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Volkswagen hands over first phase of Covid-19 temporary medical facility

- The first phase of this temporary facility could accommodate 1 485 patients
- VWSA will also assist National Health Laboratory Services to improve its Covid-19 testing capacity

Uitenhage – Seven weeks after the initial announcement of the company’s plans to provide a temporary medical facility for Covid-19 patients, Volkswagen Group South Africa (VWSA) today handed over the first phase of this project to the Eastern Cape Department of Health.

VWSA announced on 5 May that they would make their former Port Elizabeth plant, situated in Neave, available as an overflow facility to provide care for those diagnosed with Covid-19. With funding from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), VWSA has since completed the first phase of equipping this facility, which can now accommodate 1 485 patients including high-acuity patients who require oxygenation. Once the second and third phases are complete, in accordance with the Department of Health’s standard operating procedures for field hospitals the facility could accommodate more than 3 300 beds for patients.

The conversion of this 66 000m² building is the result of collaboration between VWSA, Eastern Cape Department of Health, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and the Nelson Mandela Bay Business Chamber. The funding was provided by the BMZ and a performance framework for the project was developed by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. The Business Chamber assisted in facilitating the project, while the Department of Health will be responsible for running the facility, with support from the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality.

Aside from managing the process of equipping the facility, VWSA’s role included sourcing funding of 5.2 million Euros (R100 million) for the facility, as well as the procurement of protective gear for staff at regional tertiary hospitals, regional Primary Care Clinics and Covid-19 test centres.

600 000 Euros (R11 million) of this funding will also be used in support of the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) branch in Port Elizabeth, which is responsible for the majority of Covid-19 testing in the metro. The branch is currently facing immense pressure amid challenges that include the shortage of testing kits. The assistance from VWSA will include the sourcing of necessary equipment, and improving the process flow of testing – all with the goal of doubling the current laboratory’s daily average output of 1 500 tests to more than 3 000 tests.

“We have learned that collaboration is key when facing an unprecedented threat such as Covid-19,” said Thomas Schaefer, Chairman and Managing Director of VWSA. “This pandemic requires us to act decisively and with speed. VWSA has answered this call by completing and delivering phase 1 of the

medical facility at the time when it is desperately needed by our Metro which is currently experiencing an alarming increase of infections. We are honoured to be able to provide this facility so our communities can receive the care they need during this difficult period of our lifetime.

“The testing process in the Metro needs to be optimised to enable tracing. This remains crucial as it will ultimately allow us to curb the spread of the virus. It is our hope that the support we offer to the NHLS will enable them to perform their potentially life-saving duties more effectively. I am very grateful to the BMZ and GIZ for making both these projects possible and helping us to protect our community.”

The Premier of the Eastern Cape, Lubabalo Oscar Mabuyane, welcomed the completion of the first phase of the field hospital, as well as the support to the NHLS. “The intervention by Volkswagen Group South Africa and the German government, to invest in the establishment of this 300-bed field hospital, came at the right time as many people in our province are infected by Covid-19,” said Mabuyane. “It is neatly dovetailing into our broader strategy of establishing field hospitals to fight Covid-19 in the Eastern Cape. We were looking for more beds to increase our capacity and ensure that whoever is in need of hospitalisation, would be able to get that support from this public-private partnership.”

Mabuyane revealed that the hospital will be named the Rev. Dr Elizabeth Mamisa Chabula-Nxiweni Field Hospital. This name was chosen in honour of Rev. Dr Chabula-Nxiweni, a retired Port Elizabeth doctor and vocal advocate for safe circumcision practices during initiation ceremonies. Dr Chabula-Nxiweni is also a Presbyterian minister, a former Nelson Mandela Bay Municipal Health Chief and a pioneer in caring for young initiates who have suffered as a result of unsafe circumcision practices.

“This is an honour to one of our brightest medical minds with a heart of gold and a spirit to serve our people. With this honour, we thank her for her service to our people,” said Mabuyane.

Mabuyane said the provincial government would provide healthcare workers to work at the new field hospital and its pharmacy. “The German government and VWSA have shown their good hearts in answering this call for international solidarity. This investment in human beings came at the right time. It’s a very progressive way of ploughing back into the community where you are doing business.

“300 beds is huge; we appreciate the humanitarian gesture by the donors. It is a responsible investment. We are in this campaign to save lives.”

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