

NHI public submissions to get attention early in 2020 – Business Day 2 December 2019

Parliament's portfolio committee on health will only consider how to manage the vast volume of written submissions it has received in response to the national health insurance (NHI) bill in February, its chair, Sibongiseni Dhlomo, said on Monday.

At issue is whether MPs scrutinise each of the hundreds of thousands of submissions themselves or outsource some of the work to a third party.'

Parliament's rules are silent on the issue, according to University of Cape Town constitutional law expert Pierre de Vos, and it has recently faced controversy over outsourcing the submissions received in response to its constitutional review of land expropriation without compensation.

Dhlomo said he did not know precisely how many written submissions on the NHI bill had been received by the November 29 deadline last week, but parliament indicated on October 23 that it had already received more than 100,000 written submissions. The DA said last week it had collected another 87,000 submissions.

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The bill is the first piece of enabling legislation for the government's plans for implementing universal health coverage, which aims to ensure that all eligible patients have access to health services that are free at the point of care. The bill is being processed by the National Assembly and was released by parliament for public comment on August 8.

In a parallel process, parliament's portfolio committee on health is holding public hearings in the provinces and has already toured Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal, and on Sunday wrapped up in the Eastern Cape.

Dhlomo said the committee planned to complete its public hearings in the remaining four provinces early in 2020, finishing up in the Western Cape.

It would consider the written submissions in parliament's first session in 2020, which will begin after President Cyril Ramaphosa delivers his state-of-the-nation address, scheduled for February 13.

"We will be seeking guidance from parliament about the process to follow," he said.

DA health spokesperson Siviwe Gwarube said it is important that the committee agrees upon terms of reference for handling the written inputs, as well as the process for managing oral submissions. The DA is opposed to outsourcing the job entirely, and wants the committee to be involved in scrutinising the written input, she said.

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