



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

Senate

October 13, 2022

Madam President, I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill 2022-2023. I congratulate the Minister of Finance for presenting yet another successful Budget 2023: *Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges*.

Madam President, every additional dollar that is placed in the pockets of the poor and vulnerable by the Government deserves to be applauded. One hundred and seventy-five thousand (175,000) persons who currently receive public assistance, senior citizens' pension, disability and food support grants will receive an additional \$1,000 one-off transport grant.

This measure is a great benefit to senior citizens 60 years and over who are already receiving free transportation on PTSC buses that is covered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services at a cost of **5.5 million (\$5,500,000)** for Fiscal 2021-2022.

On the 1st January, 2023 EVERY, and I want to emphasize, EVERY citizen whose take home salary is \$7,500 will be exempt from income tax. This is additional money in their pockets. Madam President, 300,000 persons will be taking home more money to support their families. This must be applauded.

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

Madam President, you are well aware that almost every country has a social protection system that secures and protects those who, either temporarily or permanently, are unable to help themselves. This is very important to maintain a stable and cohesive society.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services plays a leading role in protecting and supporting the vulnerable and marginalised in our midst, including women, children, widows, persons with disabilities, the elderly, the poor/indigent, the socially displaced, ex-prisoners, deportees and persons living with HIV/AIDS.

Madam President, we work with other stakeholders to ensure that they receive the help that is necessary, so, *‘Helping, Empowering and Transforming Lives’* is at the center of all that we do on a daily basis.

SUPPORT TO FAMILIES

Madam President, everything we do, we work to establish and secure families in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Family is considered to be the bedrock of society. It is through the family, primary socialization occurs, individuals learn about basic values such as love, honesty, forgiveness etc.

According to Jim Bunning (a former American politician), “*A loving family provides the foundation children need to succeed.*” Madam President, families contribute to the raising of law abiding individuals who invest in the development of our country. The truth is, there are many families who encounter challenges on a daily basis. As a result, the social fabric of society has been affected by crime, gender-based violence, child abuse, homelessness, elder abuse, drug addiction, suicide or attempted suicide and so many other social issues.

Families who experience challenges need to be supported to heal, be empowered and redirected on a path that will result in positive outcomes.

It is in recognition of this, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services continues to implement several measures to support poor and vulnerable families in this country.

Vision 2030 tells us that our citizens, in particular, our families are central to our development as a country and in fact are our greatest assets. As a result, we are seeking to create a society in which all the basic needs are met, and each individual, each family is valued and given the opportunity to contribute to its community.

Madam President, it is for this reason that the Government made an investment of **approximately Forty Billion on the core grants offered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to assist the members of poor and vulnerable families over the past seven years.**

These core grants are the Public Assistance, Senior Citizens Pension, Disability Assistance Grants for Adults and Minors, and Food Support. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, these core grants remain a stable source of income for many families.

I will now provide information on each grant and the investment the Government has made to ensure family members receive the financial support to meet their basic needs.

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)** persons are beneficiaries of this grant. Some of them include:

- Persons who cannot actively participate in the labour force due to health issues;
- Needy children whose father, mother or both parents are dead, incarcerated, disabled and unable to work, or has deserted the family and cannot be found.

When we look at the categories of persons who receive assistance under this grant, we must all acknowledge that the money they receive from the State, help them to meet the basic needs of their households.

The total expenditure on this grant as of September 23, 2022 was **Three Hundred and Seventy-three Million, Six Hundred and Five Thousand Dollars (\$373,605,000)** and **Three Billion, Two Hundred and Forty Million, Nine Hundred and Eighty-three Thousand, One Hundred and Fifty-five Dollars (\$3.2B)** over the past seven years and nine months.

Senior Citizens' Pension

As of September 23, 2022, the Senior Citizens' Pension is provided to **One Hundred and Eight Thousand, Six Hundred and Thirteen (108,613)** Senior Citizens aged 65 years and over. The aim of this grant is to provide financial assistance to persons aged 65 years and over who meet the qualifying criteria for the grant.

Most of these senior citizens live with their families and contribute to the expenses of the household. **Four Billion, Three Hundred and Sixteen Million, Six Hundred and Seventy-five Thousand Dollars (\$4,316,675,000)** was spent on the Senior Citizens' Pension as of September 23, 2022. This adds up to **Thirty Billion Dollars (\$30,071,947,721)** over the last seven years and nine months.

Disability Assistance Grant

Beneficiaries of this grant are individuals 18-64 years of age who are unable to work due to a disability and have been certified by a Government medical officer.

