



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

**Appropriation Bill 2023-2024
“Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth”**

Senate

October 23, 2023

Mister President, I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill 2023-2024. Mister President, I wish to congratulate the Minister of Finance for presenting yet another successful Budget 2024 that is focused on *“Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth”*. Commendation also goes to the staff of the Ministry of Finance for their contribution to the preparation of the Budget documents. I also wish to thank the Minister of Planning and Development and her team for their contribution as well with regards to the PSIP.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has been positively transforming the lives of the people of this country through the provision of quality social services to the:

- Elderly
- Men and Women
- young children or orphans
- persons with disabilities
- widows
- socially displaced persons

- victims of substance abuse
- families

We touch the lives of citizens in this country who are poor and vulnerable and are in need of assistance. Our social grants and programmes are vital to maintaining the stability of families, that is why we applaud any initiative that can Help, Empower and Transform lives.

Mr. President, there are many social programmes implemented not only by the Ministry of Social Development but others as well. This represents the government's **investment** into the lives and welfare of our citizenry. It is material to note, that many of our social programmes involve the entire life course of our citizens, and seek to address both emerging issues and temporary shocks, such as a natural disaster or economic downturn, as well as their root causes. By providing a safety net, especially to our most poor and vulnerable, we seek to promote human capital productivity, which, in turn will facilitate economic growth.

This is achieved by helping to lift persons out of poverty, as well as protecting the livelihood of many more.

Some of the initiatives in the Budget that will be implemented in fiscal 2024 and which we applaud include:

- Funding for the Adult Literacy Tutors Association to expand remedial education;
- Strengthening the technical and vocational education component of our school system;
- Providing book and uniform grants to students in need. We welcome the introduction of the \$1,000 school supplies and book grant which will assist our families who are poor and vulnerable;
- We will continue to sustain existing public assistance grants and programmes;
- As a Government, we will continue to support for the school feeding programme, while providing guaranteed markets for local farmers, also with the return of the Market Food box initiative;

- In fiscal 2024, the **Market Box Programme** is being re-introduced. A total of \$60 million has been allocated in 2024 for the resumption of the programme. Beneficiaries will be identified from the poor and vulnerable in our database.

We look forward to working with NAMDEVCO and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to reintroduce this initiative. Farmers will have a ready market for their produce and the nutritional health of our clients will be met.

Increasing the minimum wage by 17 percent, or \$3.00 per hour. The minimum wage is currently \$17.50 and will now be increased to \$20.50 per hour. This measure will benefit approximately One Hundred and Ninety Thousand (190,000) persons in the workforce. Let me restate this, One Hundred and Ninety Thousand (190,000) persons will take home more money to support their families. This is additional money in their pockets. This also means that the minimum wage that any employer offers to their employees cannot be under \$20.50 per hour.

These are just some examples of the initiatives that will be implemented by this Government.

During the last fiscal year, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services maintained its focus on our mission to positively transform the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, through the provision of grants, social services and programmes. The cost of providing grants and other services to our clients, Mister President, was approximately Five Billion Six Hundred Million Dollars (**TT\$5.6B**), as at September 2023. Mister President, in the last eight years we spent close to \$45 Billion dollars on social grants that are issued to our poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago.

SUPPORT FOR SENIOR CITIZENS

The Senior Citizens Pension (SCP)

Mister President, there is a saying, *“Those who respect the elderly pave their own road toward success.”* We here at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services do not take these words lightly.

As at September 2023, there were One Hundred and Eleven Thousand, Seven Hundred and Thirty-Five (**111,735**) senior citizens in receipt of the Senior Citizens Pension and of this figure, Nine Thousand Eight Hundred and Fourteen (**9,814**) persons were added to the database as new beneficiaries in fiscal 2023. At the close of fiscal 2023, the total expenditure stood at Four Billion, Four Hundred and Sixty-Two Million, Four Hundred and Eighty-Seven Thousand, Five Hundred and Forty-Five Dollars (\$4,462,487,545.00).

