



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

**Contribution to Motion**

*“The completely unsatisfactory response by the Ministry in assisting affected residents of St. Augustine with the promised Flood Relief Grants after the flooding devastation in December 2022.”*

**Friday May 26, 2023**

**Madam Speaker,**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this Motion brought by the Member for St. Augustine.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services understands the negative impact of floods and other unforeseen events, on families and communities, in fact, many of our own employees fall victim to these disasters, so we are far from being disinterested observers and we take our responses very personally. This is why, Madam Speaker that following any major disaster, the Ministry as a Second Responder collaborates with the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management (ODPM), and Disaster Management Units of the Municipal Corporations, to coordinate disaster relief for families. These agencies are well recognised First Responders and we take guidance from them at all times.

Together, Madam Speaker, as a ‘whole of government team’ we hasten to provide relief to persons who are experiencing loss of one type or another. We know that outside of the loss of physical assets, disaster victims can experience distress, anger, fear, frustration and other psychological and mental challenges. And when children are involved Madam Speaker, reactions to these disasters can lead to

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, grief, behavioral problems and academic difficulties. In this regard Madam Speaker, the Ministry offers assistance through a series of grants and psychosocial support to bring immediate and long-term recovery to affected residents.

Madam Speaker, I would like this Honourable House to know and I wish to be absolutely clear that when we engage in disaster relief activities on behalf of citizens we are balancing two (2) very important objectives:

1. The absolute and necessary requirement to get relief to affected persons in the shortest possible time so as to shorten their suffering and allow for a return to normal living as fast as possible: and, the second no less important objective;
2. To safe guard and be accountable for the use of taxpayers' money, as custodians of the public purse

Madam Speaker, this is a very delicate balancing act because it requires us to act both in haste and be cautious and careful, at the same time. It is not good enough in our respectful view, Madam Speaker, to go into a community, open our car trunk and distribute food cards to anyone passing by, as some have done in the past.

Madam Speaker there is a natural tension between these two objectives to provide speedy relief and to deter fraud and corruption. Sometimes they collide with each other but as we like to say, ‘time is of the essence’ and we always give the highest priority to human suffering and loss of life and property. Notwithstanding, we do not wish to compromise our responsibilities to the taxpayers of this country.

Madam Speaker, after all that I have just said, you can imagine the pain of the Officers of the Ministry and our First Responder partners when we became aware of this Motion about the alleged ‘completely unsatisfactory response’ to the residents of St Augustine who were victims of tremendous floods. Madam Speaker, this cynical approach is disheartening and demoralising to our public officers and partners.

### **Ministry’s Actions**

Madam Speaker, let me tell you the truth of this matter, during a natural disaster we have to wait for clearance to enter: As a Second Responder, we must pay attention to the instructions provided by our First Responder partners and can only let our staff go to the affected communities when we have been told it is safe to do so. Madam Speaker, the Ministry, as a responsible employer, cannot

allow staff to enter a flooded area if no clearance is provided by the ODPM. Unlike the Member for St. Augustine, we are not going to disregard the ODPM's instructions, hop on a pick up where water is more than 2 feet high to go through a community. This is so unsafe and may place more lives and limbs at risk than the disaster itself. Madam Speaker, everybody knows that the ODPM gave strict instructions that no person should drive their vehicle through six (6) inches to two (2) feet of flood water and more; and that even larger vehicles such as pickup trucks and SUVs are in danger of floating away. The person who does this, runs the risk of being electrocuted, or getting stuck in a drain which is difficult to see when the road is covered in water.

Madam Speaker, once we received the green light we proceeded to deploy resources to directly support those residents of the Tunapuna/Piarco Region, including St. Augustine and the surrounding communities who were affected.

This is what the Ministry did, Madam Speaker: Officers from the National Social Development Programme, National Family Services Division, Citizens Engagement and Outreach Service, Social Welfare Division and Food Support Programme were

assigned to the region to partner with the Disaster Management Unit (DMU) in:

- Distributing temporary food support to those persons who lost their food items
- conducting outreaches at the Real Spring, Spring Village, Bamboo #2 and other Community Centres
- providing psychosocial support to those residents who needed it.
- directly engaged with residents and provided them with information about grants and services; and

Madam Speaker, altogether The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services assigned thirty eight (38) officers from five (5) Divisions and units to provide relief and support in communities severely impacted during the 2022 flooding, including St. Augustine. Additionally, three (3) outreaches on May 16<sup>th</sup> at the St Augustine South, Community Centre, May 18<sup>th</sup> at Bamboo No 3 Community Centre and on May 23<sup>rd</sup> at Real Spring Community Centre, Valsayn South. And Madam Speaker, this level of resource deployment is what the member for St Augustine calls a ‘completely unsatisfactory response’. Is the Member trying to hoodwink the constituents of St. Augustine?

