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Rescue plan for Master's Office

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GroundUp

Justice and Correctional Services Minister Ronald Lamola has approved a rescue plan for the Master's Office.

The dysfunction of the Master's Office has reached a crisis point, according to many in the legal fraternity.

The Master's Office is responsible for the administration of deceased estates, the setting up and liquidating of trusts and managing the Guardian's Fund to protect the interests of minors and people deemed legally incapable of administering their affairs.

The rescue plan aims to fix backlogs, improve digitisation, increase capacity, ensure standardisation and transparency and stop corruption in offices across the country.

The deputy minister met stakeholders on 16 November, including the Law Society of South Africa (LSSA), to workshop the plan.

According to department of justice and correctional services spokesperson Chrispin Phiri, the plan will not be publicly circulated.

The rescue plan aims to increase the number of matters to be finalised in four months from 65% (the current annual target) to 80%.

According to the department's 2021-22 annual report, letters of appointment and authority were issued within its 14-day deadline roughly 75% of the time.

But the LSSA questioned the department's ability to accurately report its own turnaround times.

The LSSA said the figures are in "stark contrast" to the experiences of 38 000 attorneys and candidate attorneys it represents as very long delays are the norm.

Turnaround times for functions such as issuing letters of executorship were changed from 15 to 21 days.

Hussan Goga of the LSSA believed this was to make the turnaround statistics look better.

But even these altered figures are "inconsistent with the experience of the public and the legal profession", he said.

The LSSA said it takes six months or more to get a letter of executorship.

Goga said the "single most important contributor to failures in service delivery in the Master's Office is the continued use of the Post Office as the only medium of communication".