



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

PRIVATE MOTION

House of Representatives
March 24, 2023

PRIVATE MOTION

WHEREAS it is the responsibility of the Government to ensure the well-being of its citizens by facilitating a decent standard of living and quality of life.

AND WHEREAS the impending increase in utility rates and the imminent imposition of property taxes will further escalate cost of living and the inflation rate;

AND WHEREAS the consistent increases in fuel prices have further negatively impacted the cost of living;

AND WHEREAS this Government has failed to take proactive measures to cushion the economic fallouts brought about by the escalating prices of essential goods and services.

BE IT RESOLVED that this House call on the Government to outline its short, medium and long term strategies to systematically reduce the escalating and uncontrollable increase in the price of essential goods and services accessed by the population of Trinidad and Tobago;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this House call on the Government to take the necessary urgent action to immediately remedy the negative effects upon those living below the poverty line. (By the Member for Chaguanas East)

Madam Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Despite what the Members of the Opposite side say, I want them to know facts are stubborn things, and they won't go away. A significant fact that must be highlighted is that this Government, led by Dr. the Honourable Keith Rowley, continues to proactively invest in the people of this country to ensure they have a good quality of life.

GLOBAL CONTEXT

But before delving into the details of the Government's programmes, strategies, and policies aimed at assisting the vulnerable and poor in our society, it is crucial to acknowledge the current socio-economic climate, which has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of lockdowns and other public health and safety measures to safeguard both lives and livelihoods.

According to the World Bank, the global poverty rate fell from 36% in 1990 to 10% in 2015¹; based on these numbers, everyone was optimistic that the world was making progress in reducing the poverty rate.

¹ Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018: Piecing Together the Poverty Puzzle. Washington, DC: World Bank.

However, no one catered for the pandemic and the drastic changes it brought to life as we knew it.

As you recall, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020 and a mere two months later, it was characterised as a pandemic. By then, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that nearly half of the global workforce was at risk of losing their livelihoods due to the pandemic². As more data became available, it was feared that the world's poorest people could take up to a decade to recover from the economic impacts of the pandemic. Moreover, it was estimated by the World Bank that the pandemic pushed an additional 88-115³ million people into extreme poverty in 2020 alone, an increase that brought the number of new poor to between 110 – 150 million with the total number of people living in extreme poverty rising to between 705 and 729 million people⁴.

² International Labour Organization (ILO). (2020). ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. 2nd edition. Updated estimates and analysis. Geneva: ILO.

³ World Bank. "COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021." October 7, 2020.

⁴ Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020:Reversals of Fortune- Frequently Asked Questions

Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago was not immune to these shocks or spared the hardships that the pandemic brought to the world's doors. There is no denying that COVID-19, which is still very much with us, contributed significantly and negatively to global poverty rates. But the Government did not throw its hands in the air and let nature take its course. We recognise and understand the numerous factors, including economic inequality, unfair distribution of resources and natural disasters, which can change the trajectory of anyone's life in a very short space of time.

We continue to put in place measures that catch our poor and vulnerable even before they fall, and when we are unable to do so, we are ensuring there are measures in place that will help them to get back on their feet.

For this reason, the Government developed a Roadmap to Recovery that focused on the following:

- Measures that need to be implemented immediately;
- Measures to reignite economic activity and ensure social stability;
- Measures to transform a new economy and a new society.

Short, medium and long-term measures were put in place.

Madam Speaker, maintaining the health and well-being of the people of this Nation is at the heart of all that we do. We continue to implement a robust safety net to cushion the negative effects of COVID-19 on the poor and vulnerable.

Madam Speaker, even if subsidies are removed or reduced, this Government continues to use the savings generated from them to improve the lives of poor and vulnerable people. Madame Speaker, it was just two months ago that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services executed the One-off Transportation Grant, not a One-off Fuel Grant as stated by the MP for Chaguanas East. One hundred and seventy-five thousand (175,000) of the Ministry's clients who were already receiving Senior Citizen Pension, Public Assistance, Disability Grants and Food Support received an additional one thousand dollars (\$1,000).

Madam Speaker, this was a one-off short term measure intended to cushion the impact of the increase in fuel prices as a result of the removal of the fuel subsidy.

In fact, this was a double benefit for our senior citizens who were already eligible for free transport through the Public Transport Service Corporation (PTSC).

Madame Speaker, individuals and families in need can still access several social grants through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Some of these grants are...

