



SPEAKER NOTES:

DEPUTY MINISTER B. MOLOI

**LAUNCH OF NEDLAC/NIOH OHS COVID-19
WORKPLACE TRAINING PROGRAMME**

16 AUGUST 2022

ZOOM VIRTUAL PLATFORM

Chairperson, Dr Thuthula Balfour from the Minerals Council

Executive Director of the National Institute for Occupational Health, Dr Spo Kgalamono

(The NIOH is a division of the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS), headed by the CEO, Dr Karmani Chetty).

Executive Director, Nedlac Lisa Seftel

Compensation Commissioner, Vuyo Mafata

Compensation Commissioner: Department of Health, -Dr Barry Kistnasamy

Speakers

Social partners

Guests

Thank you for inviting me to be part of the launch of this important programme.

The recent Covid19 pandemic was a challenge for workers and employers in respect of health and safety. Previously, only certain sectors such as the construction sector, and factories that deal with chemicals, agriculture, and mining were focused on health and safety although

we know that many workplaces including the informal sector face serious challenges.

With the onset of Covid19 and after we began opening up after the Level 5 lockdown, every workplace had to be concerned about mask-wearing, sanitation, social distancing, and ventilation. Many could not open up without putting these Covid19 prevention measures in place. The consequence would have been illness and death.

During this period, the Department of Employment and Labour in consultation with the social partners moved swiftly to guide employers and workers with the promulgation of Directions in terms of the Disaster Management Act. However, we drew on the best practices in health and safety legislation, requiring consultation between workers and employers, undertaking a risk assessment, and protecting employees from being forced to do dangerous work.

The Compensation Fund also promulgated regulations to provide for compensation in respect of workplace acquired Covid19.

As we have emerged from the Covid19 pandemic, earlier this year the Department of Employment and Labour revised its regulations on Hazardous Biological Agents and issued a Code of Good Practice: Managing Exposure to SARS-COV-2 in the Workplace. The regulations and the Code require employers to do a risk assessment, consult worker representatives, and on this basis put in place measures to mitigate the risk of workplace transmission which could lead to ill health, absenteeism, reduced productivity, and in some cases severe disease and death.

The measures that employers can consider as part of mitigating the risk of Covid19 include improved ventilation, vaccination, social distancing, masking, etc. What measure an employer decides to take depends on the risk assessment which can also vary depending on the threat of Covid19.

As we know at the moment, Covid19 is not such an imminent threat to severe disease and death. However, it has not gone away and the risk of further variants remains with us.

For this reason, we can't go back to the old normal. We need to create a new normal. We need to improve workplace compliance with the regulations and code. My Department tells me that compliance amongst employers is not that high. Inspection reports from the Department indicate that mega blitz inspections are initiated the 2nd semester of 2021/22 to improve the compliance levels of employers by using high visibility and an inordinate amount of advocacy through the use of national and provincial media platforms.

A total of 4 783 inspections have been conducted during the five provincial mega blitz inspections (EC, WC, KZN, Limpopo, and MP). Of the 4 789 inspections 52% of the workplaces were non-compliant and only 48% complied to the Covid19 Direction and other related regulations.

This brings me to why this initiative today is very important. It is an opportunity not only to ensure that there is improved protection of workers from Covid19 and similar respiratory infections but also to chart a new way forward in respect of occupational health and safety in the workplace.

We should not underestimate the significance of a healthy and safe workplace. It is an essential part of decent work. The ILO estimates that 2.3 million workers die every year from work-related injuries and diseases. And an additional 160 million workers suffer from non-fatal work-related diseases and 313 million from non-fatal injuries per year. This also has an economic impact to companies and the economy. More than 4 percent (4%) of the world's annual GDP is lost as a consequence of work-related injuries and diseases, says the ILO.

Recently the Department released a report that the ILO did for us on the Profile of Occupational Health and Safety in South Africa. It identified a number of challenges including that our legislation is fragmented and often seen as punitive, poor compliance by employers including the

government as an employer, and too few inspectors for inspections.

Its recommendations include, amongst others, that the country should develop a national OHS policy and strategy and that it should, and I quote: “capitalize on the opportunities brought by COVID-19 to advocate for and instil an OSH culture across all sectors in the public and private sector.” Some of the opportunities listed by the ILO study include the use of technology to make information quickly available and putting things more simply.

The programme that we are launching today aims to do just that. It aims to bring information to employers and workers through simple fact sheets and videos. It aims to use Covid19 as a platform to raise awareness of the advantages of a healthy and safe workplace. And it aims to show workers and employers that a risk-based approach, doing risk assessments is not difficult to do but important and can bring dividends in terms of less absenteeism, greater productivity, and improved worker/employer relations.

This programme is also the first of its kind. It represents an important collaboration between the Nedlac social partners, the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH), and the Compensation Fund. The NIOH will be producing the materials, they will be delivered together with employers and worker representatives and the work will be funded by the Compensation Fund in line with their mandate to prevent workplace ill health.

The process will be coordinated by Nedlac as part of ensuring that a positive legacy arises from the Nedlac Rapid Response Team that has coordinated the response of social partners to Covid19.

I thank you for taking these important steps and wish you well in the roll-out of this programme.