**Keynote address by Local Government and Housing MEC Ntombi Mekgwe at the SAESI International conference in NASREC, 15 May 2013**

Programme director

Leadership of the Southern African Emergency Services Institute (SAESI)

The new President and the Outgoing President of SAESI

Executive Mayors of the cities of Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni respectively

Delegates to the Conference

Our international guests

Head of Departments presents

All SAESI officials

Employees in the field of emergency response

Members of the media

Ladies and gentlemen

Programme director, at the very beginning of my speech allow me to express the passion I have for this profession of emergency services. This is one profession that touches everyone who has been in a difficult emergency situation such as an accident, fire, floods or disaster. Under such extreme circumstances, everyone under distress looks up to one profession for help and rescue, and that is emergency services. 911, 112, 10177, 10111 are all too familiar emergency phone numbers that people use every day to request assistance from emergency services.

Emergency personnel are often placed between life and death, working tirelessly and mostly in dangerous situations which also pose a threat to them. In most incidences, the emergency personnel stabilises the injured patients and prepare them for hospital. By the time they get to hospital, half the job of saving the life of the patient has been done by paramedics.

As a mother and a grandmother, I know that when labour pains strike during pregnancy, each woman will request an ambulance immediately to take her to the nearest clinic or hospital so that the baby can be born safely. We know of countless occasions where babies were born in the ambulances. We cannot forget the story of the Mozambican women who gave birth in a tree during heavy floods and was rescued and assisted by members of the emergency services of the South African National Defence Force.

Programme director I really acknowledge and give credit to the men and women working in the emergency services field, and let me also emphasise that during their period of employment they are faced with very traumatic and extreme situations that are not easy to forget and as such those scars remain with them for the better part of their lives. These are our heroes and heroines. This is a selfless profession, underpinned by the love of mankind and desire to save lives.

As a child growing in the former Far East Rand I was fascinated by the work of emergency services, and at times I would run after the fire machine for long distances. I wanted to become a firewoman, but my destiny decided otherwise. However that was not the end of my passion, because later on as the Executive Mayor of Ekurhuleni I was bestowed with honorary position of chief fire-fighter, a position I still hold dearly. So ladies and gentlemen, I am one of you.

It is a blessing in disguise ladies and gentlemen that this conference takes place during the time when South Africa and most of the Southern hemisphere countries are experiencing the winter season. It is during this period when South Africa gets to lose lives through the brutality of fire and the emergency services officers and personnel are the direct witnesses of such brutality.

In South Africa, the apartheid spatial planning has left a sad legacy of hundreds of thousands of informal settlements across the country. Because of their informal nature, shacks in these settlements are built very close to one another, and this poses threat especially during fire breakouts. Our government is working hard to formalise and eradicate informal settlements, but in the meantime we depend on emergency services to assist during times of disaster.

One of the other challenges with informal settlements is access to the area during emergencies. These shacks are built such that they are not accessible through vehicles. This is one challenge that all of us as a nation must work around to resolve. Government, the community and emergency services must come together and find ways of enhancing accessibility, thereby creating opportunities to save more lives. This is in line with the theme of this year’s conference - *WORKING TOGETHER TO ENSURE OUR FUTURE.*

The report from the Department of Transport during the last Easter holidays have shown an increase in the number of accident occurred and fatalities on our national roads as compared to the previous Easter holidays, in essence colleagues, the fatalities or number of lives we lose during this period is forever increasing and still on the forefront of all these accidents is our Emergency services personnel.

As you deliberate the issues here for the next three days, please make sure that you learn from each other and share best practices so that you can come up with a body of knowledge that will add immensely in our work as emergency practitioners. A number of speakers here have researched and will present papers in this international conference. Let us engage with the issues they raise and help shape the future direction of SAESI.

I want to thank the Southern African Emergency Services Institute for organising this prestigious event which creates and ideal opportunity for the interaction, knowledge and skills sharing between delegates, manufacturing companies and suppliers of fire, rescue, emergency medical and disaster management vehicles and equipment.

It is a fact and a very unavoidable reality that in the 21 century we have to align our role with that of the global community in the fight against the brutality of road accidents and that of fires hence the conference of this nature. We must also take into cognisance the fact that whatever method we use in all our rescue efforts does not compromise the environment. The studies in the United State of America have revealed that the fire fighters are the most people affected in relation to cancer related diseases, we are aware of your challenges and predicaments.

Let us also give credit to all international organisations that have availed themselves for this conference and hope that their presentations in our country will help us learn a lot from what is happening in the globe in relation to emergency services.

To all the teams that will be participating in the various challenges and competitions, thank you for participating and thank you for providing the spectators with a live view of how you perform your tasks of rescuing people during fires and other emergency situations. May the best teams win!

To the outgoing president of SAESI Moshema Mosia, I want to express my appreciation and congratulations for the work you have done during your term of office. For the work that lies ahead for the incoming President Ofentse Masibi, please ensure that through your Institute we ensure a better service to all our communities as in the slogan: Communities first forever, Waya Waya.

I wish you all a pleasant and productive stay in the economic hub of Africa and I hope that going back to you provinces and countries you will spread the word about the hospitality of Gauteng and South Africa, so that they too can visit and enjoy our vibrant home.

I thank you all.