Disability Assistance Grant (DAG) and Disability Assistance Grant for Minors (DAGM)

The Disability Assistance Grant (DAG) is a safety net programme where the government provides financial support to those certified as permanently disabled. Eligible adults receive a grant of **Two Thousand Dollars** (\$2,000.00) per month and children **One Thousand, Five Hundred Dollars** (\$1,500.00) per month. This fiscal year the government has allocated **Six Hundred and Twenty-five Million Dollars** (\$625,000,000) to the **Twenty-two Thousand and Fifty-five (22,055) adults and Two Thousand, Nine Hundred Fifty-six (2,956) children under the age of 18 years** with disabilities who are accessing this support.

Public Assistance Grant (PAG)

The Public Assistance Grant (PAG) is another avenue of social protection by which the government provides financial aid to the nation's vulnerable citizens. This grant is for persons whose household incomes are deemed inadequate. This includes, but not limited to, unemployed individuals who are unable to work, or have little means of supporting themselves.

The Public Assistance Grant (PAG) has undergone several changes over the years to meet the needs of our citizens. In February 2015, it was increased by \$300.00 per month whilst in January, 2019 recipients received another increase by \$150.00. Presently, the monthly payments are as follows:

- \$1,300.00 for one (1) person
- \$1,550.00 for two (2) persons
- \$1,750.00 for three (3) persons
- \$1,900.00 for four (4) or more persons.

Madam Speaker in the last fiscal **Sixteen Thousand, Nine Hundred and Ninety-three** (16,993) individuals benefitted and the government spent **Three Hundred and Seventy-three Million, Six Hundred and Five Thousand Dollars (\$373,605,000)** on this grant.

Senior Citizens' Pension (SCP)

The Senior Citizens Pension (SCP) is one of the primary grants utilized by the government for protecting our vulnerable elderly citizens. This grant provides financial assistance to persons aged 65 years and over who meet the qualifying criteria for the grant.

This year a total of **Four Billion, One Hundred and Eighteen Million Dollars** (\$4,118,000,000) has been allocated for the Senior Citizens' Pension and this expenditure will support **One Hundred and Eight Thousand, Six Hundred and Thirteen** (108,613) senior citizens who are eligible to receive it.

Food Support Programme

Madam Speaker, our Food Support Programme prevents vulnerable persons and families from falling below the food poverty line by providing grants to purchase basic food items necessary to meet their daily nutritional requirements. The Ministry's records indicate that as of September 23, 2022 there were Twenty Thousand and Sixty-nine (**20,069**) households in receipt of Food Support Grants. This year the government has allocated for Fiscal 2023 **One Hundred and Eighty-one Million, Five Hundred and Thirty-nine Thousand, Five Hundred and Twenty-one Dollars** (\$181,539,521) for Food Support Grants to citizens. Based on the circumstance of the individual or the family, they can access the temporary, short-term or long-term food support card.

Madam Speaker the Member for Chaguanas East stood here to give the impression that this government is not doing anything to help the poor and vulnerable persons in this country. Through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services the member for Chaguanas East and indeed all Members of Parliament, just three months ago at Christmas received 200 Food cards from the Ministry to give to poor and vulnerable persons in her constituency.

Madam Speaker, as previously mentioned by the Minister of Finance, this Government removed VAT on an expanded list of food items. This was done in consultation with the Supermarkets Association, who indicated the most commonly purchased items in the supermarket. The list was reviewed to determine which items had customs duty and valued added tax on them. The basic food items that were not tax free were listed for the removal of VAT. Madam Speaker, this Government also suspended the Common External Tariff on a list of 20 basic food items. This Government does not move by 'vaps' but takes a methodological and analytical approach to making decisions that will benefit all our citizens, including the poor and vulnerable.

Madam Speaker these are long term strategies being implemented by the government to make sure protect our vulnerable populations from uncontrollable external economic shocks.

Urgent Temporary Assistance Grants

Madam Speaker, we know that sometimes unexpected things happen in families. In circumstances like this the government steps in and offers Urgent Temporary Assistance. These are short term interventions intended to remedy short term challenges being experienced by vulnerable citizens.

Grant	Value
Clothing Grant	\$1000.00 per person in the family
Dietary Grant	\$600.00 per person per month
Education Grant	\$500.00 per month per child
Funeral Grant	\$7,000.00
Household Items Grant	Generally- \$6,000.00 Disaster Only – \$10,000.00
Medical Equipment Grant	\$7,500.00
Rental Assistance Grant	Up to \$2,500.00 per month for the first 3 months then reviewed
Prosthetics Grant	Up to \$40,000.00
School Supplies Grant	Primary School Students – \$700.00 Secondary school Students – \$1000.00

Up to September 23, 2022 a total of Three Thousand and Eighty-seven (**3,087**) persons benefitted from this grant and for Fiscal 2023, a total of **Fifteen Million Dollars** (\$15,000,000) has been allocated for Urgent Temporary Assistance Grants.