In addition to this Grant, all recipients now have the opportunity to submit their completed Life and Residential Declaration forms via TTConnect.

The completion of the Life and Residential Certificates can be conducted at any of the eleven (11) Local Public Assistance Boards or at the seven (7) TTConnect offices.

This initiative is a collaboration between the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the National Information and Communication Company Limited (iGovTT) through TTConnect. This service also allows senior citizens to utilise TTConnect's 800-TTCN toll-free number and e-Appointment system to make an appointment to submit their completed Life and Residential Declaration Form.

National Centenarian Programme

In fiscal 2023 the Ministry recognized Eighty-one (81) centenarians in keeping with its National Centenarian Programme. This Programme was launched in 2021 as part of the Ministry's commemoration of International Day of Older Persons. Older persons, who have attained the age of 100 years and over are recognized, honoured and celebrated.

There are several sponsors that partnered with the Ministry to successfully execute this programme, such as KISS Baking Company Ltd., NAMDEVCO and Ultra Pharm Marketing Ltd. The Ministry of Health (MOH) has also been a significant partner. Medical staff from the Regional Health Authorities continue to visit the homes of the centenarians to provide health check-ups. We express sincere thanks to all our sponsors and partners who stayed with us on this journey to recognise our centenarians.

Mister President, today, I invite other companies and agencies to join the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services as we continue to honour and bring joy to the centenarians who contributed to the development of our country.

I want to take this opportunity to encourage all members of this Honourable House, relatives, neighbours, NGOs, CBOs and FBOs to identify and register centenarians on the Programme.

You have a valuable part to play in assisting the Ministry to identify and register the centenarians in your constituencies or communities, so that they can be placed on our list of persons to be celebrated during their 100th Birthday and beyond.

Community Care Programme (CCP)

The Community Care Programme was established to treat with the issues of vulnerable persons who had no other living arrangements available to them. In some cases, these persons who are 18 years and over were abandoned by their relatives while they were hospitalized. When this happens, the Government takes up the responsibility to have them admitted at a Home for Older Persons under the Community Care Programme.

Patients who are categorized as level 1 to 3, and are warded at a public hospital under the **five (5)** Regional Health Authorities are placed at a Home for Older Persons. These persons often do not need urgent hospital care but are in need of accommodation and social support.

Currently, there are **17** Community Care Programme Homes across Trinidad and a total of ninety (**90**) clients in this programme.

The average monthly cost for the care of the clients in the programme is Three Hundred and Twenty-three Thousand, Six Hundred and Thirty-three dollars and Thirty-four Cents (**\$323,633.34**), and the total expenditure as at September, 2023 is approximately Three Million, Six Hundred and Two Thousand, One Hundred and Eighty-One Dollars (**\$3,602,181.00**).

Additionally, between October 2022 and September 2023, there were Eighteen (**18**) new placements in the programme. Five socially displaced persons; two (**2**) individuals from private residences; three (**3**) persons who were decanted from the North Central Regional Health Authority; and eight (**8**) individuals from the North West Regional Health Authority.

Older Persons Information Centre (OPIC)

The Ministry's Older Persons Information Centre (OPIC) Help Desk provides information on activities, initiatives, programmes, services and products for older persons in Trinidad and Tobago.

The OPIC is currently accessed by seniors and members of the public through email, telephone (*800-OPIC (6742)*) and walk-ins.

For fiscal 2023, the Ministry received Four Hundred and Sixty-six (**466**) requests. Of this figure, Two Hundred and Twenty-eight (**250**) were requests for information about the Senior Citizens' Pension, home placement for senior citizens, referrals for geriatric services and questions on ageing.

Provisional data for fiscal 2023 revealed that there were One Hundred and Eight-two (**182**) reported cases of elder abuse in private residences and thirty-four (**34**) in Homes for Older Persons.