Again, Madam President, the majority of these individuals live with their families Madam President, as of September 23, 2022 Twenty-two Thousand and Fifty-five (**22,055**) adults with disabilities accessed this grant at an expenditure of **Six Hundred and Thirty-six Million Dollars** (\$636,000,000).

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

Madam President, the Disability Assistance Grant is provided to another category of persons in a family; children who are under 18 years of age with a permanent disability. A total of Two Thousand, Nine Hundred and Fifty-six (**2,956**) children received the Disability Assistance Grant for Minors as of September 23, 2022. The total expenditure on this grant was **Four Million, Six Hundred and Seventy Thousand, Seven Hundred and Fifty Dollars** (\$4,670,750).

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

Madam President, the Public Assistance, Senior Citizens Pension, Disability Assistance Grants for Adults and Minors are **not the only type of support that is provided to poor and vulnerable families in this country. There is much more than this.**

Food Support Programme

Provides short-term food assistance to help with meeting nutritional needs of thousands of families in the programme. Many families are happy to have their food cards topped up by the Government monthly because it helps to put food on their plates. This measure acts as a buffer for Twenty Thousand and Sixty-nine (**20,069**) households in receipt of food support grant as of September 23, 2022.

On Food Support alone, this Government spent **One Hundred and Eighty-one Million, Five Hundred and Thirty-nine Thousand, Five Hundred and Twenty-one Dollars (\$181,539,521)** as of September 23, 2022.

Overall, One Billion Six Hundred and Twenty-eight Million, Four Hundred and Eighty-three Thousand, Nine Hundred and Twenty-five Dollars (\$1,628,483,925) was spent in the last seven years to ensure that poor and vulnerable families are provided with financial relief for food and support.

Urgent Temporary Assistance

Families that are in need of special dietary support, help with funeral expenses, replacement of household items that may have been destroyed during a natural disaster such as a flood or fire, medical equipment, and rental assistance, regularly access the range of grants under Urgent Temporary Assistance.

Up to September 23, 2022, Three Thousand and Eighty-seven (3,087) were the beneficiaries of urgent temporary assistance at a cost of **Thirty-five Million, Nine Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$35,900,000)** and the total expenditure over the **past seven years and nine months is over Three Hundred and Twenty Million, Four Hundred and Thirty-eight Thousand, Nine Hundred and Thirty-two Dollars (\$320,438,932)**.

Madam President, the investments by the Government on a monthly basis to consistently sustain these grants is a manifestation of our commitment to building resilient families and building a stronger Trinidad and Tobago.

National Social Development Programme (NSDP)

National Social Development Programme is an initiative to ensure that vulnerable persons have access to House Wiring, Minor House Repairs and Sanitary Plumbing.

These grants are administered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Madam President, the support families receive through these grants enhance their standard of living and help to protect them from the elements and disease.

As of September 23, 2022:

- **One Million and Fifty Thousand, Three Hundred and Fifty-nine Dollars (\$1,050,359)** has been spent on 58 Minor House Repair Assistance grants.
- **One Hundred and Forty-nine Thousand, Seven Hundred and Twenty-six Dollars and Forty-four Cents (\$149,726.44)** on 15 Sanitary Plumbing Assistance grants;
- **Three Hundred and Thirty-six Thousand, Eight Hundred and Four Dollars and Seventy-three Cents (\$336,804.73)** on 27 House Wiring Assistance grants.

Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development (SEED)

The Ministry's Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development, which we call - SEED programme, provides training, as well as funding to vulnerable persons who wish to purchase equipment to start a small or micro business or expand an existing one and transition it from the informal sector to the formal mainstream economy.

The Ministry recognizes that some persons may not be able to get start-up loans for their businesses and as a result, this SEED grant is provided. Madam President, the Ministry acknowledges that starting a micro/small-enterprise business is one way families are able to support the monthly expenditure for their households and gradually come off social welfare grants.

As of September 23, 2022 **One Million, Four Hundred and Eleven Thousand, One Hundred and Fifty-three Dollars (\$1,411,153)** was **the invested and** 334 applicants benefitted from the grant funding.

The overall investment for the National Social Development Programme was Fifty-Nine Million, Three Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$59,289,700) over the last seven years and nine months.

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

TOTAL SPEND ON GRANTS

Madam President, the increase in the level of support provided to targeted families resulted in 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 being spent on grants.

Launch of the 24hr Suicide Prevention and Crisis Hotline

The suicide prevention and crisis hotline will be launched by the end of this year. This is a new initiative that will add to our arsenal of support and protection of families.

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.

