



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

Contribution to Motion

“The need for the Government to implement an action plan aimed at providing relief measures for victims of fire disasters.”

March 22, 2024

Madam Speaker,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this Motion brought by the Member for Chaguanas East.

Madam Speaker, this Government is committed to addressing the needs of fire disaster victims. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is mandated with the responsibility to address the social challenges of poverty, social inequality and social exclusion. The Ministry provides a safety net which spans tangible and intangible social grants and services to those on the fringes of our society.

During times of disaster, Madam Speaker, the Ministry's role is that of a second responder, and as such, provides relief in the form of grants and/or psychosocial support to individuals and families as they become vulnerable, to unforeseen disaster occurrences.

The Ministry provides a range of General Assistance Grants aimed at facilitating the process of recovery of disaster victims. While the grants do not aim to replace all items destroyed, in terms of the same value, it aims to bring a sense of normalcy to the affected persons. These grants include:

- Household Items up to \$10,000.00 per household;
- Temporary Food Support - \$550.00 per household;
- Clothing up to \$1,000.00 per household member;
- School Supplies up to \$700.00 per child (Primary level) and up to \$1,000.00 per child (Secondary level);
- Rental Assistance Grant up to \$2,500.00 per month for three (3) months;
- Minor House Repair Assistance up to \$20,000.00 in material only;
- Sanitary Plumbing Assistance up to \$15,000.00 in material only;
- House Wiring Assistance up to \$15,000.00 in material only.

The Ministry's Process:

When disaster occurs, the Ministry's response forms part of a comprehensive, collaborative approach, mobilizing a collective strategy to provide aid to individuals affected by disasters.

In the event of a fire, the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service acts as the primary responder, promptly attending to the situation and prepares a fire report. This report is typically available for collection by the affected individual within 1-2 weeks of the incident. Additionally, in certain cases, the Disaster Management Unit of the Regional Corporation may also intervene, conducting assessments and providing necessary relief items to those affected.

Reports to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services of fire incidents may originate from various sources, including the affected individuals themselves, personnel from the Regional Corporation's Disaster Management Unit, via media coverage, Members of Parliament, concerned citizens, and other channels.

Provision of Relief:

- a. **Temporary Food Support** – This grant is the first form of relief provided and is issued either immediately or within 24 hours of receipt of the notification.

- b. **Rental Assistance Grant** – Fire victims who are in need of the Rental Assistance Grant are required to source a landlord who is willing to accept the Invoice Order from the Ministry. Documents required include the fire victim's national Identification Card, fire report, landlord's national Identification Card, rental agreement, proof of property ownership, landlord letter agreeing to accept the Rental Assistance Grant. The assigned Officer will provide support to the client, while ensuring that the landlord meets the requirements, before the client moves into the apartment.

- c. **Household Items Grant** – Grant provides relief up to \$10,000.00 per household, to help fire victims replace basic household furniture and appliances.

The Ministry of Social Development Family Services uses a Standardized Guide, to determine the cost to be given to replace each item. Further, fire victims must source quotations for any of the required basic items.

d. **Clothing Grant** – This grant provides relief up to \$1,000.00 per household member to replace basic clothing lost or damaged. Fire victims must source quotations from suppliers and submit to the Ministry for processing along with a form of identification for each household member.

e. **School Supplies Grant** – Relief is provided up to \$700.00 per child (Primary level) and up to \$1,000.00 per child (Secondary level) to replace basic school supplies lost or damaged. Again, fire victims must source quotations from suppliers and submit to the Ministry for processing along with the birth certificate of each minor child.

Following the submission of required documents, Invoice Orders are issued directly to suppliers and fire victims are contacted by their assigned Officer for collection of items at the supplier.

Madam Speaker for the period October 01, 2019 to March 11, 2024 the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has provided relief to fire victims in the amount of six million sixty-eight thousand eight hundred and nineteen dollars and seventy-eight cents (\$6,068,819.78) representing applications from one thousand, two hundred and twenty-three (1,223) households.

Psychosocial Support - the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services also provides psychosocial Support and counselling services to fire victims through the assignment of a Family Services Social Worker. This officer in addition to assessing the needs of the family will also provide referral and advocacy services.

