



REMARKS BY
SENATOR THE HONOURABLE DONNA COX
**MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND FAMILY SERVICES**

SOD-TURNING CEREMONY

**ASSESSMENT CENTRE AND TEMPORARY
HOUSING FACILITY FOR SOCIALLY DISPLACED
PERSONS**

**SOUTH QUAY
PORT OF SPAIN**

Wednesday September 6, 2023

2.00 p.m.

SALUTATIONS:

- Dr. The Honourable Keith C. Rowley, Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago;
- The Honourable Keith Scotland, Member of Parliament Port of Spain South;
- The Honourable Fitzgerald Hinds, Minister of National Security;
- The Honourable Camille Robinson-Regis, Minister of Housing and Urban Development.
- The Honourable Stuart Young, Minister of Energy & Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister;
- The Honourable Terrence Deyalsingh, Minister of Health
- Dr. the Honourable Nyan Gadsby-Dolly, Minister of Education;
- The Honourable Foster Cummings, Minister of Youth Development and National Service;
- His Worship the Mayor of the City of Port of Spain, Alderman Chinua Alleyne;

- Mrs. Lenor Baptiste-Simmons and Mr. Ryan Ramcharan, Permanent Secretaries Ministry of Social Development and Family Services;
- Mrs. Vera Deonanan-Balkaran, Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry Social Development and Family Services; other Members of the Executive and staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services;
- Mr. Noel Garcia, Chairman UDeCOTT and Members of the Board;
Ms. Tamica Charles, Chief Executive Officer UDeCOTT;
- UDeCOTT Management and Staff;
- Mr. Gregory Aboud President of the Downtown Owners and Merchants Association and Officials of DOMA;
- Representatives of Religious Organizations;
- Representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Non-Profit Organizations (NPO), Community Based Organizations (CBOs); Faith Based Organizations (FBOs)
- Specially Invited Guests;
- Members of the Media;

- Members live on the Worldwide web; also our listening audiences.
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good Afternoon,

Today, we gather here for this sod-turning ceremony with a profound purpose that resonates deep within our hearts; I stand here with great pride and deep conviction that we stand on the threshold of a remarkable milestone. I am humbled by what this means for a group often ignored by many: our socially displaced, vulnerable, and the poor.

Trinidad and Tobago is a nation known for its rich cultural tapestry, its warmth, and its strong spirit. Yet, amidst our vibrant landscape, there are individuals who face the harsh realities of making the streets their home, and what have some of them done to deserve this? Some encountered setbacks, others made wrong decisions, endured hardships and found themselves without a safe haven to call home. This, ladies and gentlemen, is why it is our duty, to extend our hands and uplift those who have fallen on difficult times.

I am very happy, I would even go as far to say ‘elated’, to be a part of today’s sod-turning ceremony, which will signal the start of construction of the Social Displacement and Assessment Centre for socially displaced persons.

I am elated because this event comes after a long and arduous journey, dating back to 1978, to provide for street dwellers and other homeless persons in Trinidad and Tobago.

I am also honoured and humbled that although the task has fallen on me today to spearhead this initiative on behalf of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, I recognise that this is the culmination of the work of hundreds of persons over the past forty-five (45) years, internal and external to the Ministry.

I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his leadership, support and encouragement to persevere through the challenges and for backing this investment in the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I applaud the past and present work of the Staff of the Ministry and its stakeholders; our partners, the Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation (HDC), and Project Managers, the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (UDeCOTT) for staying the course with us.

I would also like to acknowledge the work done by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) and individuals who are committed to helping the socially displaced. I am reminded of Psalm 41:1 which says “Blessed is he that considers the poor...”

Ladies and gentlemen, for us, today is both an end and a beginning. This ceremony is rooted in past initiatives and contributes to a positive outcome in the future. So the turning of the sod to mark the construction of this home for the homeless, represents the beginning but it also represents the **end** of the back and forth on how to resolve the street dwelling challenges that have plagued us for over four (4) decades.

Over the years, there were a number of attempts to grapple with the problem of the socially displaced. Our formal records show that in 1978, an attempt was made, with the focus to remove persons who are mentally ill from the streets.

Since then,

- Seven (7) Task Forces and Cabinet-appointed Committees were established;
- Eight (8) studies and reports prepared including a comprehensive Joint Select Committee Report in 2017-2018 and;
- Six (6) Strategic and Action Plans were developed and partially implemented.

So, it is perhaps fair to say that the question of homelessness has not been neglected, but execution appears to have been a challenge. For the street dwellers and homeless persons in Port of Spain and environs, it is **an end** to sleeping on the streets, in front of banks, on park benches, in unsafe, unsanitary living conditions, which is beneath the dignity of which they are deserving.

