



Senator the Honourable Donna Cox
Minister of Social Development and Family Services

APPROPRIATION BILL 2022
(Income Year 2023)

Budget Contribution
Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global
Challenges

House of Representatives
October 01, 2022

Madam Speaker, it is an honour to contribute to the debate on the Government's achievements and strategic direction for our country in the coming year. Madam Speaker, I join with thousands across this Nation to congratulate the Minister of Finance for presenting yet another successful budget 2023: Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges.

I applaud the one off transport grant of \$1,000 for all the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' clients who currently receives public assistance, senior citizen pension, the disability and the food support grants. A total of **One Hundred and Seventy-five Thousand** (175,000) persons will benefit from this measure, which will cost the Government **One Hundred and Seventy-five Million Dollars** (\$175 million).

With respect to this \$1,000 dollar grant, particularly for the elderly, the Ministry of Social Development and

Family Services already covers free public transport for the elderly who are sixty years and over.

For the month of September 2022, we have paid over **Five Hundred Thousand Dollars** (\$500,000) to the Public Transport Service Corporation for this service. Overall, for the fiscal year 2021-2022, we have spent **5.5 million**.

Therefore, this measure announced by the Minister of Finance is actually an added bonus for our seniors who use public transport.

I also applaud the measure for all persons earning \$7,500 a month or less who will now be exempt from income tax. This measure goes into effect on January 01 next year, and will benefit an estimated 300,000 workers. Any increase that benefits the poor and vulnerable citizen of this country is always appreciated.

Madam Speaker I am proud to say that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services continue to help, empower and transform the lives of thousands of our citizens, every year.

Madam Speaker, 2021 was the second full year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During this period the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services once again focused its services and programmes on providing continued support to protect lives and livelihoods.

The Ministry ensured that:

- Food support was provided to assist the vulnerable;
- Psychosocial and food support were provided to widows;
- Funding was provided to vulnerable persons who could not afford to pay their rent;

- Persons who became unemployed or lost their livelihood due to the COVID-19 restrictions, received income support grants;
- The Ministry networked with the NGOs, FBOs, CBOs, Members of Parliament, Regional Corporations and other organizations to help identify vulnerable persons in their district and to distribute food hampers to the individuals who had been identified.

And Madam Speaker, the point has to be made that this Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, led from the front by the Honourable Prime Minister, was a comprehensive, well-thought out, cohesive, whole-of-government approach, from a caring and compassionate Government.

During the last fiscal year, this Government introduced a series of stimulus packages, which enabled us to protect the most vulnerable and to keep the economy running.

WHAT DO WE DO AT THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES?

The delivery of social services, forms part of the social safety net to provide support and protection to vulnerable persons.

And this is a necessary and critical part of maintaining a healthy societal fabric and stability. Particular emphasis is placed on developing, coordinating, monitoring, executing and evaluating social sector policies, programmes and services that protect the vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. And these include women, children, widows, persons with disabilities, the elderly, the poor/indigent, the socially displaced, ex-prisoners, deportees and persons living with HIV/AIDS to ensure that they receive the help that is necessary. *‘Helping, Empowering and Transforming Lives’* is therefore at the heart of what we do.

SOCIAL PROTECTION BLANKET

Our Core Grants (Public Assistance, Senior Citizens Pension, Disability Assistance Grants for Adults and minors, Public Assistance Grants and Food Support) remain a stable source of income for those who need it and the Government continues to make sure that money is always set aside for these grants to be paid in full and on time month after month, year after year.

SUPPORT TO POOR AND VULNERABLE GROUPS (Social Safety Net Initiatives)

Public Assistance Grant

The Public Assistance Grant is provided to meet the needs of persons where the household income is deemed inadequate.

As of September 23, 2022 **Sixteen Thousand, Nine Hundred and Ninety-three** (16,993) individuals are in receipt of Public Assistance Grants. The total expenditure on this grant was **Three Hundred and**

Seventy-three Million, Six Hundred and Five Thousand Dollars (\$373,605,000).

Over the past seven years and nine months the Government invested over Three Billion, Two Hundred and Forty Million, Nine Hundred and Eighty-three Thousand, One Hundred and Fifty-five Dollars (\$3.2B).

