

## Timeline of the Free State health crisis

### 2005

To understand what led to the crises in the Free State it is helpful to backtrack to 2005 when the provincial scale-up of antiretroviral therapy (ART) programmes across South Africa's nine provinces began in earnest. In the absence of guidelines, norms or standards issued by the National Department of Health, the Free State developed its own systems for scale-up. The province struggled to initiate patients onto ARVs quickly enough to meet the high demand for treatment, and its model of ARV provision through a small number of centrally located clinics meant that treatment remained inaccessible for many who lived outside the few urban areas. This was partly the result of the laborious accreditation process before ARV sites were allowed to dispense the drugs, and partly because of human resource shortages and infrastructural constraints. Between May 2004 and December 2007, it is estimated one quarter of patients on the province's ARV waiting list died before accessing treatment.

### September 2008

President Thabo Mbeki resigns and Kgalema Motlanthe assumes the presidency of South Africa for the remainder of the parliamentary term. Almost immediately Motlanthe replaced Health Minister Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang with Barbara Hogan, who was known for her financial acuity and her support for evidence-based health interventions.

### November 2008

Despite Hogan's commitments to better financial oversight and to the expansion of antiretroviral (ARV) coverage, a moratorium on initiating new patients onto ARVs was ordered in the Free State province by the Free State head of the HIV/Aids department. At the time the province had no methodology by which it set treatment targets and aligned these with budgets. At the time, the Free State also had the lowest rates of provincial ARV treatment coverage. Only 25% of those eligible for treatment was accessing it.

### 3 November 2008

The head of the Free State's Comprehensive HIV and AIDS Management Programme emailed the provinces Chief ARV Pharmacist with an instruction in the subject line to stop putting new clients on ARVs. The email stated: "This province (Free State) is experiencing an acute shortage of antiretroviral drugs...This will lead to clients on treatment defaulting not because of their own fault. The only way to avoid this is by keeping the remaining ARVs for the exclusive use of those on treatment already with the exception of clients on the PMTCT program (pregnant women). In the meantime the FSDoH (Free State Department of Health) will be trying to find ways to remedy this situation". The Chief ARV pharmacist forwarded this email to healthcare workers and facility managers, acknowledging its serious implications: "We are facing a difficult period. You at the sites are faced with an even worse situation whereby you have to turn patients away because of the present circumstances. The same patients who look at you as their last hope in life." The ARV moratorium was the forerunner in a series of cost curtailment measures, which were implemented by all 31 public healthcare facilities in the Free State on 24 November 2008. These reduced the services available by drastic measures, and terminated all outreach services (with the exception of oncology). Clinical admissions were limited to "dire need only", and at one hospital patients were instructed to "go home and phone to hear if a bed is available".

Hogan reacted to the Free State's ARV moratorium, committing additional funds to replenish drug stocks and dispatching health systems experts to the province. The minister arranged for the transfer of R9.5 million in emergency funds to the province to purchase ARVs. The moratorium, which was part of a series of cost curtailment measures, lasted for four months. During this time, an estimated 30 additional patients in the province died from AIDS each day.

### November 2013

**The Stop Stockouts Project (SSP) releases the results of a large national survey of stockouts of HIV and TB medicines in public healthcare facilities. The survey finds that the Free State is hardest hit of all provinces with over half of facilities surveyed having experienced a stockout in the preceding three months.** The SSP is a joint project of the Southern African Clinicians Society, Doctors without Borders (MSF), Rudasa, RHAP, and the TAC.)

### 19 June 2014

The TAC and SECTION27 release a media statement revealing the extent of the crisis in the Free State: <http://www.tac.org.za/news/free-state-health-system-collapse-%E2%80%93-lives-are-being-lost-urgent-immediate-intervention-minister>

### **27 June 2014**

Community health workers gather at Bophelo House in Bloemfontein, the headquarters of the Free State Department of Health. Their contracts had not been renewed and they had not been offered an explanation. A meeting with a health official leads to an agreement that a meeting with Health MEC Benny Malakoane will take place within seven days.

### **3 July 2014**

The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) releases the results of a fact -finding mission across the province. It is established that there is a health care moratorium in the province with massive stock-outs, shortages and system collapse. There is a call for the Health MEC to be fired. In addition the TAC make the following demands:

- Premier Ace Mashagule must remove Benny Malakoane from his position as MEC of Health in the Free State. If Mashagule is not willing to do this, we call on the ANC's national leadership to intervene.
- Recently dismissed community healthcare workers must be reinstated with immediate effect.
- A turn-around plan for the provincial health system must be developed as a matter of urgency. It is essential that this turn-around plan be led by committed and qualified people – and not the current MEC.
- The secretariat of the Provincial AIDS Council must be moved out of the Department of Health so as to ensure independence and more effective civil society engagement.
- The Free State Department of Health must come clean about its financial problems. The public has a right to know how the Department is spending money - especially in the midst of a crisis like the current one.

The Mail & Guardian publishes a feature further exposing the health system collapse in the province and makes allegations implicating the MEC in a “ICU bed for pal” scandal.

