the MEC and he should be ashamed of himself,” said Cornelius. “Furthermore, our strike is protected and workers are exercising their constitutional right to strike. There are currently no negotiations taking place in the bargaining council. “The issue of the permanent absorption of community health workers is not a new one. It was raised with the previous MEC and she failed to act. The issue was further raised with the current MEC, who has also elected to turn a blind eye to the plight of these workers. “It is for these reasons that we are not surprised by his attempt to sabotage our strike,” said Cornelius. Nehawu further accused the provincial department of trying to divide the workers. “Our members are disciplined and know what is right, there is no way that we dismiss patients,” Cornelius concluded