Senior Citizens' Pension

With regards to the Senior Citizens Pension (SCP) provides financial assistance to persons aged 65 years and over who meet the qualifying criteria for the grant. As of September 23, 2022 there were **One Hundred and Eight Thousand, Six Hundred and Thirteen (108,613)** Senior Citizens in receipt of this grant with a total expenditure of **Four Billion, Three Hundred and Sixteen Million, Six Hundred and Seventy-five Thousand Dollars (\$4,316,675,000).** Over the last seven years and nine months the Government

**invested over Thirty Billion Dollars (\$30,071,947,721)
in the Senior Citizens' Pension.**

Disability Assistance Grant

The Disability Assistance Grant (DAG) is paid to adult citizens and permanent residents of Trinidad and Tobago who are medically certified as being permanently disabled and cannot be employed. As of September 23, 2022 there were Twenty-two Thousand and Fifty-five (**22,055**) adults with disabilities accessing this grant. The total expenditure amounted to **Six Hundred and Thirty-six Million Dollars**(\$636,000,000).

Disability Assistance Grant Minors (DAGM) (under 18 years)

The Disability Assistance Grant for Minors (DAGM) is paid to children under 18 years of age whose disability is permanent and has been assessed as either severe or complete. As of September 23, 2022 a total of Two Thousand, Nine Hundred and Fifty-six (**2,956**) children received the Disability Assistance Grant for Minors (DAGM). The total expenditure on this grant to date for fiscal 2022 is **Four Million, Six Hundred and Seventy Thousand, Seven Hundred and Fifty Dollars (\$4,670,750).**

Madam Speaker, the overall total spent on the Disability Assistance Grants for adults and minors in the last seven years and nine months by the Government is over Four Billion, Four Hundred Million Dollars (\$4,410,956,182).

Food Support Programme

I move to the food support programme. Government's investment in the Food Support Programme is a demonstration of our commitment to ensuring that families in this country have food security. The Ministry is aware that the pandemic created challenges for more persons to put food on their table. While this may be a temporary situation for some, for others it could be much more prolonged. The Ministry's efforts over the last year was to ensure that the persons who benefited from the Food Support Programme are the poor, vulnerable and indigent.

Records indicate that as of September 23, 2022 there were Twenty Thousand and Sixty-nine **(20,069)** households in receipt of Food Support Grants.

The total expenditure on Food Support Grants, as of September 23, 2022 was **One Hundred and Eighty-one Million, Five Hundred and Thirty-nine Thousand,**

Five Hundred and Twenty-one Dollars (\$181,539,521).

Madam Speaker, the overall total spent on Food Support for the vulnerable in the last seven years and nine months is One Billion Six Hundred and Twenty-eight Million, Four Hundred and Eighty-three Thousand, Nine Hundred and Twenty-five Dollars (\$1,628,483,925).

Urgent Temporary Assistance

This programme offers a range of grants to persons who are in dire need of temporary assistance. This assistance may include special dietary support, funeral expenses, household items, medical equipment, flood relief and rental assistance.

Up to September 23, 2022 the Ministry provided urgent temporary support to Three Thousand and Eighty-seven

(3,087) persons at a cost of **Thirty-five Million, Nine Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$35,900,000)**.

Madam Speaker, I wish to highlight that the flood relief grant alone cost **\$4.8 million dollars**.

The total expenditure for Urgent Temporary Assistance over the past seven years and nine months amounted to over Three Hundred and Twenty Million, Four Hundred and Thirty-eight Thousand, Nine Hundred and Thirty-two Dollars (\$320,438,932).

Special Achievers Grant

We move to The Special Achievers grant and this provides support to persons who made a significant contribution to the development of this country and are experiencing severe hardship. As of September 23, 2022 Thirty-five (35) national heroes received financial assistance totalling **One Million, Three Hundred and**

Sixty-nine Thousand, One Hundred and Forty-eight Dollars (\$1,369,148). Over the past seven years and nine months the Government invested Thirteen Million, Six Hundred and Eight Thousand, Eight Hundred and Sixty-two Dollars (\$13,608,862).