Having heard all of this, it is clear there is an action plan in place.

Challenges and Recommendations:

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services remains committed to assessing and enhancing its service delivery to better support those affected by disasters.

The Ministry has identified various challenges and devised recommendations to address them, aiming to enhance assistance to disaster victims.

1. We recognize there is a lack of a consistent protocol for notifying the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services about fire events, which places the responsibility on fire victims to initiate the application process for available grants and services. Additionally, delays may occur when clients fail to promptly submit fire reports to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services or some experience delays in receiving the report.

Recommendations/Actions Taken: The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services proposes to launch a public information and education campaign on disaster relief, particularly focusing on fire disasters.

This initiative aims to inform the public about available grants, services and the application process, facilitating quicker and more efficient assistance.

2. Providing immediate accommodation to fire disaster victims presents a significant challenge for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. While the Rental Assistance Grant is available, it relies on clients securing landlords. Initially, victims are encouraged to seek temporary housing with extended family. If this option is not feasible, assistance may be sought through the Regional Corporation Disaster Management Unit for shelter, or from Non-Governmental Organisations for temporary housing. Referrals are also made to the Ministry of Housing for emergency housing.

Recommendations/Actions Taken: To address the challenge of immediate temporary accommodation, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services initiated a project to establish a transitional housing facility.

The first facility, located in Penal, comprises 5 dedicated apartments and an administrative office, currently at 70% completion. Additionally, the Ministry is pursuing the acquisition of another facility in Beaumont Hill, Pointe-à-Pierre, for the same purpose.

3. There are a limited number of suppliers willing to accept Government Invoice Orders, which poses a challenge for fire victims seeking assistance. This process can be difficult at times, with suppliers potentially opting out during grant processing.

Recommendations/Actions Taken: The Ministry is exploring innovative approaches to service delivery, including the development of a social benefits wallet in partnership with the Ministry of Digital Transformation and the United Nations Development Programme.

This wallet will digitize social benefits transfers, enabling clients to make digital payments to suppliers, eliminating the need for Invoice Orders. Discussions are ongoing.

4. The introduction of the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act has complicated the grant administration process for disaster relief, as non-monetary grants are considered under procurement activity by the Office of Procurement Regulation.

In their correspondence to the Ministry dated March 06, 2024 the Office of Procurement Regulation indicated that *‘the process for issuing the respective grants as set out by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, is analogous to social services procurement, that is public procurement for the benefit of social services. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, essentially engages in a public procurement process, which occurs between the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the chosen supplier/contractor.’*

They further concluded that *‘The Office of Procurement Regulation is therefore of the view that the said “non-monetary grants’ fall within the remit and scope of the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act.*

Accordingly, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is required to revise and resubmit its Special Guidelines for the Office of Procurement Regulation’s consideration.’

Recommendations/Actions Taken: The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is in the process of revising its special guidelines for Office of Procurement Regulation’s approval to support its grant administration activities for disaster events.

5. We are currently actively pursuing the recruitment of additional human resources to support our disaster response and relief efforts.

6. Enhanced collaboration among the various Ministries, Departments, and Agencies involved in responding to fire victims' needs is necessary.

Recommendations/Actions Taken: Stakeholder discussions are encouraged for a comprehensive strategy to strengthen response and relief provision.

The Ministry is also pursuing the development of a Shock Responsive Social Protection policy which will factor the input of the various stakeholder agencies.

Ultimately, the creation of such a policy is expected to improve the robustness of the country's shock responsiveness and overall resilience in times of distress. It is envisioned that the policy would formalize linkages between agencies and establish clearly stipulated roles and responsibilities for the various entities.

Hence, the shock-responsive social protection policy, once implemented should facilitate greater support and cooperation amongst the various stakeholders in the sector which will

positively redound to the benefit of the victims of disasters including those affected by fire.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services reaffirms its unwavering commitment to fulfilling its mandate of helping, empowering, and transforming lives.

In this pursuit, the Ministry remains dedicated to ensuring that robust systems are installed to detect, respond and monitor disaster events, so that no one is left behind.

I thank you Madam Speaker.