Madam Speaker, in the event of a natural disaster, as we had towards the end of last year, the Clothing Grant, Household Items Grant, Rental Assistance, School Supplies Grant and Food Support are utilised to assist the affected individuals and families to recover lost items and get back on their feet as soon as possible.

The recoverable items under the Household Items Grant are:

Recoverable Item	Description	Maximum Amount to be Paid
Stove	20 inches	\$2,500.00
Fridge	10 cubic feet	\$4,000.00
Bed with Mattress	4 x 6 only	\$1,000.00
Wardrobe	Regular size only	\$3,000.00
Living Room Set	3 pieces only	\$3,500.00
Dining Room Set	5 pieces only	\$3,500.00
Washing Machine Set	8 to 16 pounds only	\$3,500.00
Chest of Drawers	4 to 6 draws	\$2,000.00
Kitchen Cabinets	Regular Size	\$2,000.00

Additionally, a temporary food card of **\$550.00** per family is provided.

National Social Development Programme (NSDP)

Madame Speaker, the National Social Development Programme (NSDP) provides grants for minor house repairs (materials and/or labour); and materials for sanitary plumbing to eligible citizens who need this support. Madam Speaker, these amenities enhance the standard of living of thousands of our citizens and protect them from the elements and disease. Madam Speaker, the minor house repair grant is for **\$20,000** in material only and the sanitary plumbing assistance is **\$15,000** in material only.

A total of **Five Million** (\$5,000,000) has been allocated to National Social Development Programme this year.

Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development (SEED)

The Ministry's Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development Programme, which we also call the 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 either start a new business or expand an existing one. Madame Speaker and this alone can lead to financial independence, self-sufficiency and long term prosperity. Would this not lead to a better quality of life for the individual families and their generations to come?

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).

Madam Speaker, all of these grants are available to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. As long as you meet the eligibility criteria, you will receive it.

TOTAL ALLOCATED FOR SOCIAL GRANTS THROUGH THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES

Madam Speaker, over Five Billion has been allocated to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Most of this allocation goes towards taking care of poor and vulnerable persons in this county.

Madam Speaker, the measures I highlighted were only for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. There are many others which I will elaborate on.

National Schools Dietary Services Limited

Food support is also provided for deserving students throughout Trinidad and Tobago through the School Nutrition Programme. Students receive breakfast and lunch to ensure that they achieve a head start in their quest for academic excellence. The provision of school meals contributes to one quarter (1/4) and one third (1/3) of a child's recommended dietary allowances for breakfast and lunch, respectively.

The programme seeks to:

1. Improve the nutritional status of the needy child thereby enhancing the child's ability to learn; and
2. Further, stimulate the agricultural sector by utilizing local produce wherever possible in the meal plan.

Madam Speaker, not only do poor and vulnerable families benefit from this measure but the farmers who need to have a ready market to sell their produce also appreciate this programme.

For the period October 2021 to June 2022, **eight hundred and seventy-one thousand, one hundred and nineteen (871,119)** breakfasts and **seventy-two thousand, four hundred and sixty-five (72,465)** lunches were provided.

For this fiscal, over **Eighty-Eight Million Dollars (\$88,000,000)** has been allocated to provide meals for poor and vulnerable students.

FINANCE

Personal Income Tax Allowance

(Minister of Finance has spoken of this but I wish to reiterate)

Madam Speaker, as of January 1, 2023 all individuals earning \$7,500.00 a month or less are now exempt from income tax. This measure provides relief to working families by increasing the personal income tax exemption limit from \$84,000.00 to \$90,000.00 per year. This is the third time this PNM Administration has increased the Personal Allowance which will put additional disposable income of \$1,500.00 per year into the pockets of over 300,000 individual taxpayers.

We believe that this measure will stimulate economic activity, consumption and sales because consumers now have more money in their hands.