Splitting of the Local Boards

In order to expand and improve its customer service delivery and to enhance convenience and access to the public the Ministry will be opening additional centres in Arima, Chaguanas, Couva, Marabella and Port of Spain.

INVESTIGATION AND COMPLIANCE UNIT

Madam President, as we move forward diligently and with the determination to alleviate poverty and so ultimately transform the lives of our families, we have come to the sad realisation that, for some of our people, stealing from the poor is a reasonable and satisfactory occupation. This is not okay, Madam President!

Madam President I have been personally very distressed by the level of systemic fraud in the administration of our social welfare programmes and both members of the public and some public officers may be complicit.

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. The Investigation and Compliance Unit is collaborating closely with the TTPS on these matters and they have been engaging whistle-blowers who have come forward to support the move to root out fraud and corruption from these programmes.

Madam President, **corrupt actors will always look for ways to assault the public purse** and we know there are no quick wins in the fight against systemic corruption. What is required is the strengthening of our internal controls in order to increase accountability, transparency and

increase checks and balances in order to root out corruption. For too long, Madam President, corruption has been the elephant in the room in the social protection system of this country. We are now tackling it head on!

You would have heard me say in the other place, that we have identified some Ministry employees as suspects of corrupt practices. Further, I indicated that whistle-blowers have come forward and 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. Several others are being investigated by the Trinidad and Tobago Police or are before the Disciplinary Tribunal.

Madam President, the Investigation and Compliance Unit has exposed fault lines within the Ministry that we did not know existed. Some of the revelations are like an earthquake and shake the very core of decency and integrity we expect of public servants.

Investigations Continued (Food Support Programme)

Madam President, the Food Support Programme, which forms a crucial part of the Social Protection System operated under the Ministry, has been plagued by fraud from within and without. This programme seeks

to reduce the incidence of poverty by addressing food insecurity using a cash transfer in the form of a card or cheque.

In September 2021, the Ministry conducted a sample survey and evaluation of the programme and its beneficiaries. The findings revealed several irregularities within the Food Support Programme including the following:

1. There were persons on the Food Support Programme who were now gainfully employed and never reported their change of status to the Ministry, or indicated that they no longer require this support;
2. There were food support clients who were also in receipt of other core grants which already contain a food component;
3. There were clients assigned to community care facilities where the Ministry met the full cost of their upkeep, including all meals, who were also receiving Food Support (e.g. CSDP);
4. There were clients on the Food Support Programme (\$510.00 per month) with balances of Food Cards between \$2,000.00 and \$6,000.00, suggesting to us that the grant is not a necessity for them;
5. There were persons on the Food Support Programme who reside abroad;
6. Persons were also utilizing Food Cards to make purchases like alcohol and cigarettes, but not food;
7. Persons were utilizing their food cards in exchange for cash;

8. Persons applying for cards and being assessed based on the need to feed their children in the household, but the children did not benefit from the grant;
9. An apparent misinterpretation and/or non-compliance with the instructions and procedures regarding the administration of the grant by staff;
10. There were complaints of irregularity in the approvals process, favouritism in the application process and irregular transactions related to food cards;
11. There were no assessments of the beneficiaries of food support being undertaken even though they are required to be assessed every two (2) years.

Missing Food Cards

Madam President, there are other irregularities that I must mention; in August this year the Ministry discovered that 32 Food Cards were missing. Madam President, I should say **STOLEN**, not missing. The food cards were reportedly left in an unlocked drawer in an officer's desk.

Madam President, the Permanent Secretary was advised of this incident almost two weeks after it occurred and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service was called in. Parallel investigations are being undertaken within the Ministry, as well as by the Police.

An examination of the activity reports on the 32 cards left us with more questions than answers.

The activity reports provided on the replacement cards for the period October 2021 to August 2022 into thirty (30) Food Card accounts revealed balances being accrued for approximately six (6) months; these balances ranged between five thousand dollars (\$5,000.00) and thirty-nine thousand dollars (\$39,000.00).

Our first investigation of thirty-two (32) cards accounts for the period October 2021 to August 2022 revealed that:

- During the first six months of 2022 the replacement cards received continuous monthly top ups with no spending activity. That changed from June 2022 to August 2022 when significant top ups were observed;
- Seven (7) persons had large balances over \$5,000 prior to their food card being updated;
- Six (6) persons had large balances under \$5,000 prior to the food card being updated;
- During the month of June, twenty-three (23) clients received top-ups to their food cards twice within the month;
- One client received five (5) top-ups within a two-month period between June - July 2022;
- Five (5) clients had multiple same-day purchases from the same vendors at different locations;

- It was noted that on occasions the financial data for one client was transposed unto another;
- Similar financial activities were noted for two clients on 3rd and 4th January 2022, 3rd and 30th June 2022 and 26th to 28th June 2022;
- There were five (5) instances of large same day expenditure by clients during the period October 2021 to August 2022. These were as follows:
 - \$5,836.39
 - \$4,905.45
 - \$4,815.82
 - \$4,500.00
 - \$2,987.46

While the cards were only reported stolen in August 2022, there is much evidence of their continuous use during 2021. Clearly, this is an inside job.

