



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

Appropriation Bill 2025

October 4, 2024

Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the 2024 -2025 Financial Appropriation Bill.

Madam Speaker, the Honourable Minister of Finance's presentation is to be commended, as indeed it has been praised by several notable voices in the national community.

I heard the member for Chaguanas West speak about no transformational agenda, at the end of my presentation you will hear about transformational agenda where the budget is concerned.

They have expressed appreciation for this Government's ability to balance its care for the national community with prudence. It was nothing short of a comprehensive presentation of the plans that the Government has, for the continued development of our country and citizens. The current budget and proposed plans outlined in the Budget

ensures that no one deserving of Government's assistance is left behind.

Madame Speaker, The Budget emphasizes the Government's commitment to sustainable growth and diversification, it also highlights its resilience in the face of global challenges. Additionally, this Government continues to invest substantial resources to support poor and vulnerable persons throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago.

According to the Minister of Finance, *“The Government has been recalibrating our economic framework to satisfy the needs of the national community, especially the poor and vulnerable, while never losing sight of our overarching objective of economic sustainability”*. The Government's developmental agenda focuses on every person in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, because of the extensive collaboration that took place between the Ministers of Finance and Planning and Development, today, I would also like to take this opportunity to recognise the work of the dedicated, and often unheralded, public servants of both Ministries.

Madam Speaker, just as it was the tenth budget presentation of the Honourable Minister of Finance, so too it was the tenth response of the Members of the Opposition. And Madam Speaker, and when you compare the presentations on this side with what has been emanating from the other side, they could not be more starkly contrasting. On this side, we have stamina and depth, while on the other side there is shallowness, and a demonstration of vacuity that not even their Constituents are impressed.

On this side, you hear the comprehensive plans that actually saved and resuscitated the economy, while on the other, you had a regurgitation of all that had this country careening perilously close to the precipice of IMF intervention. On the one hand you saw the fruits of fiscal prudence, while on the other hand, we heard of a call for a return to the wastefulness that ran rampant through the 2010 to 2015 era.

We on this side are confident that in the same way the national community rejected that cleverly contrived coalition of the desperate in 2015, in 2020, and in every election in between, so too they will be rejected again in 2025.

I am appreciative of this initiative, programme or service that has been articulated in the Budget to help, empower and transform the lives of persons. I understand the member for Chaguanas West mentioned that the needs of the vulnerable are ignored. Member for Chaguanas West you will hear about all the we have been doing for the vulnerable. Some examples of the fiscal measures in this year's Budget which I must highlight because of course the vulnerable are affected:

- **The Online Numeracy Programme for Adults** - Through this programme, poor and vulnerable persons who pursued literacy training through the Adult Literacy Tutors Association can increase their ability to use basic maths and increase their chances of being employed in a job where they are required to manage money and provide numerical reports.

Some of these adults may not be comfortable working with numbers or formulas and they often may seek assistance for explanation or guidance

from academically inclined family members or even a neighbour.

The decision to provide this opportunity for Adults would empower them with the knowledge and confidence to make decisions in matters of income and expenditure. I see that this cost will be \$3.2 million dollars.

Another programme that also affects the poor and vulnerable would be:

- **The Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate - Remedial Mathematics Programme** – will also be implemented for students to pass the subject. Some poor and vulnerable parents may not be able to afford to pay for them to do remedial classes or to go to extra lessons and this indeed is a programme which will assist them so they will be able to pass Maths. Once this is implemented, is expected to result in an increase in the mathematics pass rate. A

total of \$3.5 million dollars has been allocated for this programme.

- Through the **National Digital Literacy Project**, numerous vulnerable citizens (young persons, adults and senior citizens). This is the part that I am happy about as we are now trying to implement very soon, a digital wallet where you would not have to have checks, so therefore we want to be able to educate our elderly and to also get them in tune with the digital divide and we are happy for this programme. The Ministry is having the discussions and this will provide the opportunity for our clients to access their grants easily. So the need to develop to gain digital skills, thus increasing their knowledge and empowering them to thrive in this digitally driven world. A key component of this course will be

teaching persons about the Digital Wallet and how to use it. The Ministry of Social Development is having discussions to develop the Digital Wallet. This will provide the opportunity for our clients to access their grants easily.

