

Speech by Mireille Wenger
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Vote 6: Budget
7 April 2025

Writing the Next Chapter: A Budget for Progress and Possibility

Honourable Speaker

Honourable Premier and Cabinet Ministers

Honourable Chief Whip, Leader of the Opposition and Members of the Western Cape Provincial Parliament

Members of the Consular Corps

Special guests

Most importantly, residents of the Western Cape

It is my privilege to table the 2025/26 Budget for the Department of Health and Wellness—a R32 billion budget that marks the beginning of a new chapter. A chapter shaped by the lessons of the past, grounded in the reality of the present, and full of possibility for the future.

To say our healthcare system has been under pressure would be an understatement. Since 2020, our health heroes have faced extraordinary challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic tested every part of our system—and just as recovery began, austerity followed. Posts were frozen, goods and services budgets were tightened, and yet, our dedicated teams ensured that not a single facility ran out of essential supplies.

With fewer staff bearing the same burdens, waiting times and the demand—especially in emergency centres—increased. And yet, across our province, our nurses, doctors, and frontline workers continued to show up for our mothers and fathers, our children and grandparents, our friends and neighbours. They carried us through a difficult chapter with heart and tenacity.

This speech, this budget, is a tribute to them—our health heroes—who wrote the last chapter with courage.

Today, we turn the page.

This budget is more than a financial plan—it is a statement of intent. It signals the start of a more hopeful, stabilised, and resilient health system. We have unfrozen critical posts, enabling facilities to once again recruit the people needed to deliver care with quality and compassion. This is the first step in restoring strength to our system—and dignity to the patient experience.

Over the medium term, we are investing over a R100 billion to ensure equitable access to quality healthcare. We do this because we believe every resident of the Western Cape deserves the opportunity to write their own story—free from the burden of preventable illness and supported in moments of need. For the 2025/26 financial year we have allocated a total of R32,009 billion [R32 009 601 000] for the 2026/27 financial year R33,164 billion [R33 164 929 000] and for the 2027/28 outer year R34,883 billion [R34 883 855 000].

More than 75% of the province's estimated 7.7 million people rely on our public healthcare system, delivered through 561 service points across the province with over 25 million patient contacts in the last financial year. This is a vast and dynamic system—and every cent of this budget has been planned with purpose, to maximise our impact for the greatest number of people.

Our vision is to be a provincial public health system that is run well and creates well-being opportunities FOR YOU, our residents, to live a long, healthy, meaningful and dignified life. At its core is our commitment to walking the life journey with every resident of the Western Cape. We will focus on ensuring that our children start well, our communities live well, and our elderly age well. This holistic approach reflects our understanding that health and wellness are lifelong pursuits that require tailored interventions at every stage of life.

In this year's budget, we are prioritising our people and restoring critical staff. This requires a larger allocation toward employee compensation, with R60,2 billion allocated over the medium term. This however will place strain on the goods and services budget, which is already underfunded and vulnerable to rising medical inflation. Over R30 billion has been allocated to goods and services over the medium term. Balancing these demands is difficult, but essential to delivering care without compromise.

Speaker, there are also challenges beyond our immediate control—external shocks that continue to shape our fiscal environment. The abrupt termination of healthcare funding from the United States as a result of policy changes there has ended a G2G agreement of an estimated R30 million and terminated approximately R376 million to NPO partners from the broader HIV/ AIDs healthcare ecosystem per year. While the Department is exploring what can be absorbed, wound down, or continued within our constraints, there will be knock-on effects.

The support we received through PEPFAR and USAID have helped us make significant progress in the fight against HIV. According to a recent Human Sciences Research Council Report, the Western Cape has the lowest prevalence of HIV in the country. We have also made significant progress in the fight against TB, however, much more work needs to be done.

I am grateful for the years of partnership between ourselves and the US, and I think that we can demonstrate that the evidence-based utilisation of these funds impacted not only local health outcomes but contributed to global health security and research.

Fortunately, our long-term strategy to reduce reliance on donor funding for core services has helped shield our most vulnerable services from complete disruption.

Over the MTEF, in the District Health Services programme, we have allocated more than R6,3 billion to HIV and Aids and in the Provincial Hospital Services programme we have allocated more than R1.3 billion to TB hospitals.

Additional funds are also spent on TB and HIV from the general budget. But Speaker, we do not do this alone. Our efforts align with the broader vision of the Western Cape Government: to build an educated, healthy, and caring society. In the next chapter, we build on that foundation—boldly and deliberately.

In my 10 months with the Department, I've seen both the complexity of the system and the immense care woven through it. I've also listened. I have travelled the length and breadths of the province, and I've heard the concerns of residents and the hopes of families. And that is why this term, my focus will be on:

1. Expanding access to quality healthcare, which can be achieved through collaboration with the private sector;
2. Accelerating our capital build programme so that we can build new hospitals and clinics & improve existing facilities;
3. Enhancing our role in violence prevention as part of the Western Cape Safety Plan;
4. Reducing malnutrition in children to ensure every child can start well.

