

*Advice offices
were always central to the
Black Sash's identity. They remain
so, even though their work has expanded
and changed over time. With its large voluntary
resources, the Black Sash is now managing an operation
which would stretch, test and challenge any corporate enterprise.
Linda Berkowitz and Sue Joynt provide this year's overview.*

advice office round-up

linda berkowitz and sue joynt

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA
REPUBLIEK VAN SUID-AFRIKA

1756

ET DIE KOMPLIMENTE
VAN DIE
DEPARTEMENT VAN
AANGELEENTHEDEN
DEPARTMENT OF INTER-RELATIONS

*NR Au Alien is a person
who is not a S.A. citizen.
Certain T.B.V.C. citizens also
qualify for S.A. citizenship.
Persons who are S.A. citizens
are confirmed they cannot obtain
S.A. identity documents. Presumably
this will not be subject to the
provisions of the Act.*

30/4/88

PRETORIA 0001

you do within _____ days of the service of this summons
to the CLERK OF THE AFORESAID COURT and also the PLAINTIFF OR HIS
agent herein a notice in writing of your intention to defend this action and answer
the summons.

adult woman and domestic worker of
Avenue, Yeoville, Johannesburg

Claim 1: R21,83
Claim 2: R40,00
are endorsed hereunder

Plaintiff is for payment of the sum/balance of R _____ for:

DATE CERTIFICATE
CERTIFIKAAT

DATE
Datum

DAY
Dag

PLACE PICK UP

BLACK SASH
ADVICE OFFICE

6 LINDA ST.
MOWBRAY

PHONE 081-550-0000

MEMBERS
Sue Joynt

The scale of Black Sash work has expanded so much recently that advice office workers around the country needed to gather a day early, before the National Conference began, to discuss their reports and to engage with fieldworkers doing related work.

The value of the workshop session before conference was highlighted by the sharing of information and procedures that have developed at different rates in the various advice offices. Technicalities of using the small claims courts, potential test cases involving eligibility for UIF benefits, working together with the South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU), making contact with and working with the trade unions, dealing with shady insurance salesmen and devious lawyers, extending advice office work by co-operation with more community-based organisations were all profitably discussed.

Altogether, the eight advice offices conducted more than 33 000 interviews during 1987, almost half of them in the Johannesburg office.

The types of cases heard by all advice offices were discussed briefly and fall mainly into the categories of social pensions, the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), wage- and other labour-related matters and housing (or the lack thereof). Pensions and other social grants are now handled by the provincial authorities and the change has led to inordinate delays in the processing of applications. Added to this, pensioners now have to apply for a new Identity Document at the same time. Much time in our advice offices is spent on labour matters. Employed workers come to voice complaints or to have their wages checked. Few wish to take any action for fear of losing their jobs. Advice offices keep up-to-date wage determinations and refer as many people as possible to appropriate unions and industrial councils. For unorganised workers, very little can usually be done.

Housing problems and their resolution vary from region to region. In Cape Town there is the huge dormitory area of Khayelitsha, home now to

some 200 000 people and officially seen as the 'homeland' for all bothersome communities whether they are living in the single quarters at Lwandle in Somerset West or in the bush at Noordhoek. In Johannesburg, on the other hand, squatters are hounded and arrested for trespass, often with no alternative offered to them. In Port Elizabeth, demolitions and removals are done in the name of up-grade when it is patently clear that the people will be unable to afford to re-occupy the up-graded areas. The East London advice office workers campaigned vigorously to bring squatters in their area to the attention of the wider community through the media and persistent canvassing of local businesses. In all these areas there are Black Sash members working regularly with squatter communities.

The relationship between advice offices and crisis work also varies from region to region. In the larger centres - Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban - there are other agencies with whom the Black Sash works,



dealing specifically with detainee support.

In Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown and East London, however, Black Sash advice offices are much more in the front line and handle crisis work directly, especially when people in detainee support groups are themselves detained. Tribute must be paid to all those involved in this valuable and necessary work. Not only are these advice offices dealing with crisis work in the communities that they serve, they are also subject to harassment by vigilantes and the security forces personally. Crisis work of another kind was undertaken by the field worker of the Durban advice office who was seconded to one of the flood relief committees set up to assist people, particularly in the rural villages, who had lost their all in the floods which devastated Natal.

The political violence that is occurring in Pietermaritzburg permeates the work of the Natal Midlands advice office although the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Action

(PACSA) deals with most of the people directly affected.

A thread running through all the reports was the high level of unemployment and destitution experienced by many of the people coming to the advice offices. In Khayelitsha, the unemployment rate is said to be about 80% while in the Eastern Cape, the provincial authorities estimate the figure to be 60%. Natal's problems have been massively exacerbated by the damage and losses incurred during the floods. Because we do not provide welfare at our advice offices, we see fewer destitute people than we otherwise might, but regular visitors to the townships and squatter camps see the large numbers of unemployed people. The crime rate in all areas is appalling and it is little short of miraculous how many people survive. The heartening side of this depressing picture is the development of income-generating schemes by a wide variety of organisations and the networking that is taking place between them in some areas. The question of which aspects of the

unemployment problem the Black Sash could and should address was the topic of one of the working groups at the conference.

One of the features of advice office work during the past year has been the training of other people in both para-legal advice-giving and counselling skills. At the same time advice office workers expressed concern that we should work on our own attitudes towards the people who come to us for help so that we empower them to make decisions for themselves, enabling them to leave the advice office with a clearer understanding of their rights.

In some of the advice offices, notably Johannesburg, the training of advice givers takes place 'in house' whereas in Cape Town a three-week course for up-country workers was devised and successfully run in co-operation with a number of other organisations.

With particular regard to the question of eligibility for South African identity documents, the East London advice office instructed the Legal Resources Centre to take a case to court which 'successfully established that the residents of Duncan Village do not need lodgers' permits before they can apply for new Identity Documents. Johannesburg reported problems experienced by people who cannot get late-registration-of-birth certificates which they need to apply for new Identity Documents because they do not have old reference books. The reason they do not have old reference books is that they do not have birth certificates. Lateral thinking and a great deal of perseverance are required to break out of this vicious, bureaucratic circle of catch-22's.

This summary cannot do justice to the breadth and depth of work done by the co-ordinators, field workers, interpreters and volunteers in the advice offices. In many areas it is the advice office that forms the centre of Black Sash activity. There is a strong ongoing need to share and discuss problems and to evaluate the work of the advice offices in terms of our organisation and its policies. □