The need to develop the digital skills in communities where there is a digital divide is the action of a responsible Government, dedicated to ensuring that the Global Digitalization evolution reaches every home and validates our position to help, empower and transform lives. This programme will cost \$5 million and will be available to all including the vulnerable.

- **The Digital Literacy Certification for Students** – numerous poor and vulnerable children who would not have acquired digital literacy skills due to the digital divide, now have the opportunity to not only acquire the knowledge and digital literacy skills but

they will get certified. This Government is committed to equipping the next generation to succeed in this increasingly competitive digital global landscape. This is expected to cost \$2.9 million.

- I applaud the Government's continued commitment to provide a \$1,000 **Book Grant** to support 20,000 poor and vulnerable primary and secondary school students. This will help to defray the cost of schoolbooks.

Madam Speaker, we at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services feel a sense of gratitude to see that two of the qualifying criteria of the book grant includes – parents of students with disabilities, and parents and guardians of students in receipt of grants from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. A total of \$20 million dollars have been allocated for the school

book grants. These are all clients of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services who are beneficiaries.

- I also publicly support the **exemption of taxes on all sporting equipment (with the exception of clothing)** in an effort to encourage healthy lifestyles. The estimated cost for this is \$20 million. The infectious power of sports which has transformed lives and promotes a collective ability to socialize through responsible behaviour, is a welcome approach by the Government to address community issues where vulnerable families reside.

There is no one right approach when dealing with complex matters that require various levels of family intervention.

- Madam Speaker, another noteworthy initiative is the **Building Block Project**. This crime management strategy adopts a multi-stakeholder, public health approach to crime and violence. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is

involved in this and we provide psychosocial support to families in communities.

- **The increase of the minimum wage from \$20.50 per hour to \$22.50 for government workers** will result in an improved standard of living for 5,100 workers at MTS, 10,000 workers in CEPEP and 6,200 workers in URP, plus other minimum wage earners in the public sector. Increasing the minimum wage for Public Servants would certainly benefit low income families across Trinidad and Tobago and this will cause an improved level of financial support and stability.

Madam Speaker, it is therefore really appalling to hear Members on the other side describe as insulting, the proposed increase in the minimum wage for public sector workers. Without indicating how they will fund larger increases, they have instead heaped scorn on this government's decision to enhance the lives of CEPEP, URP and MTS

employees who stand to benefit from the increased minimum wage. **It begs the question Madam Speaker, what does the other side have against the poor and vulnerable in our society?**

- **The Housing and Village Improvement Programme** provides low income families with the opportunity to get free starter homes. To date, over 800 starter houses have been constructed by the Land Settlement Agency. This Programme has taken poor and vulnerable families from inadequate houses to an improved standard of living of which they can be proud.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services salutes the prudent actions of the Government to improve the housing conditions and community facilities of residents in rural and peri-urban areas across this country.

As the upward journey of social equality continues, having a necessity of home security is of paramount importance for the building of a stable and well nurtured family life. This project is the manifestation of Goal 3 of Vision 2030, which states that “*All citizens will have access to adequate and affordable housing.*”

Madam Speaker, these are just a few of the initiatives that will be implemented in 2025.

These initiatives demonstrate this Government’s commitment to enhancing the well-being of all citizens of this country, particularly those who are poor and vulnerable, and I must say including the elderly.

Madam Speaker, I can tell you that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services remains committed to its mandate to help, empower and transform the lives of

all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Our commitment to the citizens of this country is without parallel and every day of the year, we set out to further develop their resilience to the extent, where they can wean themselves out of dependency, as they require less interventions from the Ministry.

It is in this context that I am deeply appreciative of the measures that have been articulated in this year's Budget, under the theme *“Steadfast and Resolute - Forging Pathways to Prosperity”*.