HOUSING

Housing Subsidies and Grants

Subsidy for Housing and Village Improvement Programme

Madam Speaker, as of January 23, 2023, through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, citizens/residents of this country can access the Housing and Village Improvement Programme (HVIP) subsidy. Through this subsidy, eligible applicants can get funding to construct a housing unit with two bedrooms from \$145,000.00 up wards:

- \$165,000.00 for construction on flat lands;
- \$170,000.00 for construction on sloping lands; and
- \$175,000.00 for construction on hilly lands.

This measure took effect on January 1, 2023.

Urban Upgrading and Revitalisation Programme

This is a home construction subsidy that can also be accessed through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. This subsidy seeks to enhance the housing conditions for low-income households. Persons who are eligible for this grant must be living in an urban settlement that is located on State-owned lands and is desirous of improving their living conditions.

The Home Construction Subsidy provides funding of up to \$50,000 to assist families with the construction of a new house. The eligible applicant must be 18 years and older and the household income must not exceed \$96,000.00.

Construction on Beneficiary's Land

An applicant who is the owner of land or who has permission to occupy land and is desirous of constructing a new house will be eligible for a Housing Subsidy. The applicant must satisfy, among other things, the requirements for a loan or mortgage; or having completed the necessary work or by showing evidence of the ability to carry out the construction of the residence.

Home Improvement Subsidies

Through the Home Improvement Subsidy of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, eligible applicants can get up to \$20,000 per beneficiary household to conduct home repairs. The household income must not be more than \$96,000 per year.

The National Commission for Self Help Limited (NCSHL)

The National Commission for Self Help Limited (NCSHL) provides Minor Repairs and Reconstruction Grants (MRRG), Emergency Repair and Reconstruction Assistance Grants (ERRAG) and Infrastructure Development Projects. This is another facility that citizens can access.

The Government Aided Self-Help Housing Programme (GASHHP)

Madam Speaker, another programme that is worth mentioning is the Government Aided Self-Help Housing Programme (GASHHP). This programme is also administered under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, Land Settlement Agency. This initiative is part of an affordable, and high-quality housing programme. Through this programme, citizens can benefit from fully developed lots at subsidized prices (30% of the market value) and can access subsidized mortgage loans from the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company Limited. They are also able to get pre-approved house plans, technical assistance and oversight for the construction of affordable, high-quality homes.

The actual construction of the houses will be achieved through a combination of self-help and the engagement of small contractors.

Madam Speaker, the provision of these grants and subsidies is evidence that this Government is taking a proactive approach to looking after the needs of the citizens/residents of this country. Additionally, through the home improvement and home construction programmes many citizens are enjoying a decent standard of living and better quality of life.

Madam Speaker, this PNM Government continues to invest in these initiatives because we believe that they will substantially help, empower and transform the lives of individuals and families who access them. Madam Speaker, these are some of the long-term strategies that our government is implementing on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago to make them more resilient and resistant to unforeseen negative circumstances such as the Pandemic.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Investing in our Youth

Madam Speaker, this Government is also committed to investing in the lives of our future leaders. There are several programmes that provide the vulnerable young people with the knowledge and skills they need to lead productive lives and lead them away from a life of poverty and toward wealth creation and independence.

Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme (YTEPP)

Through the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme, young persons are provided with a suite of technical, vocational, life skills and entrepreneurial training to prepare for employment and pursue higher levels of training. The Programme targets at-risk, unskilled and unemployed youth. Some of the young persons who are targeted come from under-served communities. For fiscal 2023, over **Forty Million Dollars (\$40,000,000)** has been allocated for this programme.

On the Job Training (OJT) Programme

The On-the-Job Training Programme (OJTP) is a pre-employment programme which offers participants between the ages of 16-35 an induction into the world of work and focuses on the acquisition of occupational skills. As of July 2022, 4,070 active trainees were participating in the Programme. Madam Speaker, young persons are not only getting work experience, they are also receiving stipends that help them to provide their basic needs and contribute to their households. For fiscal 2023, over **Three Hundred and Nine Million, Three Hundred and Ninety-Five Thousand Dollars** (\$309,395,000) has been allocated for this programme.

Madam Speaker are these not worthwhile investments that will bear fruit in the long term?

Level No.	Name	Stipend (\$)
Level 1	CXC, Craft Level Training	\$3,035.00
Level 2	CAPE, A Level, Diploma	\$4,356.00
Level 3	Associate Degree	\$5,445.00
Level 4	Undergraduate Degree	\$7,562.50
Level 5	Postgraduate Degree	\$8,712.00

Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE)

Madam Speaker, **Four Hundred Million Dollars (\$400,000,000)** has been allocated for the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) for 2023. The GATE programme as we all call it, benefits many students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds who need to work and study at the same time. However, a change in policy in 2020 restricted funding to no more than one (1) programme at the undergraduate level and students were debarred from accessing GATE twice.