Community Care Programme

The Community Care Programme was established to treat with the issues of vulnerable persons who had no other living arrangements available to them. In some cases, these persons who are 18 years and over were abandoned by their relatives in hospitals. When this happens, the Government takes up the responsibility.

As of September 23, 2022 there were **82** clients in this programme and a total of **Four Million, Eight Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$4,800,000)** was spent on their care and support. **During the period 2018 to 2022, over Twenty Million Dollars (\$20,574,342) was invested in our citizens in the community care programme.**

Homes for Older Persons

The Ministry continues to support **six** Homes for Older Persons located in Toco, Couva, La Brea, San Fernando, Siparia, and Chaguanas. These Homes provide safe, comfortable accommodation and care for approximately **154** socially-isolated and/or indigent older persons aged 60 years and over who have no one to care for them.

So Madam Speaker, the annual subvention for these six homes is **One Million, Two Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$1,200,000)**. Over the last seven years and nine months over **Seven Million Dollars (\$7,132,548)** have been spent on these Homes for Older Persons where seniors can be safe and comfortably cared for.

National Social Development Programme (NSDP)

The National Social Development Programme (NSDP) seeks to improve the living conditions of citizens of

Trinidad and Tobago, through the provision of basic infrastructure for essential utility services and comfortable living. Over the years, many deserving individuals and families have accessed grants for house wiring (materials and labour); minor house repairs (materials and/or labour); and materials for sanitary plumbing. Madam Speaker, these amenities enhance the standard of living of thousands of our citizens and protect them from the elements and disease. As of September 23, 2022:

- 58 Minor House Repair Assistance grants were given at a cost of **One Million and Fifty Thousand, Three Hundred and Fifty-nine Dollars (\$1,050,359);**
- 15 Sanitary Plumbing Assistance grants were awarded at a cost of **One Hundred and Forty-nine Thousand, Seven Hundred and Twenty-six Dollars and Forty-four Cents (\$149,726.44);**

- 27 House Wiring Assistance grants were awarded at a cost of **Three Hundred and Thirty-six Thousand, Eight Hundred and Four Dollars and Seventy-three Cents (\$336,804.73)**.

Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development (SEED)

- The Ministry's Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development which we call - (SEED) programme, provides a mechanism through which citizens who are considered vulnerable, but who have an interest in starting or improving their businesses, can gain access to investment funding. They can gain funding to start micro/small enterprises, which foster positive values such as independence and self-sufficiency.

As of September 23 2022, 334 applicants received grant funding in the sum of **One Million, Four**

Hundred and Eleven Thousand, One Hundred and Fifty-three Dollars (\$1,411,153).

So Madam Speaker, the investment under the National Social Development Programme over the last seven years and nine months amounted to approximately Fifty-Nine Million, Three Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$59,289,700).

TOTAL SPEND ON GRANTS

Madam Speaker, all in all we have spent Five Billion, Five Hundred and Thirty-nine Million, Ninety-six Thousand, Nine Hundred and Eighteen Dollars (\$5,539,096,918.00) for the fiscal year 2021/2022 on grants.

And Madam Speaker, of course, this does not include the Ministry's annual recurrent expenditure on salaries and other operational costs. Yet there are

many who saying and talking as though the Government is not taking care of its vulnerable.

Over the past seven years, approximately Forty Billion was spent on grants to assist the less fortunate. I repeat Over the past seven years, approximately Forty Billion was spent on grants to assist the less fortunate.

Madam Speaker, this is where the people's money is being spent. This is where the taxpayers' dollars went. Madam Speaker, this Forty Billion Dollars was spent on the poor and vulnerable, on the senior citizens, on persons with disabilities, in support of the work of NGOs, it was spent from moving persons from dependence to independence.

Who in this Honourable House would dare say to us that we are not taking care of our vulnerable? Are we not our brother's keeper? Isn't this the first job of a government,

to take care of its people? Madam speaker we are doing just that.

Please allow me Madam Speaker to share some details on three persons whom our Ministry and by extension the people of Trinidad and Tobago are supporting, through very difficult circumstances.