Achievements

Poor and Vulnerable - Social Safety Net Initiatives

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services plays a critical role in Trinidad and Tobago's efforts to support its vulnerable populations, allocating substantial resources to social services. The major initiatives for the fiscal year 2024 focused on

providing financial, social and psychological support to senior citizens, adults and persons with disabilities, and low-income families.

During fiscal 2024, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services expended over \$5.1 Billion Dollars to provide a suite of grants designed to support the poor and vulnerable.

I am confident that there are not many countries in this Region or across the developed nations of the world, that can truly compare the levels and diversity of social service assistance afforded to their citizens.

Our stellar reputation for serving the poor and vulnerable extends beyond our shores. The World Bank, in a recent Social Expenditure Draft Report, stated that social protection expenditure in Trinidad and Tobago, surpasses that of the rest of the Caribbean and Latin

America by 17%. This excludes two much larger countries – Brazil and Argentina.

Madam Speaker, through the work of this Ministry, improvements in the standard of living have been facilitated for a wide cross section of the most vulnerable persons in our society as follows:

Public Assistance

For fiscal 2024, the Ministry provided Public Assistance Grants to Fifteen Thousand, Six Hundred and Fifty-four (**15,654**) persons at a total expenditure of Two Hundred and Ninety-one Million, Two Hundred and Twenty-seven Thousand, Six Hundred and Seventy-eight Dollars (**\$291,227,678.00**).

Of that figure, Madam Speaker, One Thousand, Five Hundred and Eighty-Seven (**1,587**) persons were new beneficiaries to this programme.

Food Support Programme

As at September 2024, there were Fourteen Thousand, Nine Hundred and Seventy-nine (**14,979**) households benefitting from Food Support Grants, to the value of One Hundred and Sixteen Million, Three Hundred and Eighty-eight Thousand, Eight Hundred and Twenty Dollars (**\$116,388,820.00**).

General Assistance Grants

For fiscal 2024, there were Six Hundred and Two (**602**) applications approved under the General Assistance Grant Programme, at a cost of Eight Million, Two Hundred and Eighty-five Thousand, Nine Hundred and Forty-three Dollars (**\$8,285,943.00**).

These grants benefitted vulnerable persons who needed temporary assistance in the areas of:

- Household Items;
- Clothing;
- Dietary;
- Funeral Assistance;
- Medical Equipment;
- Pharmaceutical;
- Prosthetics;
- Rental Assistance; and,
- School Supplies.

National Social Development Programme:

Our 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 various grants such as:

- **Minor House Repair Assistance (MHRA):**

This grant is intended to provide up to **\$15,000.00** in materials only for the repair/upgrade of dwelling houses and up to **\$20,000.00** in materials only to effect repairs/upgrades in the event of a disaster. Four Hundred and Seventy-Nine (479) persons benefitted from this grant. This cost, Two Million, Two Hundred and Seventy-three Thousand, Four Hundred and Sixty-five Dollars and Fifty-six cents (2,273,465.56).

- **Sanitary Plumbing Assistance (SPA):**

We also have the Sanitary Plumbing Assistance Grant is intended to provide up to **\$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 latrines to indoor toilet facilities, where space permits.

This would have positively impacted One Hundred and Sixty-nine (169) beneficiaries (Five Hundred and Sixty-eight Thousand, Nine Hundred and Three Dollars and Fifty-five cents -\$568,903.55).

- **House Wiring Assistance Grant** - One Hundred and Thirty-eight persons (138) persons benefitted from this grant. This Grant is intended to provide assistance for the wiring or rewiring of dwelling houses under normal circumstances and in the event of a disaster which has impacted the electrical wiring of the house – we have spent for fiscal 2024

(Four Hundred and Ninety-six Thousand, Fifty-three Dollars and Twenty-one cents - \$496,053.21).

The Ministry also continues to provide mechanisms to empower citizens who are poor and vulnerable through the Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development (SEED) Programme. This truly gives life to this year's budget theme: ***“Steadfast and Resolute - Forging Pathways to Prosperity”***

To date, One Hundred and Seventy-nine (**179**) persons benefitted at a cost of **Seven** Hundred and Fifty-eight Thousand, Five Hundred and Fifty-four Dollars and Ninety-five cents (**\$758,554.95**). These grants target persons who have an interest in starting or improving their own businesses but are unable to gain access to funding through the regular financial institutions. This Government provided these budding entrepreneurs with the opportunity they need to become self-sufficient.