A total of 260 cases were reported in FY 2022, at private residences, a decrease of 78 persons. In FY 2022, there were 37 cases reported in Homes for Older persons, a decrease of 3 persons.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services intends to:

1. Continue to conduct additional public sensitization programme for the general public and operators of Senior Citizens Homes
2. Continue to review of the Policy on Ageing to strengthen the programme for social inclusion, education and training
3. Engage in increased collaboration with the TTPS to ensure that reported incidences of elder abuse are thoroughly investigated.

Legislation for Older Persons Homes

The Ministry is reviewing legislation with a view to obtaining full responsibility for Older Persons Homes. Our legal team had discussions with the Ministry of Health on this.

The review of the Homes for Older Persons Act and Regulations, as well as the revision of the accompanying draft Policy is near completion by the Ministry's internal legislative Review Committee.

We have received comprehensive feedback from the Ministry of Health with regard to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' proposed amendments to the Act. The recommendations have been considered with a view to incorporating them into the revised legislation.

The Ministry has also met with key stakeholders such as the Trinidad and Tobago Residential Care Association. The Ministry will further engage with other key stakeholders to finalize the review process for both the Act and the Regulations.

Senior Activity Centres

Mister President, in fiscal year 2024, in demonstration of our commitment to providing a continuum of social support services for senior citizens, the Ministry aims to resume the operation of the Senior Activity Centre Programme. We are thankful for the allocation of (\$1,300,000.00) one million, three hundred thousand dollars, which will help us to resume this important programme.

Mr. President, Senior Activity Centres are multi-service facilities where older persons can come together. Specifically, the Senior Activity Centres facilitate interaction through educational and recreational activities, exercise, outings and social events.

The centres allow persons to engage in several interests such as cooking, gardening, mentorship, physical exercise and craft. We believe every person deserves to age well, with self-worth, dignity, and purpose.

Through the involvement in Senior Activity Centres, older persons are encouraged to lead healthy, active lives. We will open centres on a phased basis, starting with those areas that already have the appropriate facilities.

SUPPORT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

During fiscal 2023, particular emphasis continued to be placed on persons with disabilities. It is with this in mind that the efforts of the staff at the Ministry have been focused on leaving no one behind.

Disability Assistance Grant (DAG)

As at September 2023, there were Twenty-one Thousand, Eight Hundred and Twenty-eight (**21,828**) persons in receipt of the Disability Assistance Grant. This Grant was distributed to persons over the age of 18 years with a disability.

One Thousand, Seven Hundred and Forty-five (**1,745**) persons were added in fiscal 2023.

The total expenditure paid as at September 2023 amounted to approximately Five Hundred and Fifty-One Million, Nine Hundred and Fifty-Five Thousand, Two Hundred and Thirty-Eight Dollars (**\$551,955,238.00**).

Disability Assistance Grant for Minors (DAGM)

For the period October 2022, to September 2023, a total of Three Thousand, Four Hundred and Eighty-three (**3,483**) children received the Disability Assistance Grant for Minors and, of this number, Seven Hundred and Fifty-six (**756**) persons were recorded as new clients of the programme.

The total expenditure on this grant for fiscal 2023 was Sixty-Four Million, Two Hundred and Ninety-Nine Thousand, Nine Hundred and Forty-Five Dollars (**\$64,299,945.00**).

Overall, the persons with disabilities who are adults and children received Six Hundred and Sixty-one Million, Two Hundred and Fifty-five Thousand, One Hundred and Eighty-three Dollars (\$661,255,183.00) in support from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Trinidad and Tobago Disabilities Bill

During fiscal 2023, the Ministry conducted a careful review of the clauses of the Trinidad and Tobago Disabilities Bill.

The Bill contains clauses that specifically focus on;

- Protection from discrimination
- Protection from exploitation and abuse
- Access to information, education and training
- Access to equal standard of healthcare,
- Access to public buildings and parking
- Access to public transport
- Right to employment, redeployment of a person with a disability to other duties if the person becomes disabled
- Rights to obtain insurance
- Duty of healthcare providers,

- Duty of caregivers
- Standards for Service animals
- The Establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago Council of Persons with Disabilities, and many other clauses.

