



Senator, the Honourable Donna Cox

Minister of Social Development and Family Services

DSFN WORLD DOWN SYNDROME CONFERENCE 2024

Tuesday March 19, 2024

Hyatt Regency

9:00 AM

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I feel especially privileged to be able to join with you once again as we celebrate the Annual Down Syndrome Family Network's Conference in commemoration of World Down Syndrome Day. This year's theme "End Stereotypes," resonates with the human rights approach to persons with disabilities and advances the goals set forth by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

In the preparation of this greeting, some statistics was brought to my attention, which not only startled, but frightened me. In the United States, nearly 70% of babies prenatally diagnosed with Down Syndrome are aborted. In England and Germany, that figure climbs to 90%, and in Iceland, nearly 100% of babies, conceived through no fault of their own, with that extra chromosome, are aborted. Sadly, these countries are not eradicating the condition; they are eradicating the people.

As I look around this audience today, at all the smiling faces, and the hearts I know that are filled with nothing but love, I thank God that I live in Trinidad and Tobago, and I thank God for persons like Glen, Lisa and all those who work so diligently in the Down Syndrome Family Network, and elsewhere, to ensure that the rights, liberties, and freedoms of persons with disabilities are protected.

World Down Syndrome Day is a day not only to celebrate persons with Down Syndrome but a day to spread awareness and to help dispel misconceptions—many of which are unfortunately publicized by persons circulating outdated and incorrect information.

Ladies and gentlemen, the celebration of World Down Syndrome Day is an opportunity to change attitudes, champion inclusion and celebrate the gifts of those born with extra love, extra smiles, extra trust, extra empathy, and one extra chromosome.

It is an opportunity to start seeing people differently, seeing their talent, skills, aspirations, and their dreams. The truth be told, the value of a human being, your intrinsic value and mine, is not dependent upon our social status, physical beauty, mental ability, or any other worldly feature. God, created all of us, and we are all worthy of love for that reason. Unfortunately, our brothers and sisters with Down Syndrome are not always treated with the proper love and respect they deserve.

I can assure you my friends, that we at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will not be voiceless nor out of tune in the defence and promotion of persons with disabilities. We will not lack the words and above all the tangible gestures for encountering and welcoming people with disabilities.

It is for this reason, ladies and gentlemen, that in our new Corporate Headquarters for which we turned the sod recently, particular attention has been paid to ensuring that the building is accessible to all persons with disabilities, and all our facilities contained therein are of similar stock.

I am equally happy to see other Ministries and Government agencies creating and implementing policies, services and programmes to ensure that persons with disabilities are able to stand side by side with the persons who do not have disabilities.

The National Library and Information Systems Authority (NALIS) signed an MOU with the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association to make thousands of books available to persons who are print disabled, visually and hearing impaired. Only on Sunday as well, my Cabinet colleague, the Minister of Sport and Community Development closed an Adaptive Physical Education Workshop in Tobago which trained persons to work with athletes with disabilities.

As Trinidad and Tobago moves to become a more inclusive society, we must learn to overcome the discomfort and fear that at times we feel toward persons with disabilities. We must learn

not only to seek, but also to intelligently invent appropriate tools so that no one is left behind.

Persons with disabilities help us to recognize, accept and promote in each of them, the incomparable value of resilience, strength, determination and hope that is embedded in each of us created by God.

At the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, our primary mission is to provide support to the most vulnerable sectors of our national community, including individuals with disabilities.

In pursuit of this mandate, we highly value and actively cultivate strategic partnerships with both public and private entities, as well as advocacy groups.

It is through the great work of our NGO partners and stakeholders such as the Down Syndrome Family Network and other organisations, that the Ministry has been able to extend its reach

and provide assistance to persons with disabilities. We thank each organization for their valuable input over the years.

In recognition of World Social Work Day, which is celebrated today, I also recognize and thank the social workers in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and other social worker working throughout this country who work diligently to help person with disabilities, ensure they are protected and create opportunities for their development. Your work is appreciated and valued.

At the Ministry, we remain steadfast in our commitment to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a particular emphasis on addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities.

World Down Syndrome Day offers a significant opportunity to spotlight the Sustainable Development Goals that promote inclusivity, rights, and well-being for individuals with Down Syndrome. Specifically, SDG 10: Reduced Inequality, which

calls for substantial efforts to diminish the disparities faced by those with Down Syndrome and other disabilities.

In this regard, organizations dedicated to advancing these goals play a pivotal and indispensable role in ensuring that no one is left behind. Therefore, I must commend the Down Syndrome Family Network for their unwavering commitment to supporting parents and caregivers of individuals with Down syndrome, significantly enriching the lives of those within this community. Your efforts are perfectly aligned with the Ministry's goals and objectives.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our Ministry has collaborated closely with Down Syndrome Family Network, participating in previous conferences, Buddy Walks, and Lots of Sock's promotions.

You consistently demonstrate your capacity to raise awareness and deliver impactful support to individuals with Down Syndrome and other disabilities. Additionally, this organization stand as one of the primary NGOs advocating publicly for legislation aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.

Recognizing the urgency of legislation specifically aimed at

protecting the rights of Persons with Disabilities (PWD), the Ministry is actively expediting its Legislative Agenda. Consequently, an initial draft Trinidad and Tobago Disabilities Bill has been formulated, with ongoing revision efforts currently underway.

In this regard, the Ministry has solicited and received invaluable recommendations from various stakeholders, including 18 Government Ministries, 3 Statutory Bodies, 10 Non-Governmental Organizations and Persons with Disabilities.

These recommendations have been meticulously considered, leading to amendments being incorporated into the Revised Draft Bill. We recently sent our draft Bill to the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago, the Equal Opportunity Commission and the Tobago House of Assembly for their comments. Furthermore, the Ministry's internal Legislative Review Team has undertaken a comprehensive revision process, including a comparative analysis of disability legislation across jurisdictions regionally

and internationally; ensuring that the resulting Bill meets or exceeds international best practices and standards.

The Ministry is nearing completion of the final draft of the revised Bill. The Bill will undergo the requisite legislative drafting process, be submitted to the Legislative Review Committee of the Cabinet and then for the approval of the Cabinet. Noteworthy, provisions of the Draft Bill include, but are not limited to:

- Protection from discrimination against persons with disabilities;
- Access to Education;
- The Right to work and employment;
- Access to Healthcare;
- Access to Housing;
- Access to Auxiliary social services
- The Right to adequate standard of living; and
- The establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago Council for Persons with Disabilities.

Ladies and Gentleman, I encourage each and every one of you to

use this year's theme as a clarion call for wider and more sustained action.

I urge us all to remain steadfast in our collective efforts to challenge and eradicate stereotypes regarding the capabilities of individuals with Down Syndrome, and all persons with disabilities. Today, I ask you to remember an occasion when you felt excluded, so you can help build a community, where everyone is included.

Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls, as you rock your socks, may God bless you.

I thank you.