We assist them, because we believe ultimately in the innate goodness of our people, and their desire to improve their own lives, without having to depend on anyone, giving them the opportunity to forge a pathway to prosperity.

- **Disaster Relief Grants** – For this period Two Hundred and Sixty (260) households also benefitted from disaster relief grants. A total of One Million, Five Hundred and Sixty-two Thousand, Seven Hundred and Fourteen Dollars and Forty-one Cents (**\$1,562,714.41**) was expended.

Temporary Food Cards were also provided to One Hundred and Five (105) households affected by natural disasters, this is not the normal food card this is the food card for persons who experienced natural disasters, such as flooding. The expenditure for the temporary food cards totalled Fifty-eight Thousand, Eight Hundred and Fifty Dollars (**\$58,850.00**).

Support for Older Persons

Senior Citizens Pensions:

As at September 2024, there were One Hundred and Fourteen Thousand, Two Hundred and Forty-two (**114,242**) citizens in receipt of the Senior Citizens Pension. We disbursed Four Billion, Fifty-nine Million, Four Hundred and Twenty-one Thousand, Two Hundred and Eighty-seven Dollars (**\$4,059,421,287.00**).

Last fiscal, Nine Thousand, Six Hundred and Forty-seven (**9,647**) persons were new beneficiaries added to our list of SCP. This year, Madam Speaker, the number of persons receiving the senior citizens' pension increased over the last year.

Senior citizens have continued to use TTCONNECT to access services from the Ministry. Senior Citizens' Pension recipients are encouraged to submit their Life and Residential Declaration through forms from TTConnect or any of our Local Public Assistance Board Offices, as well as to utilise TTConnect's 800-TTCN toll free number and E-appointment system to submit their completed declaration forms. Beside using TT Connect one can also come into the office or one can go online.

The **Community Care Programme (CCP)** caters for Level 1 to 3 patients, who are 60 years and over who have been discharged by the hospital because they are no longer in need of their care but are essentially in need of accommodation and social support. These patients are often abandoned by their families. Madam Speaker, it baffles me how children can leave their parents in hospital and abandon them and we have that happening where persons abandon their families in the hospital and the Ministry now has to step in to move them out of the

hospital so we can free up beds, so I urge persons at this time to look out for each other, look out for their families and take care of their parents.

I want to quote the bible on this, which says in Exodus 20:12 says, Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that you may live long on the earth. Blessings will always come upon those who take good care of their parents. Currently, there are Fourteen (14) Community Care Programme Homes across the country and a total of Eighty-seven (87) clients benefitting from this programme at a total annual cost to the taxpayer of Three Million, Six Hundred and Sixty-four Thousand, Five Hundred and Eighty-Two Dollars (\$3,664,582.00). Between October 2023 and September 2024, twelve (12) new clients were placed into the programme. **I just want to reiterate how important it is to take care of each other. I want you to know that the Ministry of Social Development takes up this cost, so when they talk about the Ministry and the Government don't care about the vulnerable persons**

and there is no talk about the elderly, look the money we are spending here, this is part of the money that we are spending on the elderly. We are paying three Million, Six Hundred and Sixty-four Thousand, Five Hundred and Eighty-Two Dollars (\$3,664,582.00) for persons abandoned in the hospitals.

Homes for Older Persons

The Ministry also currently provides financial support for the operation of Nine (9) Homes for Older Persons. A total of One Hundred and Six (**106**) persons have been provided with residential accommodation through these Homes.

National Centenarian Programme

Madam Speaker, I move now to focus on our super seniors. Over the last fiscal year. A total of Sixty (**60**) Centenarians has been recognised and celebrated for 2024. We have a total of Two Hundred and Thirteen (213) persons registered in our system. It does not mean

there are only 213 persons over 100, these are persons we have recognised. This programme recognises, honours and celebrates older persons who obtained the age of 100 years and over. I encourage all members of this House, relatives, neighbours, non-governmental organizations, community based organizations and faith based organizations to identify and register centenarians on the Programme.