The Ministry also invited Organizations that work with persons with disabilities, Government Ministries, and UWI to provide feedback. Persons with and without disabilities were able to provide feedback through this process.

To date, 15 Ministries, 9 organizations that work with persons with disabilities, UWI and one person with a disability who made an independent submission, responded.

Mister President, I want to emphasize that we don't believe in the top down approach, we believe that persons with disabilities have a voice and must be heard. We believe in their motto – *Nothing for Us without Us*.

This means that they must be included in the discussions about anything that is being proposed or implemented for them. We value their opinion and this is why we took the approach to hear from them.

It is our desire, that when the Bill is brought to the Parliament for debate, it would have gone through a rigorous review so that it is unanimously passed by Members of the House of Representatives and Members of this august Chamber.

The National Therapeutic and Resource Centre

In fiscal 2024, the Ministry intends to complete the refurbishment and finalize the outfitting of the National Therapeutic and Resource Centre with therapeutic equipment to facilitate the FREE treatment/rehabilitation for various categories of disabilities. Mister President, the Centre will serve as a multidisciplinary resource centre for persons with disabilities; providing free assessment, free therapy and free training for persons with disabilities who are poor and vulnerable and are unable to afford to pay for therapy.

A community – based therapeutic approach will be used in order to improve the quality of life experienced by persons with disabilities. They will receive adequate and effective free *habilitative and rehabilitative services*.

The suite of services will be offered in phases. In Phase 1, Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Behavioural Therapy will be offered. In Phase II, Aqua Therapy, Physiotherapy, Music, Art and Drama. Further, parents and caregivers will also be equipped with the necessary skills to continue therapy at home and student social workers and therapists will have the opportunity to be trained at the National Therapeutic and Resource Centre.

Additionally, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Digicel Foundation on Friday 29th September 2023.

This Agreement will see the Digicel Foundation donating approximately **Six Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$600,000.00)** in equipment to outfit the National Therapeutic and Resource Centre. This equipment will be used to furnish the Paediatric and Adult Gym areas, the Daily Living Suite and the Innovative Smart Lab which will provide accessible technologies to persons with various disabilities, allowing them the ability to use computers and access the internet.

The Ministry is in the process of awarding a tender to facilitate the infrastructural upgrades. Work will also be undertaken to install a 7ft x 7ft elevator at the Centre.

Community Therapeutic Services Survey

The Community Therapeutic Services Survey was conducted to assist the Ministry with designing a suitable therapeutic programme for persons with disabilities. The proposed programme is expected to provide affordable, safe, and sustainable therapeutic services in a community setting, to meet the needs of persons with temporary or permanent disabilities.

The scope of the survey was also revised to include a qualitative component to supplement the results of the research conducted in 2022. The relevant focus group sessions were completed in May 2023, and the findings, when analyzed, will also guide the operations and services to be offered under the National Therapeutic and Resource Centre.

Data Collection Exercise on the Disability Assistance Grant and Disability Assistance Grant for Minors

The Disability Affairs Unit also engaged in a data collection exercise geared towards recipients of the Disability Assistance Grant and the Disability Assistance Grant for Minors. This exercise sought to evaluate the clients' experiences when interacting with the Ministry; address issues that may have occurred when applying for the Grant; as well as the impact of these grants on their living situations. The exercise was completed in August 2023. The data analysis is still being conducted.

Assessment of the Disability Sector - In collaboration with the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies (SALISES)

The Ministry has supported a study, commissioned by the Caribbean Developmental Bank (CDB) to assess the situation of persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Lucia, Grenada, and Jamaica. The study was undertaken by researchers from the University of the West Indies.

Further to this, consultative workshops were held in Trinidad on August 9 and 10, 2023 and on August 18, 2023 a virtual workshop was held for persons with disabilities in Tobago. Representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations that provide services to persons with disabilities also attended.