It has been noted also that there are vendors showing up in the reports who are not listed on Ministry's list of 'Food Support Merchants'. Remember, Madam President, that a food card is for food, not for furniture or payment of insurance policies. It is for food for the poor and most vulnerable. Incompetence must not be allowed to facilitate corruption. Corruption will flourish where there are weak internal controls, collusion and incompetence.

This stealing from the poor undermines growth and development of our social service delivery programmes. In circumstances where we are already trying to do more with less, this pilferage is beyond unacceptable. This is not a victimless crime because many deserving citizens are cheated and left fully exposed to some of the worst effects of poverty. Thirty-two food cards and spending sprees. We will fix this Madam President!

Accountability and transparency within any social protection programme is critical to the targeted delivery of services to the most vulnerable. The population must have confidence in the government's ability to deliver to those most in need within society.

The delivery of the grant system must be in keeping with the highest standards of ethical conduct and withstand scrutiny from decent, law abiding citizens. It must be fully compliant with the relevant laws, policies and regulations.

Madam President, this is one of the reasons why we have established the Investigation and Compliance Unit, to root out any rogue elements that may exist within the Ministry and to deter members of the public who may seek to defraud the Ministry. However, we are determined that our Food Support programme and indeed all our other social protection grants, will be given to only those who need them and no one else.

I wish to encourage members of staff and the public, to make full use of the Investigation and Compliance Unit and report any corrupt or suspicious transactions they may encounter.

Citizens' Engagement and Outreach Service

Madam President, the Ministry remains committed to providing a level and quality of customer service that is above reproach and of which all our stakeholders could be justifiably proud. We recognise that this is a work in progress and there is still some way to go towards reaching that goal but we know that any step forward along the journey will bring us closer to our vision of being 'a dynamic, service-driven organisation that delivers premium social services towards the achievement of sustainable human and social development'.

In this regard, we are currently piloting the Citizen Engagement and Outreach Service in eight (8) social assistance local boards throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

The CEO-S, as we call it, is an Operational Service, that consists of strategy, people, systems, policies and procedures focused on getting things done and being results-oriented. Its role is to:

- collaborate with internal and external entities for the purpose of serving our clients;

- engage Members of Parliament, Ministers of Government, Partners of the Ministry and the general public on the key issues that may be affecting them;
- solve problems and overcome challenges that our stakeholders may be experiencing.

Madam President, since June this year, we have deployed 18 officers at Head Office in Port of Spain and Local Board offices in Aranguez, Chaguanas, Princes Town, Point Fortin, Port of Spain, Rio Claro, Sangre Grande and Tunapuna to support the staff at these offices.

We expect that this service will be formally launched by the end of this year and officers will be fully employed in other locations including San Fernando, Penal and Tobago and the offices that are yet to come on stream in Arima, Couva and Marabella.

Madam President I have seen some of the reports on the service delivery aspect of this pilot and I have to say they are very inspiring. Our officers are doing an excellent job and I take this opportunity to congratulate them and encourage them to continue forging ahead, offering the public the kind of service they richly deserve.

Madam President permit me to share with this Honourable House some of the verbatim comments received from our clients with regard to the Citizen Engagement and Outreach Service:

From Head Office:

- *“Thank you for having patience with me...”*
- *“...I came here so upset but I can actually leave with a smile...”*

From Aranguez:

- *“... Oh God you have eased my day...”*

From Chaguanas:

- *“... God bless you a thousand times...”*
- *“... I am going to write a letter to the Minister to tell her that I met a nice lady. You don’t ever come to Ministries and get proper customer service and attitude...”*

From Princes Town:

- *“... God bless you...”; “Thank you so much...”; “You guys are doing a great job...”*

From Point Fortin:

- *“... You make the place lighter to come to because sometimes it’s so stressful to come here...”*

From Port of Spain:

- *“...My wife came before and she said a real nice lady helped her out. It had to be you.”*
- *“... Oh my gosh you’re doing such a great job; you should get promoted...”*

From Rio Claro:

- *“It is always important to acknowledge when assistance is provided in a manner that it should. Better customer service and satisfaction are much needed in many ministries. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has taken steps to improve their customer service and delivery of support.”*

From Sangre Grande:

- *“Dear Mrs. ... I am thanking you for seeking my interest for getting back my assistance for the boys and myself so I am saying thank you thank you Thank you and May God bless you to help others”*

From Tunapuna:

- *“Thank you, thank you, thank you...Sincerest appreciation for speaking and assisting me for the last 8 months I have been trying to get answers. Thank you.”*
- *“I’m going on the Ministry’s Facebook and tell them what a great experience I had at Social Welfare...”*
- *“... I haven’t seen service like this in other Ministries...”*

From Central Office:

“Thank you for the fantastic service...”; “... They need more people like you in here...”; “...You’re very patient...”

These comments and other feedback from our clients demonstrate that we are on the right track. Madam President, so happy are our clients with this service that we have even had a marriage PROPOSAL AND A POEM WRITTEN FOR AN OFFICER!

Madam President, the Ministry acknowledges that this improvement in service is the beginning, not the end but we are encouraged by our results so far.

I am giving the commitment in this Honourable House that we are going to persevere until such time that these comments will be the norm at our offices. Madam President, this service will be officially launched and fully operational in fiscal 2023.

Public Information, Education and Sensitisation (PIES) sessions

We are aware that for one reason or another, persons do not always receive accurate information on our grants and services.

Therefore, in Fiscal 2022, the Ministry continued its drive to ensure that all of our various stakeholders, including Members of Parliament and Local Government representatives on both sides of the aisle received up

to date information so that they could direct and advise their constituents and burgesses on how to access the various types of grants and services available to them in the Ministry.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry continued to provide Public Information, Education and Sensitisation sessions virtually to thirty-three (33) stakeholders during the last fiscal. Twenty-one (21) Members of Parliament and the staff of their constituency offices were educated on all the different divisions of the Ministry and the services they provide. Additionally, booklets on the Social Programmes and Services of the Ministry were sent to their constituency offices for use by their staff.

In addition to providing information, the Ministry seeks to identify the social issues impacting the various communities to better help and support vulnerable families across the country.

To this end, the Ministry continues to collaborate with the respective Members of Parliament, Local Government Representatives, Non-Government Organizations, Faith-Based Organizations and Community-Based Organizations to collect this data for the development of poverty reduction strategies that are specific to these communities.

In the upcoming fiscal year, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services intend to continue these Public Information, Education and Sensitisation sessions with the remaining 20 Members of Parliament as well as Local Government officials. The relaxing of restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic now permits us to resume our Outreach programmes into communities.

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Immigration Division, Ministry of National Security

Madam President, as part of the Ministry's drive to become more efficient and offer a better service to the public, it has engaged with the Ministry of National Security to establish a Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate the seamless transmission of travel information and verification of residential status of those who are current recipients or who have applied for the Senior Citizens Pension and the other Social Assistance Grants administered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. This information will determine whether the applicants and recipients for the grants meet or continue to meet the residential requirements, as stated in the requisite legislation and procedures.

Over the past months both Ministries held several discussions on the issue of data sharing and have agreed to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding. The Memorandum of Understanding sets out the basis for a cooperative inter-Ministerial relationship between the Ministry of

Social Development and Family Services and the Ministry of National Security, Immigration Division for sharing travel information of applicants and recipients of the Senior Citizen Pension and the other Social Assistance Grants. In the past, applicants were provided with a form to approach the Immigration Division for their travel data, in order to assess their residential eligibility.

This will no longer be required, as information will now be transferred seamlessly between the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the Ministry of National Security - Immigration Division via electronic means. This data sharing will remove an estimated two (2) months' waiting time from the processing of grant applications so that beneficiaries can now receive their benefits within a much shorter period of time.

This will save our clients a lot of time, money and effort which were spent on checking and following-up with both Ministries.

Madam President, this initiative will also weed out all of those persons who are cheating the taxpayers by receiving grants for which they are not eligible.

This initiative forms part of the strategic intent of the Ministry to digitalise all its processes and reduce the processing time for all its

services, to quickly provide focused support to meet the needs of households and families.

