



### How Service Failures Deepen Inequality

Imagine a mother raising three kids alone and working two jobs, still waiting for the RDP house she applied for in 2014. Every year she checks and every year she's told to wait while she continues to live in a two-room shack with no running water and a solid shelter from storms. She's not asking for more than anyone else, just the dignity of a dry floor, a door that closes properly and a place her children can call home.

For thousands of women across Johannesburg, this isn't just a story to imagine, it's their reality. Many are single mothers, caregivers and informal workers stuck in limbo, waiting for housing, electricity, clean water or even a simple, hopeful response from city departments.

But these are not mere service delays but daily injustices that disproportionately affect women. When the taps run dry, it's women who must walk in search for water. When toilets remain broken, it's women who carry the risks of illness and unsafe conditions. And when housing applications stall, it's women who bear the physical and emotional burden of raising families in overcrowded and unsafe spaces.

Access to basic services is not a favour but a constitutional right, enshrined in Section 26 and 27 of the Constitution, which guarantees access to adequate housing, water and healthcare. These rights are not gender-neutral in effect, when they are denied, women suffer first and suffer the most.

This is where the Office of the Ombudsman plays a critical role.

Under the City of Johannesburg Ombudsman By-Law (2023), our office is mandated to promote fairness, accountability and responsiveness in municipal service delivery. We investigate cases of maladministration, systemic neglect and exclusion, especially where vulnerable or marginalised residents, such as women, have been failed by the system.

Section 18 of the By-Law is particularly important as it empowers the Ombudsman to demand information and lawful cooperation from City employees. Any employee who refuses

or fails to comply with these lawful instructions can be charged with misconduct and disciplined under the City's procedures. This provision ensures that responsibility is not lost in bureaucracy and that officials are held personally accountable for delays and neglect.

By addressing individual complaints and recommending systemic changes, the Ombudsman bridges the gap between policy and lived experience, thus advancing gender equity not just in principle but in practice. When we protect the rights of women, we safeguard families and build stronger communities.

If you or someone you know, has been affected by similar delays or unfair treatment, contact our office. Waiting to have one's dignity restored should never be a lifetime sentence.

### Watts the Problem? Pensioner Suffers Bureaucratic Delays

On 7 June 2025, our office received a formal complaint from a senior resident in Lenasia, south of Johannesburg, regarding administrative delays and discrepancies in accessing benefits under the Extended Social Package (ESP) - a programme designed to provide financial relief to the City's most vulnerable residents, including the elderly, persons with disabilities, indigent families, displaced individuals and unemployed youth, through rebates on municipal services like electricity, water and refuse removal, as well as social support such as food parcels and skills development opportunities etc.

The complainant, \*Mr. Eugene Jacobs, a pensioner who applied for the ESP on 1 July 2023 and met all eligibility requirements including the income threshold of R7 503.01 per month or less. Additionally, he submitted all supporting documents (SASSA card, ID document, proof of residence and recent bank statements or an affidavit in lieu of these). Yet, despite qualifying for a full rebate on municipal charges, he continued to receive normal monthly bills he should have been exempt from.



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After several unsuccessful attempts to resolve the issue through emails and phone calls to the Revenue Department, the complainant turned to our office in frustration, having received no response or remedial action.







**OMBUDSMAN**  
City of Johannesburg

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Our office launched an investigation into the matter, focusing on the City's failure to process the pensioner's rebate despite his compliance with all the requirements. We worked with relevant departments to confirm his eligibility, track the status of his application and facilitate the reversal of incorrectly billed charges.

While this case brought much-needed relief to Mr. Jacobs, it also triggered a broader review into how such applications are processed and how many vulnerable residents may be slipping through the cracks of a system intended to serve as a critical lifeline for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people.

Cases like this are not isolated; they reveal a harsh truth and that is, bureaucratic delays have real human costs. Failure to apply rebates pushes indigent citizens deeper into debt, forcing impossible trade-offs such as an elderly resident skipping essential medication to afford utility bills or a family delaying critical home repairs or school expenses just to stay afloat etc. What begins as an administrative oversight often spirals into a cycle of poverty, steadily eroding both dignity and trust in public institutions.

***"Mr. Jacobs' case reminds us that maladministration is not merely inefficient but is, fundamentally unjust. Social programmes are only as good as their execution and for the most vulnerable among us, delay is, in fact, denial."***

As an office of last instance, we are here to ensure that the systems designed to support our residents truly deliver and without prejudice, delay or exclusion. If you or someone you know is experiencing a similar issue, please do not hesitate to reach out to our office.

### **Collaboration as a Catalyst for Change: Joburg Ombudsman's Mandela Day Initiative in Poortjie**

On 31 July 2025, the Joburg Ombudsman, in partnership with the CRUM Region G, hosted a Mandela Day event at the Batho Pele Community Development Centre in Poortjie, south of Johannesburg. Aligned with the theme *"It Is in Your Hands,"* the initiative brought together officials, stakeholders and residents to uplift a centre that serves as a vital support hub for over 2 000 people from Poortjie and nearby communities, including Rietfontein, Jagfontein, Kalbasfontein and Thusanang.

The Batho Pele Centre is more than just a building, it's a vital lifeline providing skills development, social programmes and daily support to the region's most vulnerable. However, like many community-led initiatives, it has struggled with structural deterioration and limited resources.

*\* Not his real name*



In response to these challenges, our Mandela Day programme focused on practical, high-impact interventions, where volunteers, city officials and residents collaborated to paint the centre, clean the surrounding area, establish a community food garden and donate books and stationery to Mfundo Mtoti Primary School - supporting literacy and learning for children and youth. We also distributed essential goods, including non-perishable foods and cleaning supplies, to identified beneficiaries, offering much-needed relief to families in need.



© Mvikeleni Thango from our Intake and Registry Unit "ploughing back" to the community of Poortjie



© Our #jhbombudsman team restoring the dignity of a community in need, one brushstroke at a time

We sincerely thank everyone who came together in the true spirit of Mandela Day. This was more than a clean-up; it was a powerful act of service. Through every brushstroke, seedling and shared effort, we honoured Madiba's legacy and showed that compassion in action builds not just structures, but hope.

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