The preliminary findings of this study were presented at each workshop. It is envisaged that the final report, when completed, will enable the social sector to formulate more robust policies, programmes, initiatives and legislation to address the contemporary issues affecting persons with disabilities.

We are committed to working with and for persons with disabilities and we eagerly await the completion of the legislation and the implementation of more programmes and services that will help them to live more independent lives.

SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

Mister President, we believe that, the family, as the foundation of the society contributes to its growth, development and stability. As a result, the programmes and services offered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services are designed to support and empower families.

Social Assistance (Public Assistance)

As at September 2023, there were Sixteen Thousand Two Hundred and Sixty-nine (**16,269**) individuals in receipt of the Public Assistance Grant of which Two Thousand, Four Hundred and Ten (**2,410**) were new beneficiaries. The total expenditure for this Grant to date is Three Hundred and Twenty-Four Million, Six Hundred and Two Thousand, Eight Hundred and Eleven Dollars (**\$324,602,811.00**).

Food Support Programme

As at September 2023, there were Seventeen Thousand, Two Hundred and Thirty-five (**17,235**) households/clients receiving food support. The total expenditure on Food Support Grants as at September 2023 amounted to approximately One Hundred and Thirty-two Million, Six Hundred and Seventy-nine Thousand, Four Hundred and Twenty Dollars (**\$132,679,420.00**). A total of 737 persons were added to the Food Support Programme for the period October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2023.

General Assistance Grants

During the fiscal 2023, the Ministry approved a total of One Thousand, Six Hundred and Thirty-two (1632) applications under the General Assistance Programme. Approximately, Twenty-Eight Million, Eight Hundred and Twelve Thousand, One Hundred and Thirty Dollars (\$28,812,130.00) was expended on this grant.

General Assistance Grants are available for persons who are vulnerable and in dire need of temporary assistance due to crisis and /or emergency situations. These include the:

- Clothing Grant;
- Dietary Grant, Education;
- Funeral;
- Medical Equipment;
- Pharmaceutical;
- Prosthetics;
- Rental Assistance; and the
- School Supplies and
- Education Grants

Disaster Relief Grants

Mister President, Nineteen Million, Four Hundred and Fifty-Two Thousand, Seven Hundred Dollars (**\$19,452,700**) were distributed to Flood Victims for the replacement of household items destroyed during the floods.

A total of Two Thousand Five Hundred and Four (**2,504**) applications were approved, impacting Eight Thousand Eight Hundred and Eleven (**8,811**) beneficiaries.

Two hundred and fifty-eight (**258**) children received the school supplies grant. A total of Three Hundred Two Thousand and Two Hundred (**\$302,200.00**) was expended on the school supplies grant.

Some of the major challenges experienced in processing the Disaster Relief Grant applications particularly with regards to flood relief include:

- The applications lacked critical information needed for effective processing, such as inaccurate or incomplete address information, missing household member information, copies of the identification for the applicant, missing photographic evidence of damage and limited information on it.

- Inability to contact the applicant due to change in contact information and, in the case of persons who were renting, relocation out of the disaster area with no forwarding information.
- Multiple claims for the same household and multiple claims by persons who were either not impacted directly or do not reside in the area that was impacted. These claims upon discovery are being forwarded for further investigation by the relevant authority.

National Social Development Programme (NSDP)

The National Social Development Programme is a social intervention that seeks to improve the standard of living conditions of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, through the provision of basic infrastructure so that their general standard of living at their home is improved.

The Programme offers:

1. The Minor House Repair Assistance Grant, which provides up to Fifteen Thousand Dollars (**\$15,000.00**) in materials only for the repair/upgrade of dwelling houses, and up to Twenty Thousand Dollars (**\$20,000.00**) in materials only to effect repairs/upgrades in the event of a disaster.
2. The Sanitary Plumbing Assistance Grant which provides up to Fifteen Thousand (**\$15,000.00**) in materials only under normal circumstances, and in the event of a disaster for the repair/upgrade of toilet and bathroom facilities for a dwelling house. This grant also allows for the upgrade of outdoor toilet facilities (outhouses/latrines) to indoor facilities, where space permits.
3. The House Wiring Assistance Grant, assists with the wiring or rewiring of dwelling houses under normal circumstances, and in the event of a disaster, where the electrical wiring of the house has been impacted.