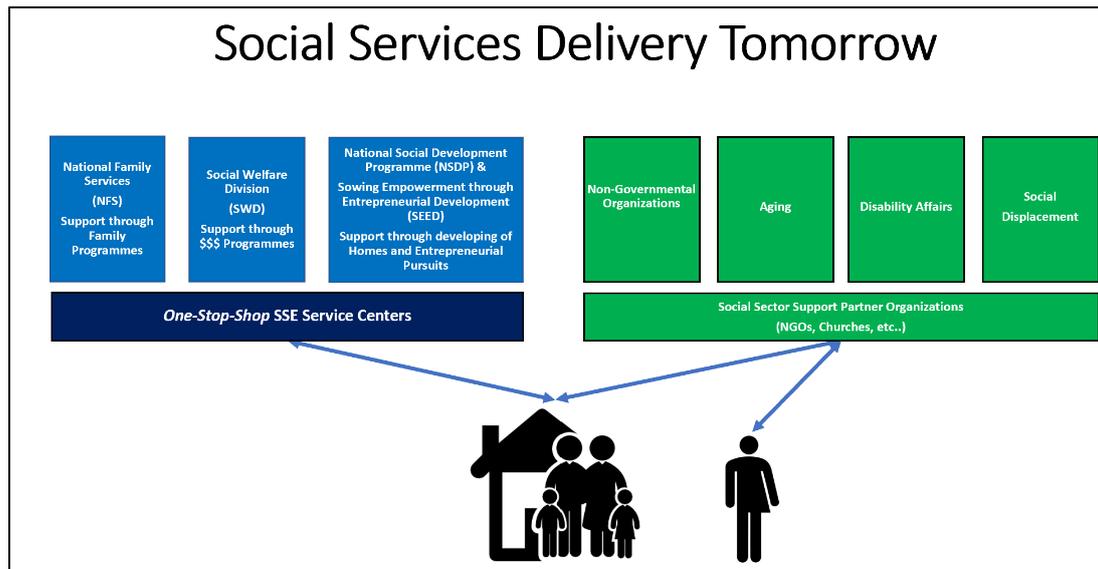
Madam President we look forward to using a similar approach with other key stakeholders involved in the application process for social grants.

DIGITALISATION AND TRANSFORMATION

Madam President, one of the Strategic pillars of the Ministry is to provide a modern, client-centered, high performance organization that delivers timely and efficient services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. In an effort to achieve this, the Ministry has taken several steps to improve the delivery of social services to its clients by designing social service programmes that are tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable families.

Madam President, vulnerable families within each region, will have the opportunity to access the range of social services offered by the Ministry in one place through the One Stop Shop - single door, Social Services Empowerment Service Centre. As we roll out this project, clients will eventually find that they will no longer have to go to Social Welfare District Offices to apply for the senior citizens' grant, then go to the National Social Development Programme to apply for a grant for minor house repair and then go to the National Family Division to get counselling.

Once they enter the One Stop Shop Social Services Empowerment Service Centre and their needs are assessed, and once they are eligible for the identified grants and other services, their applications will be processed in one place.



The Social Services Empowerment Unit will also be using a new case management approach to assist vulnerable families. This is called the Social Transformation and Empowerment Unit-Uplifting People (Step-Up) Model for social service delivery. Through this measure, families will be provided with psychological and other support to improve their standard of living. Vulnerable families will also be empowered to move from dependence to independence, self-sufficiency and resilience.

Madam President, this approach to engaging individuals and families is supported by an overall public health strategy to address violence among children, youths, women, men, and the elderly.

As a result, it is acknowledged by the Cabinet and this Ministry that there is need for collaborative planning to establish strategies;

- to create a safe and peaceful wellbeing for all;
- to focus on building strong resilient families and safe sustainable violent free communities.

Madam President, in order for the One Stop Shop Social Services Empowerment Service Centre to be efficiently functional, the Ministry is moving toward digitalizing all of our processes through an e-government solution. The digitalization project will ensure that our grants and services that are provided to our clients are done in a timely and efficient manner. It is envisaged that replacing the current paper-based processes to a digitalised one will result in significant benefits to the Ministry such as:

- Introduction of an e-ID that will uniquely identify clients;
- More efficient processing of applications, queries;
- Save time, particularly since employees will be able to access information on clients at a click of the mouse;
- Files can be easily located through a simple search engine and the challenges with files missing will be a thing of the past;
- Promote staff efficiency and productivity;
- Automate workflows that will promote transparency, since clients will be able to get feedback on their applications etc.;

- Automate Tasks by enabling employees to produce quicker results of a higher quality;
- Digitalization of client files.

The digitalization of the Ministry's files and processes will be of great benefit to clients who will:

- Access online applications, information and services;
- Enjoy shorter application timeframe for approvals;
- Get automatic notifications at each step in their transaction when completed;
- Receive faster response rate for queries;
- Reduce visits to the Ministry's offices to get feedback;
- Enjoy better service experience for clients.

