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Are there lessons to be learned from this tragedy?

By Merle Allsopp

This first term of 2017 has been a trying one in many respects for South Africans, what with our parliament dissolving into disarray at SONA, and the controversy about the social grants payments causing anxiety for service recipients and social service professionals across the country, the economy still struggling and, in the Western Cape, a continued and threatening drought fueling devastating fires. At least the rains have come for the bulk of the country!

But, for our sector, the release of the findings into the tragic deaths of almost a hundred mentally ill people in residential care in mental health facilities in Gauteng must be one of the most concerning and tragic news events of the year – and, perhaps for our entire period of democracy. The fact that this took place in organisations under the jurisdiction of the provincial Department of Health should not give our sector any comfort or complacency. It is a shocking situation, and highlights many issues surrounding residential care of which our sector should be very mindful.

My blood ran cold in my veins reading about the manner in which people died in these facilities. It appeared to me that these were preventable deaths that have come about largely through institutional neglect – and cruelty. The upshot is that the institutions that were supposed to care for these vulnerable people actually were the cause of their undignified, humiliating and sometimes painful demise. The state itself – into whose care these people were entrusted because they were of the most vulnerable amongst us – must surely be held accountable for failing to provide the oversight needed to ensure that care was of the standard required by our legislative and policy framework.

It is my fervent hope that if *one* positive can come out of this situation it may be that the Department of Social Development turns its attention once again to the responsibilities it has to support sound and effective residential care for children. In the face of the overwhelming social devastation that has come with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the many other responsibilities of the Department, many are of the opinion that the services provided within residential care settings have not received the

support that is needed from provincial Departments of Social Development. Often not paid timeously, not monitored, and not supported in doing the complex work that they are, child and youth care centers have felt themselves to be ‘poor relations’ within the social development sector.

As a person who has been responsible for a child and youth care center, I know the potential for things to go horribly wrong...I still shudder at the thought of discovering a smoking cushion on an illicit heater next to a sleeping child; at seeing an angry fist go through a window and pierce the skin just next to the artery of a teenage arm; at the vision of a youngster running on a steeply pitched roof thirty meters off the ground. These are examples of the *real* hazards inherent in caring for hurting young people away from their homes. We know that things can go wrong in child and youth care centers, and that those for whom we care for are indeed very, very vulnerable – and that because of *this* the state needs to put in place the resources to provide services in line with the legislative requirements.

But in a country such as ours where the pressures on the state are many, I believe that civil society has a significant role to play in raising awareness and lobbying for particular special interests to be heard. If we are to ensure that there *are* potential gains for the residential care sector from this horrendous tragedy, I believe that the sector must stand together at this time to lobby, to raise awareness of the needs of the sector, and to hold government accountable for providing the financial, human and technical resources required to ensure that residential care facilities – child and youth care centers, whose function is to provide residential care to our country’s most vulnerable children – are *able* to provide the services required by our policy and legislative framework.

There are lessons to be learned from this tragedy, lessons for all parties. Let us, as the child and youth care sector, be sure that we learn the value of collective action at local, regional and national levels in raising awareness on the importance of providing *caring* residential care services for children. ●

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