Mister President, in fiscal 2023, Two Hundred and Thirty-one (231) households benefitted from these Grants at a cost of approximately One Million, Fourteen Thousand and Two Hundred and Fifty-Two Dollars (\$1,014,252.00).

With an eye on building capacity and increasing empowerment of our clients, the Ministry continued to fund its *Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development (SEED) programme*, which provides a mechanism for citizens who are considered vulnerable, but have an interest in starting or improving their businesses.

Many existing clients of the Ministry who receive welfare grants, have been able to start micro-enterprises which foster positive values such as independence and self-sufficiency. For fiscal 2023, fifty-nine (59) beneficiaries received grant funding in the sum of approximately One Hundred and Ninety-Four Thousand, Nine Hundred and Seventy-Four Dollars (\$194,974.00).

Mister President, this is certainly one of the Ministry's success stories, as one of our primary objectives is to ensure that as many clients as possible be weaned off grants, as their circumstances improve, thereby allowing more persons the opportunity to get assistance.

Adult Education Programme

Mister President, the Ministry is in the process of re-aligning our Adult Education Programme. This Programme will be aligned to our STEP-UP Programme. We help individuals and families through the provision of grants, but we will also empower through the training and development they will receive in this Programme. There is no doubt the mother who received a grant from the SEED Programme and, who enrolls in the Adult Education Programme, would also benefit from the budgeting, report writing, project management and other courses that will transform the way she does business, manages her daily affairs and even help find employment. This is just one example of how the STEP-UP Programme can empower and transform lives.

We intend to hear about many of our clients STEPPING UP and becoming financially independent so that they no longer need to be on the food support grant, public assistance or other grants offered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Strengthening and Supporting Families

The Ministry of Social Development Family Services continues to prioritize the strengthening and supporting of families with the understanding of its role in enabling long term solutions to issues such as poverty, crime, domestic violence and child abuse, among others.

To this end, in fiscal 2023 the National Family Services Division (NFSD) remained unwavering in advancing its mandate of promoting healthy family functioning through preventive, developmental, and remedial programmes and services. As of September 2023, the National Family Services Division provided psychosocial support to Seven Thousand, Two Hundred and Sixteen (7,216) individuals by way of counselling services.

There was an increase in counselling cases (accounting for approximately 4 persons/individuals per household) by way of counselling services. There was an increase in 1377 cases compared to 5,839 cases in FY 2021/22.

In addition to the aforementioned services, the Division regularly engages in **Parenting Workshops** both virtually and in-person. In fiscal 2023, the Ministry continued to host a variety of Virtual and Community Workshops.

During fiscal 2023, **577 participants** took part in these workshops covering topics such as;

- Parenting and Family Violence;
- Parenting for Men;
- Co-parenting and Grandparenting.

National Suicide Prevention Hotline

Mister President, in June 2023, the Ministry launched our *National Suicide Prevention Hotline 800-COPE (2673)*. This 24-Hour Crisis hotline is operated by specially trained personnel to efficiently address crisis issues related to suicidal ideations and other critical challenges faced by citizens.

As part of the ‘*Whole- of- Government Whole- of- Society*’ approach, collaboration with several stakeholders is being maintained through a referral system.

Monitoring of this new Hotline will also facilitate data collection, regarding the number of persons who attempted suicide, experienced suicidal thoughts, as well as other family crisis issues. This data will be used to inform policy development and initiatives, as well as identify gaps to be filled and the relevant interventions and strategies to be identified. In fiscal 2023, the Hotline has received One Thousand, Six Hundred and Twenty-eight (**1,628**) calls.

