

# Family Advocates to share expertise at annual meetings



By Neliswa Demana

South African Family Advocates will now meet annually to share experience and expertise on their work. This decision came about at the inaugural Family Advocate Conference, on 22 to 24 January, themed “The Dawn of the Children’s Act”. About 190 Family Advocates attended the conference.

The conference aimed to build upon the Public Sector’s service delivery pledge, which is in the Batho Pele principles. This conference will define essential and actual questions to debate new

ideas about what should be done to inform future policies in the field of Family Law and Practice. Future conferences will further give full effect to the Constitutional Rights of children.

Chief Family Advocate Petunia Seabi said “This is the first of its kind. We hope to do it annually. We decided to bring professionals in this industry to discuss issues such as the Children’s Act.”

KwaZulu-Natal Regional Head Brigitte Shabalala encouraged the advocates to keep on doing the



**Principal Family Advocate Brenda Makganyoha, programme director of the second day of the conference.**

good work. “It takes more than a qualification to do what you are doing. You were not appointed by chance.

Your appointment gives you the opportunity to plough back to the community.” She explained that the Department is doing a lot of excellent work which can be showcased to the world. “I encourage you to love your jobs, as this will make you go further.”

Mrs Shabalala motivated everyone to follow Mahatma Gandhi’s words, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”



**From left: KwaZulu-Natal Regional Head Brigitte Shabalala and Chief Family Advocate Petunia Seabi.**

**The following issues were discussed during the conference:**

1. The Hague Convention and the Children's Act
2. Human Rights and Family Law
3. Mediation in Family Law: An African Cultural Approach
4. Parents' and Children's Rights translated into the work experiences of the Family Advocates
5. Mediation as a resolution for family conflict
6. The challenges and opportunities of representing children
7. The impact of legislation on Hindu and Muslim personal

The Office of the Family Advocate assists people to reach agreements on disputed issues such as child custody, access and guardianship. These services are rendered to the public for free. The Department has prioritised the capacitating and training of Family Advocates.

Upon application by the parties, the Family Advocate

institutes an inquiry during which the Family Advocate, assisted by a family counselor (normally a trained social worker), interviews the parties to ascertain their personal circumstance and the background details to their matter. The Family Advocate then interviews the child to allow them the opportunity to be heard.

This prevents the child from having to appear in court. The Department has prioritised the capacitating and training of Family Advocates. A total of 25 offices, nationally are now in operation to increase accessibility to services of Family Advocates. The Department noted that in family matters the argumentative methods of resolving disputes promote hostility in the family structure. These impact on children psychologically, especially in the termination of a marriage.

To address this, mediation services and restorative justice programmes are being promoted to strengthen social cohesion with emphasis on building family unity in the fight against crime. The Family Advocate has succeeded in extending services to all the Lower- and High Courts in the country as well as the provision of mobile periodical services in rural areas.



**Above: Chief Family Advocate Petunia Seabi handing children certificates of appreciation for rendering the National Anthem.**

**Below: Family Advocate attending the conference.**

