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Social work 'needs to be recognised and boosted'

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General Reporter

GOVERNMENT social workers were not appreciated and recognised as much as their teacher and nurse counterparts, Social Development Minister Zola Skweyiya said yesterday.

He said the government needed to recognise the profession, which drew lower salaries than the teaching and nursing professions.

"Social workers are paid less when compared with teachers and nurses although they spend similar years studying at university," he said.

Skweyiya, who was celebrating World Social Work Day with 250 social workers in Johannesburg yesterday, called on social workers to stay in the country, instead of opting for better salaries overseas. He said the department was doing everything to retain them in the public service. The department's recruitment and retention strategy for social workers was also launched yesterday with the aim of enticing prospective social workers.

It seeks to revive interest in the profession, by recruiting student social workers, improving working conditions and providing better remuneration to those already in the profession.

Skweyiya called on retired social workers to come on board to help in rebuilding the profession and to raise awareness of it.

The minister said the government has declared social work a "scarce skill" profession with the country facing an "acute shortage of social service professionals". This was hindering social development.

He said his department had allocated R210m to the social work bursary scheme for students who wanted to pursue social work.

He said he was lobbying other government departments to prioritise issues affecting social workers.

According to the department's strategic report, about 11000 social workers were registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions in 2004.

Lynne Cawood, director of Gauteng Childline, said there was a need for at least 43000 social workers across the country to deal solely with issues affecting children.

Margot Davids of the National Association of Social Workers in SA said most social workers were operating in difficult conditions and their contributions were less recognised.

She said it was a good idea to lobby influential people such as veteran social worker and struggle icon Winnie Madikizela-Mandela to help promote the profession.

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