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**MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT &
FAMILY SERVICES**

**LAUNCH OF THE DIGIGEL FOUNDATION
INNOVATION LABS**

POINTE-A-PIERRE SPECIAL SCHOOL

FEBRUARY 14, 2023

I am pleased to address you today on this very special occasion of the launch of the Digicel Foundation's Innovation Labs. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services welcomes and enjoys the opportunity to endorse initiatives that focus on improving accessibility and enhancing the quality of life of persons with disabilities. I am told that through this initiative, schools will receive computers, virtual reality headsets, smart boards, smart TVs, printers, projectors assistive devices and accessories, which will assist students with varying disabilities to better access and function more effectively with technology. In other words, they are making sure that *no one is left behind*. This is a model project; one we fully endorse.

I commend the Digicel Foundation for their dedication to investing in sustainable development programmes and building stronger, more resilient individuals, families and communities. The vision of the programme to assist multiple special needs schools is worthy of recognition. I am delighted to note that many of your programmes align with the goals of the Ministry and I am already looking forward to our future collaboration with the National Therapeutic and Resource Centre for persons with disabilities.

Through our Disability Affairs Unit, the Ministry works diligently towards *helping, empowering and transforming* the lives of persons with disabilities throughout Trinidad and Tobago. We are committed to creating a better quality of life for persons with disabilities through recognition and promotion of their dignity, rights, accessibility and well-being.

In 2021, the Ministry re-launched its website. This website included for the first time, a microsite designed solely for the use of Persons with Disabilities. This was developed with significant input from the Blind Welfare Association and other stakeholders in the community of persons with disabilities. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has also engaged the Ministry of Digital Transformation in an effort to ensure that each Government website is designed for accessibility to persons with disabilities.

Digital transformation can catapult persons with disabilities towards greater success and help to tap into their potential and unique skill sets.

Article 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states, *“Technologies play an increasingly important role for children with disabilities by helping them to live a full and decent life with dignity and, as far as possible, to live independently and to play an active part in the community.”*

Through the collective efforts of the Ministry, other public and private entities such as Digicel Foundation, it is anticipated that persons with disabilities, will be further empowered. Through these partnerships, our society would be equipped to provide adequate support to this community, thereby contributing to the achievement of the United Nations’ 2030 Global Sustainable Development Goals.

As a signatory of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this Ministry makes the call for all institutions in society, to collaborate in bridging the communication gap between persons with and without disabilities. I am personally gratified that all media houses are now using sign language in their newscasts as a standard, best practice.

I fully applaud this demonstration of their commitment and goodwill to the national community and more specifically, the deaf and hearing impaired.

The Ministry is advancing its collaborations with international and local organizations towards increasing accessibility and removing barriers that hinder persons with disabilities from living their best lives. We are in the process of advancing amendments to existing legislation and creating new ones that will uphold and propel the rights and dignity of all persons with disabilities, and their ability to participate in the continued development of our country. The National Policy for Persons with Disability highlights the goals and objectives that must be implemented to create sustainable opportunities for the vulnerable, particularly, persons with disabilities.

On an ongoing basis for example, the Ministry's NGO Unit continues to host capacity-building workshops for organisations that provide services for persons with disabilities.

We are also facilitating sign language training for our staff and both private and public sector organizations. This sign language programme has also been extended to schools, where the distribution of sign language posters at both primary and secondary schools continues to raise awareness of Sign Language and the need for all of us to communicate with persons who are deaf or hearing impaired.

The Ministry's Public Information, Education and Sensitization Sessions (PIES) also seek to educate and inform organizations that work with persons with disabilities to access the various grants and services offered by the Ministry. In the near future our community outreach caravan will be launched in an attempt to meet persons with disabilities in the community.

Ladies and gentlemen, we would all agree that this launch of the Innovation Labs sits well with our Government's thrust to have a digital society, where access to information and Government services – is just one click away.

As such, through this initiative, the Ministry is quite confident that the Digicel Foundation will reduce the digital divide and create avenues for quality education and enhanced standards of living for a more prosperous future.

In closing, I take this opportunity to once again congratulate the Digicel Foundation for their vision and commitment to helping, empowering and transforming the lives of the community of persons with disabilities. I reassure you that the Ministry will continue to offer all its resources to support efforts aimed at improving the lives of persons with disabilities as we all work in partnership to ensure that *no one is left behind*.

May God richly bless you all!

I thank you!