Alternative sentencing on cards

CAPE TOWN: Alternative sentencing of convicts to ease congestion in the country's drastically overcrowded jails is being underutilised, but a new programme to educate justice officials on non-custodial punishment will be in place across all provinces by the end of next year.

Pilot programmes will begin "virtually immediately" in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State and Mpumalanga to help study and promote alternative sentencing measures.

Similar programmes would be instituted in the other five provinces by the end of 2007, Celia Dawson, Nicro's Deputy Executive Director, said after the organisation's colloquium to investigate alternatives to imprisonment for criminals.

Nicro says South African prisons operate at 140% of capacity; there are almost 160 000 prisoners in the country's 240 prisons – nearly 45 000 more than they are built to accommodate. Though South Africa has spent R10.6 billion on corrections in the past nine years, the rate of imprisonment and the prison population have continued to grow.

Options

Nicro plans to institute programmes that promote alternative sentencing options, such as probation, community service, fines and suspended sentences, to help reduce the overcrowding.

Prisons are often overloaded with inmates who would be better served by rehabilitation and diversion programmes, says Nicro. Though many alternative sentencing options exist, Nicro says officials in the justice system are often unaware of them.

Shamila Batohi, Director of Public Prosecutions in KwaZulu-Natal, said that although imprisonment was necessary for many criminals, alternative programmes could sometimes be more effective in preventing future criminal activity.

There is a large body of offenders who, if treated differently … could change behaviours," she said.

The programmes would develop processes and procedures to educate and train government officials at the local level about non-custodial punishment, Dawson said.