Senior Transport

The **Free Bus Pass** facility for older persons as well as those receiving social service support, provided by the Ministry, in collaboration with the Public Transport

Services Corporation (PTSC), has continued unabated, with a total of Five Million, Nine Hundred and Forty-Eight Thousand, Five Hundred and Eighty-Nine Dollars (**\$5,948,589.00**) paid to the PTSC for this facility. For persons 60 years and older the sum of Five Million, Five Hundred and Thirty-Two Thousand, Nine Hundred and Twelve Dollars (\$5,532,912.00) was spent. Elderly persons used the service One Million, Two Hundred and Twenty-Nine, Five Hundred and Thirty-Six (1,229,536) times. For persons who receive the Public Assistance Grant and the Disability Assistance Grant a total of Four Hundred and Fifteen Thousand, Six Hundred and Seventy-Seven Dollars (\$415,677.00) was expended to cover the cost and they used the system Ninety-Two Thousand, Four Hundred and Fifty-One (92,451) trips.

I want to make this clear, the Ministry is taking up the cost for this.

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 2024, the Ministry received one hundred and eighty-six (**186**) requests for information on the senior citizens' grant, home for older persons' placement, referrals for geriatric services and questions about ageing. Sadly, Madam Speaker, provisional data for fiscal 2024 revealed that there were one hundred and seventy-one (**171**) reported cases of elder abuse in private residences and nineteen (**19**) in Homes for Older Persons. These are investigated by officers of the Division of Ageing and the required interventions made.

Support for Persons with Disabilities

Disability Assistance Grant (persons 18 years and over)

A total of Twenty-one Thousand, Six Hundred and Thirty-nine (21,639) persons benefitted from the Disability Assistance Grant in fiscal 2024 in the sum of Five Hundred and Fifty-Two Million, One Hundred and Eighteen Thousand, Two Hundred and Fifty-Six Dollars (**\$552,118,256.00**). Over the last year One Thousand and Thirty-One (**1,031**) beneficiaries were added to the programme.

Disability Assistance Grant Minors (DAGM) (under 18 years)

A total of three thousand, eight hundred and ninety-seven (**3,897**) persons benefitted from the Disability Assistance Grant for Minors at a total expenditure of seventy-three million, four hundred and twenty-six thousand, two hundred and ninety-five dollars (**\$73,426,295.00**).

Of this number, five hundred and sixty-one (**561**) children were added as new clients of the programme. There was a sixteen percent (16%) increase in the number of children receiving the Disability Assistance Grant for Minors, over the last fiscal year.

Madam Speaker, on May 1, 2024, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) introduced new guidelines for the administration of the Disability Assistance Grant for Minors (DAGM). A new criterion was designed to target families who are facing financial hardship, therefore ensuring that assistance is directed to those who require it most.

These updated guidelines are a crucial step toward ensuring that those eligible and most in need families receive the support to assist their children with disabilities.

This is in keeping with our mandate to improve the efficacy of our social safety net programmes.

Disability Legislation

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to advise that we have completed the revision of the Trinidad and Tobago Disability Bill after receiving feedback from several Ministries, Agencies, NGOs and persons with disabilities. We are awaiting feedback from only two key stakeholders, before moving on to the Legislative Review Committee.

National Therapeutic and Resource Centre

During Fiscal 2024, the Ministry focused on the refurbishment and outfitting of the Centre.

The facility will serve as a multidisciplinary resource centre for persons with disabilities, providing free

assessment, free therapy and free training for persons with disabilities who cannot afford to pay.

Outfitting of the Facility is also being undertaken and include inter alia:

- The daily living suite - (1) room;
- The Innovative Technology NGO Resource Room.

This room is outfitted for NGOs, parents, children with disabilities and the community of persons with disabilities. It is equipped with computers featuring assistive software, such as screen readers and other vital tools that make technology accessible to persons with disabilities. Additionally, we have incorporated cutting-edge Virtual Reality headsets, allowing users to be engaged in virtual immersive experiences.

