



Family Digest 36

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Disability, Desperation and the Water Cannon

In early January 2021, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), which falls under the Department of Social Development, announced that it had suspended 210 778 temporary disability grants (after a series of extensions during 2020 lockdown) that lapsed at the end of 2020. Frustrated and increasingly desperate beneficiaries were told to reapply for medical assessments during the height of the second wave of coronavirus infections. The temporary disability grant, which provides financial assistance and food security to over 200 000 South Africans who are unable to work due to injury or illness, for between six and 12 months, is subject to a medical review. This means that applicants need to be evaluated by a SASSA-contracted medical doctor to determine whether or not they continue to qualify for the grant. SASSA claimed that it did not have the necessary funds to finance further extensions, and lacked the capacity to deal with the high number of medical reviews.

“Government has failed to prepare for the upcoming flood of beneficiaries who will need to undergo their reassessments, thereby putting many vulnerable South Africans at risk of losing their much-needed disability grants in the coming weeks,” argued DA MP Bridget Masango.¹ This failure to prepare would compromise the dignity, psycho-social well-being, health and in some instances corporal integrity, of many of those seeking to reapply.

Queues, which have been such a sad and desperate feature of the COVID-19 South African experience, began to form outside SASSA offices countrywide. At the Bellville offices in Cape Town the police arrived and, as those queueing were deemed to be inadequately ‘social distancing’, proceeded to use a water cannon to disperse the ‘crowd’. The disability, infirmity and immobility of those queueing was not taken in to account. Those with illness or disability usually have somebody else with them as their condition makes it difficult for them to travel alone; this is commonly a family member from the same household and as such not required to ‘social distance’.

During the long months of the lockdown there have been several instances of overzealous application of lockdown regulations by both the SAPS and the SANDF. They have adopted the role of enforcer rather than protector and have, in some circumstances, failed to evaluate the situation correctly. Alternative and less aggressive approaches could have been adopted.

Alternative measures have been put in place to deal with the immediate crisis. However, we need to be vigilant that sustainable changes are made. The economic devastation wrought by the lockdown, which has wiped out much of the informal economy and cost millions of jobs, both demands and necessitates significant social security interventions if we are to avoid dire poverty and extreme

hunger. When handing down judgement in the Constitutional Court in another matter regarding SASSA grants, Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng said, “The consequences [if the social grants crisis continues] could be more catastrophic than we have the capacity to imagine.”² The long months of the lockdown have given us a view of what that catastrophe would look like and it cannot be allowed to happen.

The following links provide an overview of the problem as well as a response to the crisis by SASSA:

<https://www.businessinsider.co.za/more-than-200000-disability-grants-suspended-as-sassa-runs-out-of-money-2021-1>

<https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/sassa-slammed-for-leaving-thousands-in-the-disabled-community-without-grants--5f68296a-b36d-4b70-aa40-b0b45cdf8004>

<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2021-01-11-sassa-slammed-amid-claims-it-ran-out-of-funds-for-temporary-disability-grants/>

<https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/sassa-water-cannon-chaos-i-this-lindiwe-zulu-asked-the-police-to-stop-the-spraying-20210120>

<https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/investigation/2423262/western-cape-police-to-investigate-use-of-water-cannons-on-sassa-applicants/>

<https://www.groundup.org.za/article/sassa-office-only-serves-50-people-day-what-it-looked-130pm/>

<https://www.groundup.org.za/article/disability-grants-sassa-promises-process-all-applications-end-march/>

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¹<https://www.businessinsider.co.za/more-than-200000-disability-grants-suspended-as-sassa-runs-out-of-money-2021-1>

² <https://ewn.co.za/2017/03/15/13-fiery-quotes-from-the-concourt-sassa-battle>