Let us look first at Mr. Singh (not real name). He is a 46-year-old resident of the Borough of Chaguanas. These are real stories. He currently receives \$2,000.00 per month for a Disability Assistance Grant as well as \$1,900.00 in Public Assistance to support his children, a total monthly sum of **\$3,900.00** from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. This totals **Forty-six Thousand, Eight Hundred Dollars (\$46,800) annually.**

Madam Speaker, you know, there is a common misconception that men cannot receive grants on behalf of their children from the Ministry. Today, I am setting the record straight that the Ministry will help ANY person who is vulnerable.

Then, there is Mrs. Ramlal (not real name). Mrs. Ramlal is a 66-year-old grandmother who currently takes care of her grandchildren.

She resides in Siparia and receives the full sum of her Senior Citizens' Pension of \$3,500.00 and Food Support in the sum of \$800.00. Mrs. Ramlal receives a sum total of \$4,300.00 monthly from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. A total annual sum of **Fifty-one Thousand, Six Hundred Dollars (\$51,600).**

And finally, Ms Mabel Lane (not real name) resides in San Juan. She is 70 years and is a recipient of the Senior Citizens' Pension of \$3,500. Her husband is a recipient

of the Disability Grant of \$2,000. In total, the family receives \$5,500.00 on a monthly basis. This adds up to **Sixty-six Thousand Dollars (\$66,000) annually.**

So for these three clients **alone**, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services provides **One Hundred and Twenty-one Thousand, Dollars** (\$121,000) annually in Grants. And these clients are the norm and not the exception. Because the majority of the approximately One Hundred and Seventy-five Thousand (175,000) persons who receives our core grants every month are recipients of two or more grants.

INVESTIGATION AND COMPLIANCE UNIT

Madam Speaker, a key mandate of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is to alleviate poverty and so ultimately, transform the lives of our less fortunate citizens. We have been working steadfastly on all fronts to roll back poverty. It is however, difficult to do this if unclean hands keep dipping into the cookie jar!

I take no pleasure in saying Madam Speaker, that we have found too many cases of systemic fraud in the administration of our social welfare programmes. Many of these cases are not of recent vintage, and both members of the public and some public officers may be complicit. Be assured that all persons with questions to answer on matters pertaining to inappropriate handling of welfare grants, will be interviewed by members of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Yesterday I heard the Leader of the Opposition stated that every cent lost to corruption is a dollar that could feed a child and I want to extend that every cent lost to corruption is a dollar that could be spent on all vulnerable persons. In order to ensure that help gets to where it is most needed, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has been pursuing a vigorous fraud and corruption prevention strategy. We are determined to stop the haemorrhaging of the State funds associated with persons who exploit the system.

It is precisely through the successful execution of this strategy that some Ministry of Social Development and Family Services employees who were identified as being part of the corrupt practices, were terminated from the public service, having been found guilty of misconduct in the public service. Several others are being investigated by the Trinidad and Tobago Police or are before the Disciplinary Tribunal and are being investigated by the police.

The Investigations and Compliance Unit and the TTPS are closely collaborating on these matters and whistle-blowers have been actively supporting the activities of the Investigations and Compliance Unit of the Ministry.

This newly formed Unit is pursuing active risk-based fraud prevention strategy that has seen the withdrawal of grants from persons who are ineligible or deceased. And these include:

- Grants paid to persons residing permanently outside the borders of Trinidad and Tobago and who enjoy other forms of social protection benefits from other countries which place them way above the income eligibility threshold for Senior Citizens' Pension in Trinidad and Tobago;
- General Assistance and Disaster Grants that are the subject of fraudulent applications. When I speak particularly I'm referring to persons who apply for flood;
- The Ministry continues to draw on information from databases of other Government agencies to support its processes and limit the chances of fraud applications;
- There were 9,000 Senior Citizens' grants that were discontinued in fiscal 2022 based on the information received from the Register Generals' Department.

Indeed, Madam Speaker, only recently we found cases where several adults were living in one household and were in receipt of Public Assistance Grants, despite owning a business or and despite the fact that they had meaningful employment. Their earned income is way above the threshold for persons eligible for grants. Madam speaker we are discovering cases where persons are in receipt of the Disability Grant but are in full time employment, even with state agencies. One such case shows that the officer has been employed for over 25 years in the public service and paid National Insurance. This client was declared permanently disabled and unable to earn a livelihood by a doctor.