The NGO Resource Room is a space for training and capacity building resources that will foster independence and promote a more inclusive society, as NGOs and

families are equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to help and empower individuals with disabilities.

This centre also contains a:

- Swimming pool to aid in aqua-therapy;
- Paediatric Assessment room;
- Adult Gym; and
- Therapy Rooms.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry is working assiduously towards operationalising this first of its kind, state of the art centre in fiscal 2025.

Seminar on Sexual and Reproductive Health

Recognising the needs of the vulnerable community of women with disabilities, the Disability Affairs Unit of the Ministry hosted its inaugural Sexual and Reproductive Health Seminar for women with disabilities in May of this year.

Approximately fifty (**50**) women with disabilities, their caregivers, advocates and NGOS serving the community of persons with disabilities benefitted from this seminar.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that poor reproductive health accounts for a significant burden of disease globally, with women of reproductive age bearing a substantial part of this burden. Women with disabilities face unique challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health services, including attitudinal barriers and limited physical access.

Persons with disabilities are more vulnerable to infections if they do not have access to information, education and services to ensure prevention of infections and to lead healthy sexual lives.

The Ministry also partnered with the Ministry of Health to provide services such as breast examinations, HPV

vaccinations, nutritional, and mental health advice to the attendees. Participants were also provided with the requisite knowledge to make informed decisions as it pertains to their sexual and reproductive health, and family planning.

Provision of Subsidised Mobile Devices

To improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities, the Ministry through the Disability Affairs Unit, continued to collaborate with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT).

The Ministry verified five hundred and twenty-nine (**529**) applications for the provision of subsidised mobile devices for persons with disabilities submitted to the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, while the Ministry continues to work towards meeting the needs of the vulnerable in our

society, efforts to ensure that this is backed by concrete findings are also being undertaken.

Baseline Study on Disability Assistance Grants

In fiscal 2024, the Disability Affairs Unit and the Social Investigations Division of the Ministry collaborated to conduct a study to assess the grants and services available to Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), so as to ensure that their needs are being satisfied and met. The study's findings will be utilised as a standard to guide future initiatives as the Ministry works to fulfil its mandate regarding persons with disabilities.

It would also be useful in identifying gaps in the quality of service and delivery to persons with disabilities and to highlight areas for improvement.

Family Services

Madam Speaker, we recognize that families are the bedrock of society and as such, we are advancing our

mandate to promote healthy functioning families through the work of the National Family Services Division (NFSD). So I may remind this Honourable House and by extension the national community, we do much more than give out grants.

For fiscal 2024 the National Family Services Division provided thorough preventive, developmental, and remedial programmes and services to members of the public.

Information on healthy family life was disseminated through:

- Community workshops;
- The Radio Programme: *It's Family Time, Let's Talk*;
- Outreaches;

- Lectures upon request by various organisations (Governmental and Non-Governmental).

During the period October 2023 to August 2024, the Family Services provided psychosocial support to individuals and families through the delivery of the following services:

- Counselling – six thousand, one hundred and twelve (**6112**) beneficiaries
- Parenting support / Counselling – two hundred and twenty-five (**225**) beneficiaries
- Advocacy – two hundred and twenty-six (**226**) beneficiaries
- Referrals and other forms of support – three hundred and seventy-three (**373**) beneficiaries
- Crisis Interventions – thirty-eight (**38**) beneficiaries

Suicide Prevention

Madame speaker, having observed trends in its thrust to cater to the needs of the society, the Ministry was honoured to launch the **National Suicide Prevention Crisis Hotline 800-COPE (2673)**.

Madam Speaker, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was observed that there was no mental health first aid available to the public 24 hrs / 7 days a week.

In light of this and considering the statistics of persons attempting and committing suicide, the Ministry collaborated with many stakeholders in a ‘Whole- of- Government Whole- of- Society’ approach, to put measures in place to address this issue head-on.

We then took a decision to launch the Suicide and Crisis Hotline.

