



Statement on the devastating fire at 80 Albert Street fire, Marshalltown

by the *Collective Voices for Health Access* Coalition, and others

7 September 2023 - The *Collective Voices for Health Access* coalition expresses its deep sadness on the 80 Albert Street fire tragedy that occurred in the early hours of 31 August 2023. The fire claimed at [least 77 lives and 88 were left with injuries](#). Many survivors find themselves without shelter and in many circumstances, without any of their possessions or documents.

Alongside our distress at this tragedy, we are disturbed by the immediate responses to the fire by City officials who have sought to assign blame rather than reflecting on the tragedy itself. Blame has been directed at NGOs who have worked over many years to ensure the dignity of people, both from South Africa and elsewhere, living in buildings like 80 Albert Street. The [victims themselves have also been blamed](#) – for being poor, for being non-nationals, and for seeking shelter in so-called “hijacked” buildings.

These attempts by opportunistic politicians and government officials serve to divert attention from the failures of their own departments to deal appropriately and fairly with dangerous unofficially occupied buildings in Johannesburg. The haste with which fingers have been pointed at organisations like the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI) and Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) is not only a deliberate deflection from government responsibilities but also such accusations stoke the fire of xenophobia and anti-poor rhetoric in the city. This endangers many more lives across South Africa and threatens the work of our colleagues across civil society. Claims by the City of Johannesburg's 'Transport MMC [Kenny Kunene](#), City of Joburg Council Speaker [Colleen Makhubele](#) City of Johannesburg MMC for Public Safety, [Mgcini Tshwaku](#) blaming the victims of the fire or NGOs and providing assurances that they have tried to deal with the issue of “hijacked” buildings falsely imply that an appropriate alternative plan was made to relocate those living there. SERI, for example, has clearly stated that they did not litigate against the City of Johannesburg in relation to 80 Albert Street yet have [“consistently tried to engage the City to improve conditions in its shelters, to no avail”](#).

[80 Albert Street was a historic building](#) and became [a temporary home to many](#) over the years. Formerly the Centre Pass Office of the Apartheid era in which the “Dompas” was issued to control the movement of Black Africans in and out of the city in 1994, the building was converted into a women’s hostel and was re-named the Usindiso Women’s Shelter for abused Women and Children. While it was still a shelter, a room full of apartheid archives was found in the basement of 80 Albert Street yet, despite requests for these archives to be protected and preserved this was not done, and it is assumed that they are all lost in the fire. Usindiso closed in 2018 after shelter staff were forced to leave the building.

Collective Voices for Health Access calls for care and compassion for all survivors of the fire and their families, for those who have lost loved ones and for those still living in dangerous buildings. We stand in solidarity with SERI, LHR and other NGOs accused of being responsible for this tragedy, and in other instances, threatened for assisting some of the most marginalised in our society in line with our Constitution.

We call on the City of Johannesburg to urgently retract any statements made by authorities blaming NGOs for the fire at 80 Albert Street, and to express their support for organisations like Gift of the Givers, SERI, CoRMSA, LHR and other entities and individuals in response to the fire, and their work as human rights defenders. We support the creation of an [independent inquiry](#) into the cause of the fire and those responsible for the deteriorating conditions in 80 Albert Street. The inquiry needs to investigate in particular why this building was so neglected and how those responsible can so easily turn on the victims and those who have tried to assist them.

Finally, we call on the City to urgently provide shelter and medical assistance to the survivors of the fire, to facilitate the replacement of destroyed personal documents such as IDs, and to implement a plan to provide safe and affordable accommodation for all who live in Johannesburg.

‘Collective Voices for Health Access’ (previously ‘Collective Voices against Health Xenophobia’) is a coalition of more than 60 civil society organisations, activists, healthcare workers and researchers who work on furthering social justice and challenging xenophobia within the health care sector.

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Enquiries: Marlise Richter: marlise@healthjusticeinitiative.org.za

Individual Endorsements:

1. Africa Revival Foundation
2. Africa Solidarity Network(ASONET)
3. African Legal Students Association and Justice Chapter
4. Amnesty International South Africa
5. Black Sash
6. Foundation for Human Rights
7. Gauteng Housing Crisis Committee (GHCC)
8. goGOGOgo
9. groundwork
10. Friends of the Earth South Africa
11. Healing Nation Forum
12. Health and Human Rights programme in the School of Public Health at UCT
13. Health Justice Initiative
14. HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society)
15. Inner City Federation
16. International Commission of Jurists
17. International Labour Research & Information Group
18. Johannesburg Migrant Health Forum
19. Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia
20. My Vote Counts
21. Observatory Civic Association
22. Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town
23. School of Public Health University of the Western Cape
24. SECTION27
25. Solidarity Action Committee Collective
26. Sonke Gender Justice
27. Women on Farms Project
28. Xenowatch

Individual Endorsements:

1. A.Prof. Carla Tsampiras
2. Adv. Bonolo Khumalo
3. Alana Pugh-Jones Baranov
4. Alex Sutherland
5. Asha George
6. Barbara Buntman
7. Bavesh Kana
8. Claire ceruti
9. Colette Solomon
10. Dale McKinley
11. Daniel Dunia
12. David Hallowes
13. Deborah Byrne FHR
14. Dehran Swart
15. Dostin Lakika
16. Dr Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon
17. Dr Wendy Burgers
18. Elsje Bonthuys
19. Farzaneh Behroozi
20. Glenda Gray
21. Guy Richards
22. Haidee Swanby
23. Helen Schneider
24. Hoodah Abrahams-Fayker
25. James McIntyre
26. Jane Simmonds
27. Jenny Grice
28. Jeremy Nel
29. John Gear
30. Jo Vearey
31. Kezia Lewins
32. Lauren Fok
33. Leslie London
34. Louis Reynolds
35. Lucille Blumberg
36. Marlise Richter
37. Mary (Maria) Burton
38. Matthew Chersich
39. Max Price
40. Melanie Alperstein
41. Munashe Mutasa
42. Namuma Mulindi
43. Nikki Schaay
44. Peter Speed
45. Prof Alex van den Heever
46. Prof Laurel Baldwin-Ragaven
47. Prof Uta Lehmann
48. Professor Francois Venter
49. Rebecca Walker
50. Renier Coetzee
51. Rico Euripidou
52. Sasha Stevenson
53. Shaheen Khan
54. Sharon S Ekambaram
55. Sibongile Tshabalala-Madhlala
56. Silindile Mlilo
57. Susan Goldstein
58. Thea de Gruchy