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## **On the job training to plug the critical shortage of boiler operators at provincial hospitals.**

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Public Works North West has recruited 91 trainees as boiler operators at 11 provincial hospitals in an attempt to address the critical skills drain and shortage created partly by the ever increasing vacant posts that has reached critical levels.

Also feeling the pinch, are major hospitals like Mafikeng Provincial Hospital; General De La Rey Hospital in Lichtenburg, Potchefstroom Hospital, Tshepong Hospital in Matlosana, Vryburg Hospital, Zeerust Hospital and Job Tabane Hospital.

Boiler operation is one of the most critical for the smooth running of hospital services in the province in that boiler operators do regular maintenance of hot water boilers that hospitals use for the generation of steam.

In provincial hospitals boiler operators ensure that there is steam reticulation into the entire building for heating water, cooking and sterilization of theatrical equipment and for the laundry equipment, among others.

The provision of boiler operation services at provincial hospitals remain the competency of the Public Works department.

The recruitment of 91 from 6 500 applicants, followed previous, yet unsuccessful attempts to fill more than 50 boiler operator posts in hospitals. One of the reasons cited for the exodus of boiler operators to greener pastures, was the unattractive salaries.

Boiler operators in the province are employed on salary level three (R54 879 per annum) while their assistants are on level two (R47 787 per annum).

Currently, there are 106 boiler operators in the province instead 161 that exist in the structure.

Acting Head of Department Motlapele Ntshabele said the trainees- all from rural and poor background- would undergo a 12-month on-the-job training. Each will receive a monthly R2 500 stipend.

At least 55 are expected to be absorbed permanently at the end of the course.

Ntshabele said the high vacancy rate of boiler operators in state hospitals across the province had put a strain in both the department's human and financial resources.

"The few people that have been doing this kind of work had to work day and night because boilers have to be manned 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This led to a situation where the department spent a lot of money on overtime claims," she said.

Ntshabele cited Job Tabane Hospital in Rustenburg as an example where only three boilermakers have to work overtime "just to keep health services uninterrupted".

The enthusiastic learners, who are made up of 71 men and 20 women, have been placed in the 11 hospitals across the province.

According to Human Resource Management Director, Pogisho Moremedi, the current boiler operators would act as mentors to the learners. A training consultant would be appointed shortly.

Moremedi said training would cover key areas of boiler operations which include lighting the fire, raising steam pressure, de-ashing, emergency shutdowns, blowdown procedures and safe maintenance of steam pressure.

One of the trainees Kenaleone Moeng (23) from Vryburg said since passing her matric in 2002 all had seemed gloomy until she saw an advertisement in a local newspaper for the boiler operator development programme.

"This is an opportunity of a life time. For me as a young woman, this is a very proud moment because these kinds of jobs were previously dominated by our male counterparts," she said.

At the end of the programme learners are expected to emerge with a wealth of knowledge and a recognized certificate issued by an accredited institution to help the trainees to be competitive in job market.

End

