



MEDIA STATEMENT

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Priority: HIGH

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Comments on the National Budget by Minister of Social Development and Family Services

Senator, The Honourable Donna Cox is today confirming the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' readiness to support the Government's plans to revitalize and reset the economy through a multifaceted, wide-ranging and responsive social safety net. These comments follow the presentation of the Financial Appropriation Bill 2020/2021 by the Honourable Colm Imbert, Minister of Finance, this afternoon. The theme for this year's budget presentation was *Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation*.

In keeping with this year's budget theme, as well as, many of the concerns that were outlined in July's Report of the Roadmap for Recovery Committee 2020, the areas of *empowerment* and *resilience* will be among the most critical on the agenda for recovery and sustainability. As such, the objectives and input of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services remain key in this regard, as the *MSDFS serves as the voice of the most vulnerable*, particularly in times of social and economic crisis.

The Ministry intends to continue to maintain the human-centred approach in the delivery of its social services, with continued payments of all grants, inclusive of public assistance, senior citizens pension and disability assistance. The COVID-19 experience has resulted in an expansion of the safety-net offerings, and as such, the implementation of the National Social Mitigation Plan will be top priority in the Ministry's stream of work during this fiscal period.

It is the Ministry's intention to strengthen and improve the mechanisms associated with social services delivery. This will be done through a framework of institutional re-engineering and digital transformation. In this regard, the following will be undertaken:

- The establishment of a Social Support and Empowerment (SSE) Unit, for the integration of Government grants via a *single door policy* to social services. Here, information on a register of Agencies and services accessible to the vulnerable will be made available. A call-centre will also support this initiative;
- The implementation of an Integrated Services Enterprise Management System (ISEMS) which will represent the modernized way of providing social services at the Ministry in terms of processes and systems for greater targeting and information management of the vulnerable in our country;
- The launch and implementation of the Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme – Uplifting People (STEP) model to provide vulnerable populations with re-tooling strategies to improve their quality of life. A transformation in our Value System will be critical here.

- Implementation of the National Services Card System which will track vulnerable populations and take social services to those most in need.

To complement the thrust towards the social and economic empowerment of citizens, and in keeping with efforts to enhance this country's contributions to the establishment of a global digital society, the report by the Roadmap Committee also outlined the need to strengthen social safety net programmes with the use of technology. In this regard, it is *necessary to ensure continued accountability, transparency and responsiveness at the core of the provision of essential social services*. Therefore, digitization of all social services and Government grants will be critical, particularly as more focus will be placed on the following groups, who were affected by the pandemic:

- Families
- Single Mothers
- Women and Children
- Persons with disabilities
- Older Persons
- At-Risk Youths
- Socially Displaced

The Ministry welcomes the placement of additional disposable income in the hands of families. This will apply to situations where an individual earns \$7,000. 00 or less per month, that person will not be required to pay income tax.

In keeping with the intention to create a digital society (via MI-FI), the MSDFS endorses the initiative of the Government to expand existing Wi-Fi hotspots and establish more internet cafes in all areas of Trinidad and Tobago. This will allow families who do not have access in their homes and surrounding areas to be provided with this service to assist online teaching and learning. The MSDFS will play an important role in this regard in identifying families in need.

The Ministry intends to work closer in the community, with NGOs, civil society organisations and community groups; as well as the private sector, with a view to a more integrated approach to social services delivery. The Ministry remains committed to its thrust in maintaining the high levels of investment in the social sector, in order to mitigate existing and emergent economic impacts.

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