National Register of Vulnerable Persons (NRVP)

The Ministry is presently in the process of creating a National Register of Vulnerable Persons, as a mechanism for improving its targeting and timely response to the poor and vulnerable. The National Register for Vulnerable Persons was a specific deliverable identified in the Roadmap to Recovery (2020) under the remit of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, towards integrated service delivery.

The Register will be a computerized database that will be used to collect, store, and process vital information on vulnerable people on a single platform. It is also expected to improve the coordination of activities within the social sector and enhance the overall efficiency of the social protection system in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as facilitate the rapid response to emergencies/shocks and adverse situations of vulnerable groups.

It will also ensure that the Government can easily identify citizens in need, the programmes and services available, the eligibility criteria and the type and level of intervention required, as well as track clients' graduation/exit from the system. The Project is well supported by our partner the United Nations Development Programme.

National Centenarian Programme (NCP)

Another Flagship Programme being undertaken by the Ministry is the National Centenarian Programme, which was re-launched in December 2021. Among other things, the Programme will recognise and honour citizens attaining the age of 100 years and above, in order to promote a sense of social inclusion and esteem among centenarians, given their contributions to the development and overall success of our nation.

The National Centenarian Programme is multi-pronged as it seeks to:

- a) highlight the positive contributions and unique perspectives of our oldest citizens;
- b) build the nation's historical capital by allowing centenarians to provide memories of historical events; and,
- c) allow for intergenerational knowledge exchange as the wisdom obtained from centenarians on their best practices for living a full, long, healthy life will be shared with our youth and the wider public.

As at October 02, 2022, a total of 102 individuals, aged 99 years and over have registered with the programme. Of those registered, sixty-five (65) have been celebrated by the Ministry. Moving forward, we intend to also present centenarians with a gold "100 Years" centenarian medal inscribed with their names in honour of their longevity.

We have partnered with several private sector, State agencies and organizations such as KISS Baking Company Ltd., NAMDEVCO and Ultra Pharm Marketing Ltd. The Ministry has also partnered with the Ministry of Health to offer health check-ups to the centenarians at their homes.

We would like to thank all our sponsors and partners who have collaborated with us to recognise these centenarians and invite other companies and agencies to do the same. The Ministry continues to encourage, families, relatives, neighbours, Non-Government Organizations, Community-Based Organizations and Faith-Based Organizations to identify and register centenarians on the Programme, so they too can be recognised and rewarded for their contributions to the development of Trinidad and Tobago.

OTHER INITIATIVES OF THE MINISTRY

Psychosocial Support and Counselling

Madam President, individuals, groups, couples and families received psychosocial support, counselling, advice, advocacy, referrals and placements via the National Family Services Division.

Family breakdown can negatively impact the well-being of children. It is for this reason that the Ministry is implementing measures to ensure that families maintain stability and remain resilient. A total of Four Thousand, Eight Hundred and Three (4,803) individuals received psychosocial support in the form of counselling services from the National Family Services (NFS, as of September 23, 2022).

Parenting and Grand-parenting Workshops

Madam President, there is no doubt that parenting in the 21st Century is a challenging task that requires support from family members and the wider society.

While many parents are managing effectively, there are others who are in need of support. Some families in our country are fractured due to parents being either incarcerated, deceased or absent. These circumstances often create high risk environments for children to engage in anti-social behaviours and activities. As such, there is a need to bring together the resources of the national community in an effort to identify ways of breaking intergenerational cycles of crime and criminality in families and communities. Let us rally around grandparents who are often required to step into the parental role, in the absence of parents.

The Ministry continues to make a significant investment in parents and grand-parents through the parenting and grand-parenting workshops and webinars. The sessions seek to sensitize and equip them with the knowledge and skills to make responsible decisions when it comes to the safety and well-being of children within their care.

A parenting workshop was also held with inmates who were participants in the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Services Inmate Development Programme. The sessions covered topics such as:

- Parenting Roles and Responsibilities;
- Parenting while incarcerated;
- Effective Parenting; and
- Co-Parenting.

Madam President, the Ministry's parenting programme will now be adopting a Village Parenting approach because it takes a Village to raise a child. When members of the Village are involved, parenting the children of the Village and looking for each other, crime and violence in the community will be reduced. Citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, we need you to partner with us to build stronger families, stronger communities and a stronger society.

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

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).

National Therapeutic Resource Centre

Madam President, the Ministry is moving forward with outfitting the National Therapeutic and Resource Centre at Carlsen Field and hiring an Organization to manage the facility.