SUPPORT FOR SOCIALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

During fiscal 2023, the Ministry turned the sod for the construction of an Assessment and Temporary Housing Facility for Socially Displaced Persons in South Quay, Port of Spain.

We at the Ministry acknowledge that each socially displaced person belongs to a family; they are our fathers, our sons, our daughters, our abuelas, our abuelos, our mammoos, our daughters, our brothers; and they need our help. Some of them may be substance abusers, deportees, persons with mental health issues, elderly, ex-prisoners who have been socially displaced and yet others may be fine but just without a stable place to live.

The Assessment Centre and Temporary Housing Facility 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 gain a sense of purpose.

The Centre, 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.

The 5-storey facility that our homeless citizens can call home:

- Is located on a site that is about half an acre, with a floor area of 62,000 square feet;
- It will host a minimum 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, activity centre and a night-user facility with a shelter, washrooms and laundry. Shared communal space includes dining hall, gathering space, counselling rooms and meeting rooms;
- Levels 2, 3 and 4 will house male and female dormitories including TV rooms/gathering space and a library;
- The Top Level features administrative offices and family dormitories with shared living, kitchen and laundry services.

The cost is approximately Fifty-five Million Dollars (\$55,000,000.00).

The Facility will be outfitted with tamper proof furniture and fittings. The price tag approximately \$55 million of this facility may seem substantial to some, but let me remind you that this cost extends far beyond mere numbers. It represents a profound investment in humanity, compassion, and the transformation of lives.

INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE THE EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MINISTRY

Mister President, every one of us on this side, have accepted the challenge to develop and transform our Ministries. As a result, every Ministry is in a much better state than we met it. We, at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services are aware of the number of persons who rely on our services, and have committed to digitize and simplify our processes and procedures so that our clients can access our services with less challenges.

We established a Model Office, which consist of staff from the National Family Services Division, Social Welfare Division and the National Social Development Programme (Sowing Empowerment through Enterprise Development) and is supported by the Transformation and Change Management professionals in the areas of information Technology, Organizational and Process Design, Change Management and Project Management.

A major factor of the transformation effort is the introduction of Family Case Management and the Social Transformation and Empowerment Program - Uplifting People (STEP-UP) initiative. The STEP-UP is a programme of psychosocial, educational and financial support that focuses on the welfare and well-being of families. The aim is to reduce dependency and enable families to become self-sufficient.

ICT Solutions for Improved Social Service Delivery

Mister President, the Ministry is one of the biggest supporters of Government's overall national agenda for a digitised public

service, and has continued to prioritise the digitisation of its social services delivery system for greater efficiency and effectiveness.

The Ministry's digitisation project aims to digitize the Ministry's processes as we move to an Electronic platform. With assistance from the Ministry of Digital Transformation, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services Digital agenda will be in alignment with the overall government mandate.

Our ICT solution will provide end-to-end processing and deliver functionality such as Grant Management, Case Management, Payment file creation, and Cheque Printing. It is intended to capture client information associated with all services provided by the Ministry.

The change management process needed for the successful implementation of this project are currently all in progress.

The impact of this will clearly be seen, Mister President, in reduced instances of double dipping and fraudulent activity,

shorter wait time for the processing of grant applications, and an overall improvement in our customer service interface.

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 an additional centre in Arima, for fiscal 2024. The Tunapuna Public Assistance Board will be split and some of our clients will now have to go to Arima. This will positively impact our clients who will no longer have to travel to Tunapuna.

CONCLUSION

Mister President, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services touches citizens in this country who are poor and vulnerable, and are in need of assistance. We remain committed to helping, empowering and transforming lives. Digitalizing our systems and process will not only deliver more efficient services to our clients but also close any gaps or loop holes which may enable corruption, fraud and error.

We remain resolute in our efforts to ensure that NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND, as we continue to work for all the poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mister President, I thank you and Members of this House for the opportunity to contribute to this Budget Debate for Fiscal 2023/2024.

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

I thank you. God bless you.