## **Relief Provided to Disaster Victims**

And what did all of this activity yield, Madam Speaker, what was the sum total of our efforts in that Region? The total number of applications for processing was 5,259, some of them were received via the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government ARCGIS Survey 123 system and others via the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' Critical Incident Portal (CIP).

A total of one thousand nine hundred and twenty-nine (1,929) assessments were from the Tunapuna Piarco Regional Corporation. From this total, the Ministry has processed a total of **one thousand three hundred and eighteen (1,318)** applications. **(NOTE 2)**

**Two hundred and eighty-six (286)** cheques remain uncollected at the Ministry's Head office and 20% of these uncollected cheques are for the region of Tunapuna/Piarco and twenty (20) cheques are from the St. Augustine Constituency. The Ministry continues to make numerous attempts to contact persons to advise them that their cheques are ready for collection.

## **Processing of Disaster Relief Applications**

Madam Speaker, in the interest of transparency and accountability for public funds, before cheques are disbursed we have to go through a thorough process of assessment and validation for the victims of disasters. For the information of the Member of Parliament for St. Augustine:

1. When a community level disaster event occurs the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government (MRDLG) Disaster Management Units (DMUs) conduct the disaster assessment and needs analysis (DANA). They use an electronic assessments system called the ARCGIS Survey 123;
2. The MSDFS personnel who have access to the system will download a spreadsheet containing the details of all the assessments conducted over a specific period.
3. Applicants are contacted via telephone for a validation process which is done to verify the information on their application form.
4. Forms which are recommended for relief will be processed for payment while forms that are not recommended will be passed for rejection. Forms that carry a suspicion of fraud will be submitted to the Permanent Secretary accompanied by a



formal report for forwarding to the Ministry's Investigation and Compliance Unit.

5. Any client who was rejected for reasons such as unable to contact or for missing information or documents but thereafter makes contact with the Ministry and provides the outstanding information will be validated and processed for payment.
6. Applicants who have been rejected are notified accordingly of their rejection status and the reason for the rejection. Approved applicants are contacted and advised to collect their cheques at the Ministry's Head Office and to sign a legal agreement to utilize the funds for the purpose intended and provide proof of purchase within 30 days.

The Member for St. Augustine should note that applications are processed based on the list obtained through the ARCGIS and not by Constituency. This promotes fairness and equity in the processing.

So, in the context of this Motion, the constituency of St Augustine falls within the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation and the entire region is our unit of analysis, not any particular constituency.

So within this Region Madam Speaker we responded to calls from Residents of St. Joseph and Tunapuna as well as St. Augustine.

Madam Speaker, so far, the Ministry has provided **fourteen million two hundred eight thousand eight hundred dollars (\$14,208,800)** in household and clothing grants for flood relief related to the disaster of December 2022. The Tunapuna/Piarco Region accounts for **forty seven point seven per cent (47.7%)** of this expenditure or **six million seven hundred and seventy five thousand nine hundred dollars (\$6,775,900)** covering **seven hundred and seventy five (775)** households.

The Ministry also provided **one thousand eight hundred and seventeen (1,817)** food support cards in the sum of **nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand three hundred and fifty dollars (\$999,350)** to affected families throughout the country who were in need of food support. Madam Speaker, the records from our Food Support Unit indicate that approximately three hundred (300) cards were distributed to households within the St. Augustine area.

Madam Speaker, I have been reliably informed by Officers of the Ministry that affected residents of the Tunapuna/Piarco Region, including St. Augustine have been positive and gracious in their

recognition of the efforts put in the Ministry and partner agencies. Here are two (2) comments we received (**NOTE 3**)

### **System of Processing going forward**

The Ministry continues to examine and review how it can improve the delivery of services to those impacted by disasters, given the continuing global impact of climate change and the yearly impact of inclement weather conditions, resulting in heavy rainfall, and flooding. In this regard, the Ministry has commenced the development of a **comprehensive and revised disaster relief policy** that will seek to formalize and standardize inter-ministerial disaster response collaboration and relief efforts, associated with processes and procedures for both single and community level disasters.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services reassures of its commitment to uphold its mandate of helping, empowering and transforming lives and in doing so, will continue to leave no one behind.

I thank you Madam Speaker.