The project did encounter some delays due to COVID-19 restrictions but the infrastructure upgrade of the Centre was essentially completed in Fiscal 2022. The upgrades to the Centre included the pool and related civil works.

IP surveillance cameras and fire and safety equipment were installed and miscellaneous works were also undertaken.

Madam President in Fiscal 2023 we are committed to moving swiftly to outfit the Centre so that our clients can use it for the purposes intended. Additionally, Madam President, some examples of the services that will be provided at this therapeutic facility include assessment, speech therapy, aqua therapy, counselling, occupational therapy, physiotherapy.

THE ELDERLY

Regularizing Homes for Older Persons

Madam President, it should be noted that families who are unable to care for their elderly mother and father at home, and have admitted them to a Homes for Older Persons, can rest assured that that this Government is taking steps to ensure that that the care provided at Homes for Older persons is of a high standard. Even though Homes for Older Persons come under the purview of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services continue to work collaboratively with the Ministry of Health and other key stakeholders to set standards for

Homes for Older Persons to ensure that our senior citizens who are accommodated at these Homes are properly cared for and protected.

For Fiscal 2022, **twenty-one (21)** inspections were conducted at Homes for Older Persons. Some of the inspections were done collaboratively by staff from the Division of Ageing and staff at Ministry of Health, to ensure compliance and care standards are maintained.

Additionally, the Homes for Older Persons Act No. 20 of 2007 is currently under review. It is being proposed that an entity will be responsible for monitoring, evaluating and licensing all Homes for Older Persons. Homes for Older Persons that do not meet the approval process for a license will not be allowed to remain in operation.

SOCIALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

Madam President, the Ministry continues to support persons who are socially displaced. Madam President, we were able:

- to close the Centre for Socially Displaced Persons (CSDP) located at Riverside Carpark #1 Town Council Street, Port of Spain, effective 1st September, 2022 and relocate the residents to more suitable accommodations;

- We intend to do the same for those who are presently living on the streets, in collaboration with our partners: The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Municipal Police, the Ministry of Health, private sector, Regional Corporations, Non-Governmental Organizations, the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs.

Madam Speaker we recognise that the only solid solution to the challenge of street dwelling is through legislation. The Ministry will continue to review the legislation to bring about greater efficacy in the system of engagement, treatment, care and rehabilitation of street dwellers.

The Socially Displaced Persons Act, Act No. 59 of 2000

The Socially Displaced Persons Act, Act No. 59 of 2000 aims to provide for the assessment of care and rehabilitation of socially displaced persons and related matters.

The Ministry is therefore seeking to have this legislation become operational by ensuring amendments are made to allow the establishment of a more comprehensive and responsive system inclusive of removal, assessment, rehabilitation and reintegration into society of persons who habitually dwell on the streets of Trinidad and Tobago.

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. We are hoping that this important piece of legislation will be placed on the legislative agenda for this fiscal year.

Social Displacement and Assessment Centre

Madam Speaker, the Ministry, working with its partners, commenced the design of a purpose-built home for the Socially Displaced and Assessment Centre, a five storey facility for the socially displaced in Port of Spain. This will be a 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 bringing this Centre into fruition.

Review of Legislation

The Ministry's transformation drive has revealed the need for the review of the relevant legislation and policies to further align to regional and international best practices/standards. These include the following:

- Senior Citizens' Pension Act, Chap. 32:02
- Public Assistance Act, Chap. 32:03
- Socially Displaced Persons Act; Act No. 59 of 2000
- Homes for Older Persons Act, No. 20 of 2007.

Legislation pertaining to the Blind Welfare Association and the Trinidad and Tobago Association of the Hearing Impaired will also be reviewed.

CONCLUSION

Madam President, I wish to thank the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for continuing to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will continue to make significant investments in the lives of the people of this country because we know without a shadow of a doubt that as we persist, we will see lives empowered and transformed.

We are building resilient individuals and families, building a better and stronger Trinidad and Tobago.

We are building individuals and families; establishing standards; prioritizing the modernization of our policies, programmes, projects and services in an effort to enhance the quality of life; and we are digitalizing our systems and process to ensure that we deliver efficient services our clients.

We will continue to advance the work of the Ministry for the benefit of all poor/indigent and vulnerable women, children, widows, persons with disabilities, the elderly, the socially displaced, ex-prisoners, deportees

and persons living with HIV/AIDS to ensure that NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND.

Madam President, I thank you and Members of this House for the opportunity to contribute to this Budget Debate for Fiscal 2022/2023.

I also thank God, for He is worthy of all the praise.

I thank you.

God bless you.