After careful consideration, this criterion has since been adjusted because of the challenges experienced by students who were progressing from a non-degree course to a Bachelor's Degree Programme. Students in good standing who are enrolled in institutions and programmes accredited by the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago can qualify for GATE if they have completed an initial programme of study, such as a diploma or associate degree and they wish to upgrade to a Bachelor's degree.

Many more persons who could not get funding to pursue their studies, will now join the 19,141 students in post-secondary and tertiary education who benefitted from the GATE Programme in Fiscal 2022. Madam Speaker, is this a long term strategy being advanced by the government to create greater opportunities for citizens to have a better, more sustainable quality of life in the future?

MIC Training Subsidy

The MIC Training Subsidy seeks to facilitate human capital development for the workplace predominantly in the manufacturing sector. In fiscal 2022, ten Engineers in Training and forty-six (46) journeyman trainees commenced the Programme and benefitted from training.

Youth Agriculture Homestead Programme

The Youth Agriculture Homestead Programme (YAHP), is a programme that empowers young farmers to use modern farming techniques. The young farmers in this programme are provided with land that is leased to them by the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service.

Land identified for the Youth Agriculture Homestead Programme is located at:

- Fyzabad Field Road
- Chatham Dairy Farm
- Kendall Dairy Farm in Palo Seco.

Other areas that have been identified for the Youth Agriculture Homestead farms are:

- Valencia, Gran Couva
- Pointe-a-Pierre
- Todd's Road
- Lopinot
- Santa Cruz.

This programme provides the opportunity for young persons to earn a sustainable income through the sale of produce and livestock.

Madam Speaker, there are many other youth-based programmes that young persons can access.

All of these programmes have received substantial allocations for this fiscal – 2023. Some of these programmes are:

Youth Focused Programme	Allocation for FY 2023
School Transportation Services	\$50,000,000
SERVOL Junior Life Centres	\$14,600,000
MIC Craft Programmes	\$7,000,000
Helping Youth Prepare for Employment Programme (HYPE)	\$13,787,000
Multi-Sector Skill Training Programme(MUST)	\$12,286,800
SERVOL Hi-Tech & Advanced Skills Training Programme	\$5,000,000
SERVOL's Human Development and Skills Training	\$14,000,000
Metal Industries Co Ltd (National Skills Development Programme)	\$40,820,100
Civilian Conservation Corps	\$45,000,000
Military Led Academic Training (MILAT)	\$15,000,000
Military Led Programme of Apprenticeship and Re-orientation (MYPART)	\$1,000,000

School Transportation Services

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education's School Transportation Services provides free transportation for primary and secondary school students to be transported to school.

This significantly helps their parents to be relieved of the financial burden of having to get money to send them to school. A total of \$50,000,000 has been allocated for the School Transportation Service for 2023.

This Government has taken an all of Government proactive approach to help individuals, the elderly, families, young persons and even businesses in this country.

Madam Speaker, when we look at the number of social protection initiatives that are implemented by this Government it speaks volumes that this Government is committed to ensuring that *No One is Left Behind*.

HEALTH CARE

Focus on Health Care

Madam Speaker, **citizens have access to free healthcare, including CDAP, which costs Six Billion Dollars (\$6 billion)** each year. Those in need, cardiac health is available at the public health institutions through the Ministry of Health's Adult Cardiac Programme.

The Ministry of Health also procures cardiac services from private health care providers on behalf of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. These cardiac services include angiograms, angioplasties, echocardiograms and open heart surgeries.

Madam Speaker, to date, hundreds accessed cardiac procedures in the public and private health care systems and are alive today because of the interventions made by this Government.

Conclusion

Madam Speaker, I can continue to speak at length about all that the government is doing to take care of our vulnerable citizens, but I will conclude here and assure the Nation that this Government will continue to advance its work to ensure that *NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND*.

Notwithstanding our detractors:

- We will continue to invest in all of citizens, to ensure that they have the best possible opportunity to develop their talents, skills, and realise their full potential.
- We will continue to implement social protection measures that will help, empower and transform their lives.

- We will continue to nurture a caring society.
- We will create a better Trinidad and Tobago for you and me.

Madam President, I thank you and Members of this House for the opportunity to contribute to this Motion.

I thank you, the people of this Great Nation of ours, for giving us the opportunity to serve you.

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