And this has warranted the need for the Ministry to make arrangement to interrogate the payroll data to identify clients abusing the system. It has also forced the Ministry to commence a review exercise of all the grants to ensure compliance. So we know some memner of

Parliament would have called about grants but the delays are because of the robust review of these grants.

On the heels of the Auditor General's Report where it was reported that 61 individuals below the age of 65 years were receiving Senior Citizens' Pension, the Investigation and Compliance Unit, through its investigations, was able to close 47 of those cases. Fourteen of those cases remain outstanding and are expected to be closed by December 2022. Of the 14, it is expected that eight (8) will be sent to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service for further investigation. This Madam Speaker is only the tip of the iceberg, as more than 34 other cases are already being processed by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

I must reiterate that financial resources meant for the poor and vulnerable must be received by them and not syphoned away by dishonest persons for their own use.

We will continue to support our vulnerable citizens who are most in need and ensure they receive their benefits

with ease and dignity. To do this, I appeal to right thinking persons to partner with us by reporting cases of known or suspected fraud whether within or outside the Ministry. Help us to apprehend those who would steal from our vulnerable.

I commend all the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services who have remained true to the cause, as we continue this unprecedented journey of delivery to our citizens.

I move to OUR DIGITALISATION AGENDA

Madam Speaker, the Ministry is working feverishly to ensure that our social protection policies, programmes, projects and services are modernized and expanded to better meet the needs of our clients. In fiscal 2022, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services focused heavily on transforming the way our Divisions engage our clients from working in silos to a “client-centric, one-stop-shop”.

ICT Solutions for Improved Social Service Delivery

Madam Speaker, all our efforts to improve the effectiveness of our delivery to social services to those who most need. We want to do this in a timely and efficient manner. If we are to do this it must be done simultaneously to ensure that the necessary ICT solutions are in place. To this end, and consistent with the Government's drive for further digitalization and increased utilisation of e-Government services, the Ministry has continued to work diligently towards this end goal, and has advanced various ICT solutions including:

Integrated Social Enterprise Management System (ISEMS)

We are well advanced in the digitalization of our manual and paper-based processes, as we move to the fully automated Social Sector Management Information System (SSMIS). This is an enterprise resource planning

solution that addresses the operational and technological deficiencies of the current social services delivery system.

Data Cleansing and Migration

The objective of this project is to facilitate data migration of existing electronic client records to the new system. Madam Speaker, we know that our databases have been plagued by inaccuracies, duplications and incomplete records.

Madam speaker this clean-up exercise aims to identify and remedy these anomalies. To date, the Ministry has validated over 40,000 of our client files. The impact of this will clearly be seen, Madam Speaker, in reduced instances of double dipping and fraudulent activity. We are working on having shorter wait time for the processing of grant applications. I have heard complaints from the public and Members of parliament

and so we are working on improving the overall customer service interface.

SUPPORT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Apart from the Disability Assistance Grants paid directly to persons with disabilities, the Ministry supports these persons in many different ways.

Organizations that Work with Persons with Disabilities

The relationship between government and non-governmental organizations continued to grow and strengthen with a more focused, strategic approach to NGO engagement and support for civil society initiatives.

The Ministry continues to ensure that persons with disabilities are included and participate in social, educational, cultural, economic and recreational spheres

in our society. Organizations that work with Persons with Disabilities including the three (3) Statutory Boards, the Blind Welfare Association, the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired and Lady Hochoy Centres, have each received subventions. As of September 23, 2022 **Forty-five Million, Five Hundred and seventy-eight, Thousand, Four Hundred and Twenty-seven Dollars** (\$45,578,427) was allocated to organizations that serve persons with disabilities. So the total number of beneficiaries are Five Thousand, Seven Hundred and four persons (5,704).