A street count conducted by the Ministry as recent as July, revealed that there are: -

PORT OF SPAIN

- 198 Males
- 12 Females
- **TOTAL - 210**

WOODBROOK

- 34 Males
- 1 Female
- **TOTAL -35**

DIEGO MARTIN

- 7 Males
- 2 Females
- **TOTAL - 9**

Overall, there are Two Hundred and Fifty-four (254) persons living on the streets of Port of Spain and environs.

The Social Displacement and Assessment Centre will be a **new beginning** for street dwellers. This is a dedicated space for them, where they will feel at home and accepted without the stigma of feeling that they are a forgotten people and that they are being left behind.

We at the Ministry acknowledge that each one of them comes from and belongs to a family; they could be our fathers, our sons, our daughters, our brothers, our abuelas, our abuelos, our mamooos, and they need our help. Some of them may be substance abusers, deportees, persons with mental health issues, elderly, physically ill, ex-prisoners who have been socially displaced and yet others may be neglected by their families and do not have a stable place to live.

When completed and fully functional, this Centre will mark a new beginning for our homeless population who now have a place where they can go to get a meal, a shower, clean clothes, see a doctor, dentist, or seek psycho-social and spiritual counselling.

The construction of this Centre, signals a new level of continued partnership among Government agencies: the Ministries of Social Development and Family Services, Health, Attorney General and Legal Affairs, National Security, Rural Development and Local Government, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Municipal Police and the Boroughs and Regional Corporations.

It also means new arrangements with the private sector, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Faith Based Organizations (FBOs); community groups and individual, who serve and care for the homeless.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the specs of this Centre are no less than spectacular! Our Facilities Unit that created the Brief and the architect who designed the complex must be commended. In conceiving the design of the building, we wanted to make sure that:

- It should not look downtrodden and desolate; it must be bright and inviting;
- It must not remind them of the streets; instead it should feel like home;

- It must also provide all the services required to keep them safe and healthy.

This will be a state-of-the art, modern, 5-storey facility in keeping with international standards, that our socially displaced persons can temporarily call home. Here are some of the details:

- Site Area is about half acre with a floor area of 62,000 square feet, spread over 5-storeys;
- It will host a minimum of 200 homeless persons and 25 staff at a time with adequate accommodation for a 6-week maximum assessment period;
- The grounds of the building will include parking, a hard court, courtyard, green space and vegetable garden.
- Level One (1) will include a reception, an assessment centre, day-user facility with activity centre and a night-user facility with a shelter, washrooms and laundry. Shared communal space includes dining hall, gathering space, library, counselling, training and meeting rooms.
- Levels 2, 3 and 4 will house male and female dormitories, including TV rooms/gathering space.

- The Top Level features administrative offices and family dormitories with shared living, kitchen and laundry services.

This facility represents a profound investment in humanity, compassion, and the transformation of lives.

Within these walls, we will offer more than just a shelter. We will provide comprehensive assessments, guidance, and support to help our socially displaced and vulnerable overcome their challenges. Through collaboration and consistent evaluation, we will offer job training, skills development programmes, and access to healthcare services; we will continue to work with other state agencies, and our Key Stakeholders, to create sustainable pathways for our socially displaced.

For us at the Ministry, this centre will serve as a sanctuary of hope, healing, and restoration.

Within its walls, our socially displaced will not just have a bed to sleep in, or a roof overhead, but the opportunity to rebuild their lives with dignity, restore their self-worth and provide them with a sense of purpose. It symbolises our unwavering resolve to uplift lives and offers a second chance to those who need it most. It will provide our socially displaced with an opportunity to reclaim their dreams, to regain their footing, and to once again contribute to the fabric of our society.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services does not have the legislative authority to remove persons from the streets. As a result, the Socially Displaced Persons Act is currently being reviewed to provide us with the authority to do so.

We have recognized that providing support to socially displaced persons requires a multi-faceted approach. Not only do we need the support of other sectors, we also need the support of families to help us get their loved ones off the street. We need your input to help us to encourage your loved ones to voluntarily accept alternative living accommodations. We need you to help us to help your relatives.

Helen Keller, an American author and disability rights advocate, once said, and I quote, "Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much" end quote. It is through our collective efforts that we will continue to help, empower, transform lives; and sow seeds of compassion that will flourish for generations to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen this is what we do at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Today, I look forward to the possibilities that lie ahead; we are breathing life into dreams that have been dormant for far too long. May today and, of course, the completion of this centre serve as a beacon of hope, guiding us to be our brother's keeper, as we embrace and uplift the most vulnerable among us, leaving no one behind.

I thank you, and may God bless you!