An analysis of the data collected revealed that 65% of the persons in need of this type of support, were outpatient clients of mental health clinics. These persons were not compliant with their medication. Through this facility we were able to reroute them back to their treatment plan. Additionally, 35% percent of the persons who called the hotline experienced some form of situational crises including family, spousal and financial issues.

For the period October 2023 to August 2024 the hotline received three thousand, four hundred and fifty-nine (**3,459**) calls. Under the remit of the National Family Services Division, this 24-Hour Crisis hotline continues to be operated by specially trained personnel who efficiently and confidentially address crisis issues related to suicidal ideations and other critical issues faced by citizens.

At this juncture, I repeat, we are much more than just grants.

Transformational Agenda

Madam Speaker, the Government continues to prioritise digital transformation with a view to improve productivity and enhance service delivery, through its ongoing collaborative project between the Ministry of Digital Transformation (MDT) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The Ministry remains committed to transforming Social Service Delivery through the development of a comprehensive, automated information system that will be used to administer various programmes, grants and services coupled with a “one stop approach” at Social Services Centres. To this end, we have partnered with the Ministry of Digital Transformation - Digital Delivery

Unit for guidance and support in fulfilling this initiative.

The key areas of the partnership include:

- Technical advice and support for the solution implementation which would enable the integrated service delivery model to better meet the needs of clients. This integrated approach will address access to timely data to support processing of applications.
- Organizational Design: Guidance and implementation support for the Ministry's Transformation Programme, towards a streamlined service;
- Process Re-engineering: Review, mapping and reengineering of the Ministry's processes to enable the transformation of the Service Centers;
- Change Management: Advice on Change Management activities (change leadership, capacity building, stakeholder engagement) to prepare the Ministry for the change and to facilitate continued efforts;
- Knowledge Transfer and Capacity Development.

During fiscal 2024, the following ICT initiatives continues to improve the Ministry's social services delivery through

- **Electronic-ID and Interoperability Project:** This project will facilitate the realization of real time access to relevant records, with a view to improving the time it takes to process applications.
- **Digital Archiving Project:** Focuses on the digitisation of client records resulting in real-time accessibility and optimised processing, as well as ready access to client documents required for processing grants.
- **The Benefits Wallet** focuses on real-time service delivery updates to victims of disasters who opt-in to this application and notification process.

The Ministry is collaborating with the MDT and the UNDP to develop and operationalise this electronic app designed to provide clients with a seamless step by step progress updates and access to their benefits.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry will continue to develop this integrated approach to service delivery, focused on improved productivity and optimizing the time it takes to receive approved benefits through the use of digital technology.

Social Welfare Initiatives

Arima Office - The Local Public Assistance Board of St. George East was divided in order to create the Local Public Assistance Board of Arima. The Ministry recognised the need to align Social Welfare Boards with Regional Corporations and Boroughs.

This will ensure that poor and vulnerable clients in the Local Public Assistance Districts of Tunapuna and

Arima will be more effectively serviced and there will be a more equitable distribution of the workload for the Social Welfare staff. Clients in the Borough of Arima and environs will no longer be required to travel to the Local Public Assistance Board of St. George East in Tunapuna but will be able to access social welfare and other services in their own district. The tender went out for the outfitting of the Arima Office which will be opened in fiscal 2025.

Conclusion

In concluding Madam Speaker, I must convey my thanks for the opportunity to have shared just a few of the achievements of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and our focus, which I have had the distinct honour and privilege to lead in Fiscal 2024.

I must also convey my gratitude to the Honourable Prime Minister for his continued faith and confidence in me to

lead this Ministry and the Permanent Secretary, Executive Team and staff of the Ministry for their dedication and commitment over the period under review.

Madam Speaker, as so well-articulated by the Minister of Finance on Monday last, Trinidad and Tobago has had to grapple with the almost relentless technological, human resource, fiscal, climate and other changes over the last Fiscal year and yet, by God's grace we have persevered.

As we confront the new and continuing challenges that await us in Fiscal 2025, through you Madam Speaker, I wish to share with the national community the

commitment that we in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will remain steadfast and resolute in our drive to serve the most vulnerable of our citizens as we all forge pathways to our country's continued prosperity.

I thank you.

May God bless you.