Sign Language Training

The Ministry, in collaboration with the UWI Open Campus commenced basic sign language training to a cohort of staff members in different Divisions such as the Division of Ageing, National Family Services, Disability, Affairs Unit, National Social Development Programme, HIV/AIDS Coordinating Unit and the Social Investigation Division. This training was done to

ensure that our staff are equipped to communicate with persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Capacity Building for NGOs that serve Persons with Disabilities

In recognising the need to build the capacity of our NGO partners, the Ministry has been undertaking capacity building workshops with NGOs across Trinidad and Tobago. As of September 23, 2022 the NGO Unit of the Ministry facilitated both group and individual knowledge sharing initiatives towards enhancing capacity with targeted NGOs, based on identified or expressed areas of need and observed deficiencies. So the Unit has been working with NGOs to build capacity.

A total of 36 organizations benefited from access to information, knowledge sharing or targeted support towards enhancing organizational capacity, covering areas such as:

- i) recognising personal and organisational stress;

- ii) identifying problems and applying specific treatments;
- iii) basic proposal writing; and use of financial monitoring tools, among others.

Five of these NGOs work directly to support persons with disabilities.

In fiscal 2023, the Ministry intends to provide training in the form of a capacity-building workshop to targeted NGOs again. It is expected that this initiative, which will be undertaken in partnership with PAHO, will increase the technical abilities of these NGOs to provide better service to their clients.

National Therapeutic Resource Centre

Madam Speaker, the Ministry has been working on the operationalization of the National Therapeutic Resource Centre at Carlsen Field.

The refurbishment of the infrastructure at the Centre has been completed. A tender has been issued for the management of the facility and the Ministry is working on outfitting the facility with state-of-the-art therapeutic equipment, furniture and appliances that are suitable for a range of therapies such as art therapy, speech and language therapy.

NGOs

The Ministry has continued to provide support to vulnerable groups through the provision of financial support to other NGOs in the form of annual subventions or financing for one-off grants for specialized programmes or projects.

As of September 23, 2022:

- One off grant funding (under \$10,000) were given to five (5) new NGOs totalling **Thirty-Two Thousand, Five Hundred Dollars (\$32,500).**

Apart from the three (3) Statutory Boards mentioned earlier, subventions were provided to:

- Five (5) Youth Organizations – totalling **Four Hundred and Fifty-six Thousand Dollars (\$456,000)**; and
- Fourteen (14) NGOs – valued at **Seven Million, Five Hundred and Eighty-nine Thousand, Five Hundred and Seventy-three Dollars (\$7,589,573)**;

to support the work of these organizations and facilitate the delivery of specialised services for vulnerable clients.

SOCIALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

I now turn to another group of vulnerable citizens whom we serve at the Ministry. At the present time the management and staff are developing interventions for socially displaced persons.

During the last fiscal year, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services tackled the problem of street dwelling on a number of fronts.

Closure of CSDP

The Ministry, in addressing the issue of social displacement, successfully closed the Centre for Socially Displaced Persons (CSDP) located at Riverside Carpark #1 Town Council Street, Port of Spain, effective 1st September, 2022. The venue had outgrown its original purpose, and thus as a result, it became necessary to relocate the residents.

In 1991, the Centre for Socially Displaced Persons was established as a component of the Continuum of Care (COC) for socially displaced persons and was envisioned to be a cumulative effort among public, private, and non-profit entities to address social displacement, through the engagement of street dwellers and provision of

temporary shelters; Transitional housing and services and finally, permanent housing.

Over the years, various taskforces and inter-ministerial committees have been unanimous in their recommendations that the facility was not fit for purpose and should be closed.

As of August 31, 2022 the Ministry successfully relocated persons to:

- the Community Care Programme;
- Mental Health Long Term Care;
- some accepted training opportunities through Vision on Mission;
- others were admitted to Drug Rehabilitation Centres;
- some persons reunited with family members;
- other clients accepted the Ministry's Rental Assistance Grant;

- two (2) persons are currently hospitalized and will be placed by the Ministry upon discharge.

Additionally, some residents declined placement, many of whom were gainfully employed or had alternative living arrangements to go to.

So the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is currently engaged in addressing the Street Dwelling population. Among the persons who declined, many were unemployed and were using the facility as a hostel. One decided that he wanted to get married as his girlfriend was also at the facility. The Ministry continues to engage persons so they don't return to the streets.

What we are doing now is meeting the relevant stakeholders, acquiring and outfitting a suitable venue to be used as a temporary assessment centre and the voluntary engagement of street dwellers throughout the country. Those willing to be placed in relevant

accommodations will be assessed and placed accordingly.

