PARLIAMENT PUTS NHI BILL ON HOLD AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC - EWN 19 APRIL 2020

CAPE TOWN - The COVID-19 pandemic has put the brakes on one of South Africa's flagship pieces of proposed legislation, the National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill.

Parliament took a decision last month to suspend the programme of its two houses in the interests of social distancing.

The extension of the nationwide lockdown means even longer delays to the NHI Bill and other pieces of legislation.

But the national legislature said it was working on a continuity plan.

South Africa's health system has always been in the spotlight, but the focus has sharpened and will continue to do so as the country fights the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ironically, the virus crisis-hit South Africa just as lawmakers were preparing to finalise the NHI Bill, which seeks to provide quality, universal healthcare.

The bill is still being piloted and is still officially before Parliament.

But Democratic Alliance member of the health committee Siviwe Gwarube believes they might have to go back to the drawing board on the NHI Bill in light of COVID-19.

"I think one of the things that we've got to be able to do as a committee, specifically the health committee, is to look at how healthcare will be delivered in a post-COVID-19 pandemic environment."

Parliamentary speaker Thandi Modise last week called MPs back to work albeit virtually.

She's promised key legislation like the NHI will be looked at as part of a business continuity plan.

"Phased in return to work. We can't all rush back to work must take certain precautions. Parliament last two weeks working on a plan to phase in the resumption of duty".

As much as Modise and her deputy are set on getting Parliament's work back on track, they acknowledge that much of the work they'll plow through in the coming weeks will be urgent and in some way related to the pandemic.