Speaker, in South Africa today, 27% of children under five are stunted—a figure that is as alarming as it is heartbreaking. In the Western Cape, we've made

encouraging progress, reducing our stunting rate by 5.4 percentage points over the last six years. Today, our provincial rate stands at 17.5%.

This is a positive step toward our goal of reducing stunting to 10.3% by 2030, but the truth is—17.5% is a most shocking statistic. We know how much more needs to be done. And we know we cannot afford to lose momentum. Because when a child is stunted, their potential is stunted. So, we cannot wait. Every day we delay addressing malnutrition, we rob our province—and our country—of its greatest resource: its people.

If left unchecked, the combined cost of stunting and obesity in the Western Cape could reach a staggering R947 billion in lost economic potential by 2040. These children are more likely to face developmental delays, struggle at school, drop out early, live in poverty, and suffer from chronic illness later in life.

That is why I am especially proud to announce today a bold new pilot project that we will launch in partnership with the DG Murray Trust and the Department of the Premier. This initiative will target underweight pregnant mothers and low-birthweight babies—because, Speaker, low-birthweight babies are three times more likely to become stunted. We are currently in discussion with potential retail partners to support the delivery mechanisms for this pilot.

I would like to welcome the deputy CEO of the DG Murray Trust here today, Ms Kentse Radebe. On behalf of this government – thank you for your continued partnership and support in this crucial policy area. The best way to prevent stunting is to address it before it even begins—starting with maternal health and nutrition.

So we are taking action.

Later this year, we will launch a pilot programme in Worcester, Khayelitsha, and Mitchell's Plain, aimed at ensuring that these women and their young ones have

a nutritious diet. These mothers will receive monthly support—from their first antenatal visit until their baby turns six months old – to offer them food security and diversify their diets to ensure their babies receive the nutrition they need.

But, Speaker, this support alone is not enough. They need care and connection.

That is why each mother in the pilot will also receive concentrated care from specially trained community healthcare workers. These workers will offer an Enhanced Care Package, including growth monitoring, maternal and child health services, mental health support, breastfeeding counselling, and more.

This is a holistic intervention—one that meets mothers where they are and walks alongside them through the most critical months of their baby's life.

The pilot will run until October 2026, and if successful, it will provide the proof of concept we need to secure public funding and expand the programme in future budget cycles.

Speaker, this is about changing the trajectory of a child's life. It's about giving every baby the chance to start well and it is part of building a healthier Western Cape.

And to ensure our residents can live well, we will continue to strengthen our violence prevention efforts. Currently, we have 12 dedicated safety coordinators—7 in the metro and 5 in rural communities—working every day to prevent violence before it happens. Their focus is on family strengthening, building youth resilience, and reducing substance harms which we know are vital interventions to stop violence before it takes root in our communities.

We are now exploring how to scale up this important work so that we can deepen our impact—playing our full part in delivering on the Western Cape Safety Plan

with some significant announcements to come in the second quarter of this year. Because safety is not only about law enforcement; it is about prevention, it is about health, healing, and hope.

Speaker, none of what we share today—none of the goals, achievements, or plans—would be possible without the people who give them life and are stepping up every day. Behind every budget line, there is a person. A health hero.

Let me tell you about just a few of them.

At Groote Schuur Hospital, Mr. Ebrahim Cassiem has served for over 30 years. He has led environmental hygiene services with quiet pride and unwavering commitment—ensuring cleaning, waste, and pest control are not only maintained but that it excels. Under his guidance, the hospital recently achieved a 100% audit score for cleaning, and 97% for waste management. His work, often behind the scenes, is a reminder that a safe, clean hospital is as vital as any surgical theatre.

To support the essential work of administrators, we have allocated R1 billion in 2025/26, and R3.1 billion over the MTEF.

In Matzikama, another kind of leader has stepped up—Dr. Earlin Ockhuis, a doctor who is so much more than his title. In the face of chronic staff shortages, he didn't step back—he stepped up. He covered call rosters, mentored junior doctors, and kept patient care going with relentless dedication. His story reminds us that leadership in health isn't always about grand gestures—it's about consistency, compassion, and showing up.

To support district health services where heroes like Dr. Ockhuis work every day, we are investing R13.2 billion this year, and R41.2 billion over the MTEF.

Now, imagine meeting Athenkosi “Athie” Sobada, an Emergency Care Practitioner whose reach extends far beyond emergencies. In communities like Philippi, Langa, and Nyanga, Athie builds trust first—engaging with people as equals, listening before acting. For him, every siren call is not just a response, but an opportunity to step up and build a resilient, inclusive healthcare system from the ground up.

For our EMS services—where health heroes like Athie are the first to arrive and often the last to leave—we’ve allocated R1.4 billion in 2025/26, and R4.5 billion over the MTEF.

And then there’s Sister Janine Watson, with three decades of service at Groote Schuur Hospital. When surgical theatres faced overwhelming pressure and frozen posts left teams short-staffed, Sr. Watson held the line. She trained, recruited, and stepped in to scrub in herself when needed. Her calm under pressure, her leadership through adversity, and her unwavering standards have kept surgeries going and saved lives.