So Madam Speaker, officers of the Ministry have already started engaging the homeless who reside on the streets and I would like to share with you what we have been hearing from some of our homeless:

I will like to hear what we have been hearing – real stories - Mr. Joseph Thomas (not his real name) aged 24, known client of the Ministry who is mentally ill and uses illegal drugs. Mr. Thomas was engaged on September 26, 2022 at Independence Square Port of Spain. He was seen wearing a blue jersey with blue jeans. Accommodation was offered at Court Shamrock and the night shelter and he refused. He was advised to go to Pembroke Street Mental Health and Wellness Centre. Rehabilitation was offered and he also refused. Mr. Thomas was previously engaged and offered accommodation, which was refused.

At one point, he was placed in a residence by a member of the public but he left in the first week stating that he is unable to stay there if he cannot smoke and do as he likes.

Mr. Edward Collier (not his real name) is 62 years old and is a known client of the Ministry who uses illegal drugs. He was engaged between September 12 to 16 along Yard Street, Chaguanas. Mr. Collier was seen wearing a striped T-shirt, green pants and slippers. He appeared dirty and unkempt. He was offered rehabilitation and he refused. An offer of the Community Care Programme was also made and he refused stating that the only way he would go is if both he and his girlfriend can be accommodated in the same home and room.

Ms Vidya Rampaul (not her real name) is 58 years old. She is a known client of the Ministry and uses illegal drugs. Ms Rampaul was engaged at Independence Square, Port of Spain on September 26, 2022. She was

seen wearing an orange jersey, khaki pants and slippers. Accommodation through the Community Care Programme was offered to her and she refused. Rehabilitation was offered and this was also refused.

Ms Ramlogan stated that she is not homeless but has a house in Borde Narve and comes to the street to hang out. Ms Ramlogan has been previously engaged by the Ministry.

And we have highlighted these cases as examples of what the Ministry has been doing and why the issue of homeless persons on the streets is so complex and intractable. So Mr Deputy Speaker, it is incorrect, if not a bit unfair, for persons to say that people have been left on the street; this has never been the case. We cannot force anyone to accept our services. Some have outrightly refused our assistance, but those who indicated a desire to work with us have been accommodated.

And we will continue to collaborate with our stakeholders: The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Municipal Police, the Ministry of Health, private sector, Regional Corporations, NGOs, the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs in relocating the homeless to more appropriate residential spaces.

However, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services alone cannot address the street dwelling problem. To remove persons from the street, it requires a collaborative approach.

This is why the legislation is so critical Mr Deputy Speaker. The Ministry is focused on strengthening legislation to bring about greater efficacy in the system of engagement, treatment, care and rehabilitation of street dwellers.

Consequently, emphasis has been placed on the Socially Displaced Persons Act, 2000 (No. 59 of 2000). The current draft of the Policy document with regard to the Amendments to Social Displacement Act No. 59 of 2000 is under review and finalization by the Ministry's Legislative Review Committee and hoping to get it on the Parliament's Agenda. The Ministry does not have the teeth to move persons so we have to put the legislation in place and that is what we are working on.

Long term Planning

In addition, the Ministry also continued the pursuit of the strategic direction as identified in the *June 2017 Report of the Street Dwellers Coordinating and Monitoring Committee*. Some of the major activities related to the Plan identified in the Report include:

- Completion of Transitional Living Facility at Carapo. A community care programme for persons (22-55 years) who require rehabilitation services

and are in need of consistent temporary accommodation and care, will be offered at this facility.

- Refurbishment works at Hernandez Place, Arima. The works at Hernandez Place have been completed. This is another facility where we can place persons who are abandoned at the hospital
- The Ministry, working with its partners, commenced the design of the purpose-built Socially Displaced and Assessment Centre, a five storey facility for the socially displaced in Port of Spain. This will be a permanent facility totally dedicated to assessing and housing the homeless. It will be the first of its kind in the history of Trinidad and Tobago and we look forward to this.

NATIONAL FAMILY SERVICES

The National Family Services Division (NFSD) promotes healthy families through the provision of preventive, developmental and remedial programs and services. It offers psychosocial assistance to individuals, groups, couples and families via counselling, advice, advocacy, referrals and placements.

