R W Matthews

P O Box 951

Fourways

2055

26 July 2022

To whom it may concern

**Reference Phola Mahlaba**

Dear Sir / Madam

We were first introduced to Phola in June 2019 when she contacted us regarding the possible meeting with our daughter’s murderer. This is referred to as a Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD). We did not have an understanding of the process and declined the opportunity. It was in April 2021 when Phola again made contact to follow up on a pending parole hearing for the offender. We were completely stunned by the background of this call. As far as we were concerned, Correctional Services had all our contact details and registration of our interest in participating in any parole hearing. Phola had been asked by Correctional Services to contact us to advise us of the pending hearing. They told her they did not have our contact details and asked if she would make contact. It was Phola who, back in June 2019, took the trouble to find our contact details. Nobody else even tried!

This is a testament to the professionalism of Phola. She made the effort and had the energy to find our details which were on Correctional Service’s database.

We asked again about the VOD process and the role and expectations that could come from such a meeting. Phola invited our attorney and us to a meeting where she explained the process. She took time to go over areas we did not understand and was completely objective about the process. She demonstrated a high level of professionalism and empathy. She was able to deal with a matter that had the potential to place us in a downward spiral just as we were getting to grips with our loss. She could relate some of her own tragic circumstances, which further helped us deal with the discussions and our emotions.

Our meeting was not a once-off session, and there were numerous follow-up sessions where we discovered that we had to make contact with other players in the VOD process. It was Phola who made these introductions. Throughout everything, she helped keep us informed, cared for, and continued to do so with utmost empathy. The treatment we received from Phola was unbelievable. The others tasked with delivering on a “Victim centric justice process” were missing - it was Phola who held our hands and guided us through the procedures.

From our experience, we believe that Correctional Services, through their haste and lack of empathy, is undermining the VOD process. What could potentially be a meaningful activity (and part of restorative justice) is being looked at by Victims with a very sceptical view that fails to bring restoration to the lives of the Victims and thus support the process. Phola is making great strides in trying to change this.

Over the past year, we have referred several other Victims to Phola for her guidance and assistance. In all these cases, she has assisted them through the challenging process set out by the Correctional Services, which they continue to communicate poorly but expedite without thought and consideration. Without Phola’s guidance, there would have been secondary victimisation for these victims due to the unprofessional approach by that department.

In summary, we have found Phola to be a dedicated, kindhearted and sensitive person, making a difference for many victims let down by the system. She has gone the extra mile and is a significant asset to the justice process in South Africa. She deserves so much more support from the system and authorities who do not realise the person they have – one who continues to use her resources to make a difference for victims. She has travelled down the road as a victim herself and painfully understands the pitfalls within the system.

We are available to be contacted to confirm this reference and answer any other questions that one may have. We wish Phola the very best in her endeavours; she truly deserves the support anyone may be willing to provide. There are not enough Phola’s in a country like ours that is riddled with crime and leaves victims, so many of which have no resources, trying to get their lives back together. Phola is truly amazing.

Yours faithfully

Rob Matthews

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