<http://mg.co.za/article/2014-07-03-how-a-dying-womans-bed-was-taken-by-anc-official>

### **9 July 2014**

Over 100 Community Health Workers (CHWs) and TAC activists from across the province start a peaceful vigil outside Bophelo House in an effort to draw attention to their plight. The TAC announces the commencement of a civil disobedience campaign. Media statement: <http://www.tac.org.za/news/tac-embark-civil-disobedience-free-state>

Reports emerge of MEC Malakoane phoning CHWs, warning them that they will be arrested if they participate in the protest action. He demands the names of those attending the protest. Police presence increases significantly and they start negotiating with CHW and TAC leadership.

### **10 July 2014**

Further police back-up arrive on the scene and protestors are ordered to disperse or face arrest. Police tell protestors they have been sent by the Health MEC Benny Malakoane. Police move in and start arresting male CHWs and male TAC activists. Arrested protestors are taken to various police stations where they are locked up. Media statement: <http://www.tac.org.za/news/police-arrest-over-100-health-workers-and-activists-staging-peaceful-vigil-outside-fs-health> Protesters are told they are being charged for taking part in an illegal gathering.

Later in the day another 50 TAC members are arrested for picketing outside Bophelo House and taken to Park Road police station. They are forced inside police vans.

TAC General Secretary Anele Yawa contacts ANC General Secretary Gwede Mantashe who indicates that

he does not see it as his responsibility to deal with the ANC leadership in the Free State.

### **11 July 2014**

All those arrested appear in court and are told to again appear in court on September 1.

### **16 July 2014**

Press statement sent out notifying the press about the continuation of peaceful night vigils:

<http://www.tac.org.za/news/tac-continue-peaceful-night-vigils-free-state>

### **17 July 2014**

About 1 000 activists march to Bophelo house, the Free State Department of Health headquarters. The activists demand the immediate dismissal of Free State Health MEC Benny Malakoane, the reinstatement of recently dismissed community health workers on new terms, and a clear action plan to fix the Free State health system. The group also marches to the Provincial Aids Council to give the council's secretariat a memorandum to acknowledge the failing provincial health system and call for the MEC's resignation. Mail & Guardian coverage on march: <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-07-17-free-state-healthcare-workers-march-for-malakoanes-head> <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-07-17-free-states-malakoane-calls-activists-slogans-insulting>

Enca interview: <http://www.enca.com/media/video/tac-vigils>

### **18 July 2014**

TAC General Secretary Anele Yawa and TAC leaders meet with Tefo Tabi, the head of the Free State Provincial AIDS Council secretariat to discuss the crisis.

### **22 July 2014**

Free State health department offers two-month contracts to the CHWs.

### **23 July 2014**

TAC meets with NUMSA leadership.

### **24 July 2014**

TAC meets with COPE leadership.

### **25 July 2014**

Student nurses embark on a strike at Bongani regional hospital  
300+ TAC members attend another night vigil

### **01 August 2014**

MEC Benny Malakoane appears in Welkom Magistrate's court on charges of fraud and corruption from his time as Matjhabeng municipal manager between 2007 and 2010. The case is transferred to Bloemfontein Regional Court and postponed until the 27<sup>th</sup> of August. <http://www.ofm.co.za/article/Local-News/150476/Two-FS-MECs-in-Welkom-court>

A TAC night vigil continues into the morning and 30 TAC comrades picket outside the court

### **11 August 2014**

The student nurses strike at Bongani Hospital grows; they stated that no one will be working until their demands are met

New SSP survey released. It indicates that there is no improvement in the availability of essential medication in the Free State. (

### **14 August 2014**

Free State TAC leaders meet with the public protector. She says they are aware of allegations of corruption against MEC Malakoane, but her office needs more facts in order to investigate.

The new doctor appointed head of the HIV program in the Free State requests to meet with TAC and wants to create a platform to have monthly meetings .

TAC releases a statement inviting partner organisations to a collaborative meeting on 18 August to talk about problems in the Free State and other key campaigns. <http://www.tac.org.za/news/invitation-18th-aug-tac-engages-partners-free-state-other-core-campaigns>

### **18 August 2014**

Over 20 organisations are briefed on the situation in the Free State during a partners meeting in Johannesburg. Partner organisations pledge support for the ongoing work in the Free State.

### **27 August 2014**

MEC Benny Malakoane appears in the Bloemfontein Magistrates' court on charges of fraud and corruption. The matter is once again postponed. This time until November – more than a year after he first appeared in court on these charges.

### **28 August 2014**

A delegation of TAC national leadership led by General Secretary Anele Yawa meets with an ANC delegation led by Secretary General Gwede Mantashe at Luthuli House. Much of the discussion relates to the crisis in the Free State healthcare system.

### **31 August 2014**

Community healthcare workers and TAC activists gather in Bloemfontein in preparation for the 1 September court appearance of the 130. Those appearing in court are briefed on the legal situation and the options available to them. A night vigil is held at Batho Hall in Bloemfontein in solidarity with the healthcare workers and to draw attention to the ongoing crisis in the provincial healthcare system.

### **1 September 2014**

The 130 community healthcare workers are set to appear in court.  
TAC intends to officially bring new charges of corruption against MEC MALakoane.