The Division distributes information on healthy family life through community workshops, its Radio Programme, outreaches and lectures to members of the public. As of September 23, 2022 **Four Thousand, Eight Hundred and Three (4,803)** individuals received psychosocial support in the form of counselling services from the National Family Services (NFS).

A total of 14 sensitization sessions were also held with stakeholder groups and these sessions covered topics such as building family resilience, mental health awareness, coping with anxiety, effective parenting and building child-parent relationships, domestic violence as well as managing stress in the context of work-life balance. In recognition of the role of the parent in our

society the Ministry places a high value on strengthening and supporting families. Our investment in parents through the parenting workshops is viewed as a significant strategy to address issues such as poverty, crime, domestic violence and child abuse, to name a few.

During fiscal 2022, the National Family Services Division hosted:

- One ‘Grand Parenting’ Webinar;
- One ‘Parenting for Grandparents’ workshop;
- Two online parenting workshops with the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Services Inmate Development Programme;

These sessions covered topics such as:

- Parenting Roles and Responsibilities,
- Parenting while incarcerated,
- Effective Parenting,
- Co-Parenting,

Review of Legislation

Mr Deputy Speaker, in the same way that our people and our institutions must evolve to cope with and survive the changing times, the legislation which govern the operations of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services must also be comprehensively reviewed.

Launch of the 24hr Suicide Prevention and Crisis Hotline

The suicide prevention and crisis hotline will be launched by the end of this year.

The service will provide prevention, rehabilitative and support interventions to address issues pertaining to suicide, gender based violence and other crises persons may encounter and require intervention for. To date the facility has been identified, refurbished and outfitted.

The active listeners will be provided with training prior to this 24 hr service being launched. Citizens can be assured that they will be serviced by well trained and competent active listeners.

Citizens' Engagement and Outreach Service

Mr Deputy Speaker, the Ministry has taken the proactive position to provide additional resources to support our existing customer service infrastructures and delivery systems. This has been done in the form of a Citizens' Engagement and Outreach Service, which is currently being piloted at eight (8) of the eleven (11) local board offices around the country. This results-oriented team will collaborate with internal and external entities to solve problems, overcome challenges through the engagement of Members of Parliament, Ministers of Government, Local Government Officials, clients and the general public.

The primary purpose of this initiative is to enhance the performance of the Ministry in the delivery of services to citizens and to understand the needs of citizens in order

to respond positively to their concerns in an efficient manner. The Ministry anticipates that the Citizens' Engagement and Outreach Service will improve access by the vulnerable to social protection programmes that have been inaccessible for reasons out of their control such as barriers in the application process etc. This new service demonstrates that the entire Ministry, from the top to the bottom, cares about the issues that citizens encounter on a daily basis and shall actively seek to address and rectify them.

Currently, the Ministry has been in receipt of high commendations from clients who have accessed the service regarding the resolution of queries and complaints.

Madam Speaker, this service will be officially launched and fully operational in fiscal 2023.

CONCLUSION

Madam Speaker, in the time allotted to me, I have sought to place into context the following:

- an account of the \$5.6 billion allocated and received by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services;

Madam Speaker, the work of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services positively impacts the poor and vulnerable. Seeing or hearing that our clients have been positively transformed is what brings us fulfilment as a Ministry. We will continue, Madam Speaker, to do our part to lift the fallen, one by one; to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and give rest to the weary. If the work we do, put a smile on the face of at least one person, then our work would not have been in vain.

- And We will continue to invest in our people.

- We will continue to implement social protection measures.
- We will continue to nurture a caring society.
- We will continue to bring to justice anyone who attempts to defraud the system, to steal from the poor.
- We will create a better Trinidad and Tobago for you and me.

I wish to thank the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for their hard work, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. I also wish to thank you and this House for the opportunity to make this presentation in support of this remarkable budget presentation for Fiscal 2022/2023. The Budget ensured that the most vulnerable in our society has access to a multifaceted safety net, especially at this time and beyond.

And we will continue to work tirelessly and fearlessly to ensure that no one is left behind in our beloved country.

I thank you.

God bless you.