To support tertiary institutions like Groote Schuur, Red Cross and Tygerberg Hospitals, we’ve set aside R8.6 billion in 2025/26, and R27.23 billion over the MTEF.

At the same time, our regional hospitals, psychiatric and TB hospitals, and transitional care facilities—so vital to the continuity of care—will receive R5.1 billion this year, and R16 billion over the MTEF. We’re strengthening transitional care services, and improving the link between regional hospitals, TB facilities and primary care—so that no one falls through the cracks.

To ensure our system is sustainable into the future, we’re also investing in the next generation of health professionals.

R1.39 billion over the MTEF will go toward Health Sciences and Training—including R211 million in bursaries, R422 million to train nurses, and R129 million for

our College of Emergency Care. Because the future of health depends on what we do today to prepare tomorrow's workforce.

And then there are the people who make the healthcare system run—even when things break, lights go out, or buildings flood. Cornel Badenhorst is one of those people. A technical expert with an unshakable sense of purpose, he has quietly stepped up to solve problems others couldn't—redesigning sewer systems, restoring failing infrastructure, and keeping facilities operating in the middle of crises. He is a true ambassador for ethical, efficient use of public money, and a reminder that not all heroes wear scrubs.

To back our support services and operations, we've allocated R2.15 billion over the MTEF.

And as our province grows, so must our facilities. In the year ahead, we will see 18 infrastructure projects in planning, 68 moving into design or tender, and 43 handed over to contractors.

29 construction projects will be underway, including Community Day Centres and clinics in Ravensmead, Hornlee, Ceres and Weltevreden; acute psychiatric units at Eerste River, Khayelitsha, and New Somerset Hospitals; and major refurbishments at Alexandra Hospital, Tygerberg, and Groote Schuur, including surgical theatres, emergency centres, and critical building systems.

In total, Health Facilities Management will receive R1.39 billion in 2025/26, and R4.4 billion over the MTEF—a 7.23% increase to support our ambitious infrastructure pipeline.

But fixed infrastructure is only one part of our mission to expand healthcare and improve access to services.

Our clinics across the rural areas of the Western Cape extend their services to patients on farms and hard to reach areas through mobile units. These units offer preventative and chronic services to patients who live far from the nearest health facility.

I am delighted to say that we are in the process of replacing all the existing mobiles with units that were custom designed with input from our rural nurses – with fridges for medicine storage, generators and air conditioning - improving the experience of both the staff and their patients.

Speaker, partnership is close to my heart and it is incredibly important to recognise our various partners – some are in the gallery today – for your continued support towards creating a healthier Western Cape.

To the various international partners and nations that support our work, thank you. Specifically, to the Global Fund for your generous support this year.

Also thank you to the various trusts that support our work, including the Tygerberg Children's Trust, the Children's Hospital Trust and the Groote Schuur Hospital Trust.

I want to specifically highlight an incredible pilot project undertaken by the Children's Hospital Trust. This project aims to strengthen care for children who have suffered burn wounds by upgrading infrastructure at rural facilities to provide immediate, high-quality care without children having to heal far away from their homes and their families. Work on this project is underway at three hospitals in the Cape Winelands and I hope that it will eventually be expanded across the province. To Chantal Cooper from the Trust, here today, thank you.

Our important partnerships with our universities and higher education institutions goes beyond education, it's also about harnessing the expertise of our academic institutions to shape and inform policies and craft responsive solutions to the healthcare challenges we face. By combining research, innovation, and training,

we're building an ecosystem that not only strengthens our healthcare system but also uplifts our communities and protects the most vulnerable.

The Department also works with many NGOs and PBOs to expand access to healthcare. Last year during the InReach project in Beaufort West, the Department of Health worked with universities and NGOs to provide 94 cataract surgeries and assist 249 people with dental procedures.

There are many other examples of organisations who work with us, innovate with us, and help us expand access to good quality healthcare. Thank you for your support.

Speaker, this budget is not just about allocations. It's about aspiration. It's about resilience. And it's about rewriting the story of public healthcare in the Western Cape—with people at its centre.

We honour the chapters that came before us—the hardship, the healing, the hope. And now, with renewed energy, bold investment, and unwavering focus, we are stepping up.

Last week I was delighted to announce the renewal of Dr Keith Cloete's contract as the head of department for another five years. His continued leadership ensures stability, expertise, and a steadfast commitment to advancing high quality, person-centred healthcare in the province. Thank you for your leadership, Dr Cloete, and indeed the entire TEXCO team for their commitment, leadership and hard work. This next chapter that we will be writing together will be one of possibility and progress—where a mother doesn't have to choose between food and care, where a baby is born into health and hope, where a nurse is no longer alone on the night shift, and where infrastructure doesn't buckle under pressure, but rises to meet it.

Let us write this chapter together—health workers, officials, partners, and residents.

Let us write it with courage.

Let us write it with compassion.

Let us write it with clarity of purpose—so that those who come after us will read it and say: "*Here, they cared.*"

I herewith table the 2025/26 Budget for the Department of Health and Wellness.

Thank you.