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LEGAL ASSISTANCE CENTRE

Recipient of the UNICEF Maurice Pate Human Rights Award – 1997
JP Karuaihe Human Rights Award – 2008 and 2010

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IN RECOGNITION OF THE DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD 2012

The theme for the 2012 Day of the African Child is “*The rights of children with disabilities: the duty to protect, respect, promote and fulfil*”.

The Legal Assistance Centre would like to use this day to call attention to the challenges children with mental health disabilities and disorders in Namibia face. The Legal Assistance Centre would like to highlight the following five points:

Firstly there is a lack of information about the needs of children with disabilities and disorders. There is little data even on the number of children with mental health disabilities and disorders. For example, the 2006 Namibia Inter-Census Demographic Survey reports that 5% of people in Namibia have a disability. Of this percentage, 11% are classified as having a mental health disability. The survey does not cite separate data on the incidence of mental health disabilities in children. Data from South Africa suggests that a much higher percentage of people have mental health disabilities and disorders. Namibia and South Africa share many similarities and it is likely that the needs of many children with mental health disabilities and disorders in Namibia are going unrecognised.

A second problem is insufficient provision of and access to healthcare services. According to Namibia’s Mental Health Policy, the government provides a total of 211 psychiatric beds provide for the mental health needs of the entire population. In 2012 the Health Professions Council of Namibia reported that there are 96 registered psychologists. Furthermore, patients visiting state healthcare facilities are expected to pay an admission fee. Although a waiver system exists, many people who are eligible for the waiver are not aware of it. The admission fee can be a barrier to some people, meaning that some children do not get the healthcare services that they need.

A third problem is the fact that whilst Namibia has a law and a policy on mental health, both are outdated. Furthermore they make insufficient reference to the specific needs of children with mental health disabilities and disorders. The government has a draft Mental Health Bill in development, but it has been many years in the making and is not yet ready to be tabled in Parliament.

Trustees of the Legal Assistance Trust:

Clement Daniels (Chairperson) Elize Angula Esi Schimming-Chase Nico Kaiyamo
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Bisey Uirab

Fourthly, public awareness about mental health conditions is limited and there are few places where members of the public can access information. There is a critical need for greater public awareness about mental health disabilities and disorders including information about recognising mental health problems and options for treatment and care.

Finally, a **fifth problem is that medical aid schemes discriminate against clients who are suffering from mental as opposed to physical health problems.** Given the lack of awareness about mental health disorders, few people have the capacity to lobby against these discriminatory provisions.

Recommendations

The Legal Assistance Centre calls on the government to:

- (1) conduct research to assess the numbers and needs of children with mental health disabilities and disorders;
- (2) improve service provision for mental health patients;
- (3) prioritise revision of its mental health legislation and policy
- (4) increase public awareness about common mental health disorders and ensure that members of the public know how to access appropriate treatment and care
- (5) address discrimination against persons with mental health disabilities and disorders by medical aid schemes