SA mulls solutions to prison overcrowding

PRETORIA: Correctional Services Minister Sibusiso Ndebele says the roll-out of electronic monitoring will address overcrowding in correctional centres and contribute to a safer South Africa.

Ndebele, Correctional Services Chief Operations Officer, Nontsikelelo Jolingana; Chief Deputy Commissioner for Community Corrections, Pumla Mathibela and KwaZulu-Natal Regional Commissioner Mnikelwa Nxele, are currently on a study tour in Los Angeles and New York to examine and observe various issues pertaining to electronic monitoring in order to consolidate a best-practice model for South Africa.

Addressing a meeting on electronic monitoring on Monday in Los Angeles, the minister said: "Overcrowding in correctional centres in South Africa must be addressed. As stated in my budget vote speech, as of 27 May 2013, South Africa's inmate population was at 152 514; 45 043 (29.5%) were remand detainees, and 107 471 were sentenced offenders.

"In addition, 65 931 offenders are outside correctional centres living in their respective communities; 48 716 are parolees, 15 491 are probationers (serving non-custodial sentences) and 1 724 are awaiting-trial."

Ndebele said on average, 15% - 20% of the 45 043 awaiting trial detainees are in custody because they cannot afford bail.

The minister said the Electronic Monitoring Pilot Project (EMPP) has proven to be economical, effective, efficient and relevant to the broader goals of the Department of Correctional Services and the Justice, Crime Prevention and Security cluster.

Electronic monitoring is now available to the courts, particularly for remand detainees, non-custodial sentencing and parolees.

It currently costs the taxpayer R9 876.35 per month for each inmate, whilst electronic monitoring costs R3 379.

Electronic monitoring enables offenders to be monitored within metres, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"Should an offender commit any violation, alerts are immediately generated and transmitted. Interference with the equipment, including tampering or failing to charge the receiver, is electronically relayed to the control room. Electronic monitoring offers a solution to overcrowding and protects society against criminals," said Ndebele.

Courts order reduction of prison population

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Division of Adult Parole Operations (DAPO) has been using Global Positioning System (GPS) technology since June 2005. GPS is used as a tool to assist parole agents and local law enforcement with the supervision of parolees. Since using GPS, DAPO has become one of America's largest users of the technology.

In California, between 2001 and 2011, the inmate population has been fairly steady, with the average daily population ranging from 8 000 in 2007 to 71 000 in 2011. This year, the population is expected to decline by about 38 000 inmates (23%).

The parole population is expected to decline by about 77 000 parolees (71%). The recent decline is due in part to several counties being subject to court-ordered inmate population limits.

This decline is also attributable to the 2011 realignment legislation, which limited prison commitments to felons, who have a current or prior conviction for a serious, violent or sex offence, and limited state parole to felons, whose current offence is serious or violent.

On 20 June, a panel of federal judges ordered California to ease overcrowding in state prisons by reducing the number of inmates by about 10,000 this year, and criticized in harsh terms what they described as foot-dragging in dealing with the matter.

The three-judge panel also repeated an earlier warning to potentially hold California Governor Jerry Brown in contempt if a reduction plan was not implemented.

California, the USA's most populous state, has been under court orders to reduce inmate numbers in its 33-prison system since 2009, when the same three-judge panel ordered it to relieve overcrowding that has caused inadequate medical and mental healthcare.