



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

Appropriation Bill 2023-2024

House of Representative

October 10, 2023

Thank you, Madam Speaker for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill 2023-2024. I wish to congratulate the Honourable Minister of Finance for his comprehensive Budget presentation, and his team at the Ministry of Finance who often go unrecognized and unheralded, for their hard work, research and preparation that assisted the Minister. I would like to also thank the Minister of Planning and Development and her team for their contribution as well with regards to the PSIP.

Madam Speaker, the theme of the fiscal package for 2023-2024 “Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth”, according to the Minister of Finance, speaks to “this Government’s commitment to building capacity, developing resilience and maintaining responsiveness in the public sector.”

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, will ensure that we continue to help, and empower our clients so that they will develop the capacity and resilience

required to the point where there is little or no need for the Ministry's intervention.

Madam Speaker, the entire thrust of the Minister's presentation is consistent with the Ministry's declared intention to align all its programmes and policies with the Government's National Development Strategy (Vision 2030), as well as the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through the Sustainable Development Goals. Both frameworks fully support the thrust to achieve social inclusion among the vulnerable populations by promoting strategies for sustainable livelihoods to *Leave No One Behind*.

Indeed, we are even more grateful to hear from the Budget Presentation, that there are measures to strengthen the social safety and protection network for our citizens. I am also happy to know the Honourable Minister articulated our Government's plans to allocate TT\$5.5 Billion Dollars to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to achieve these initiatives.

It must be acknowledged that all of the social safety and protection programmes do not reside within the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, but are implemented by other Ministries. This provides evidence of the whole of Government approach adopted under the astute leadership of our Prime Minister. It demonstrates that the challenges we face in this country are not insurmountable when we put our heads together, and commit to arriving at solutions for the greater and common good of all the citizens of this country.

We applaud the programmes articulated in the Budget presentation which supports the vulnerable, some of these 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;

- Continuing support for the school feeding programme, while providing guaranteed markets for local farmers, and the return of the food box initiative; plus
- Continuing to sustain existing public assistance programmes.

Madam Speaker, we on this side can say without fear of contradiction, that there are few countries in the world that provide the suite of grants to their citizens, as obtains here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the 17% increase in the minimum wage which will impact the pockets of approximately 190,000 citizens, was another clear signal that this Government listens to the cries of those who are often considered poor and vulnerable. It is important to make the point Madam Speaker, that this is a minimum wage, which simply means that no employer can offer anything below that to their employees. It however, does not stop them from offering a higher wage.

Madam Speaker, as I listened to the Opposition Leader and subsequent speakers, and even before her, the members of the Trade Union movement, all of whom were arguing for a larger increase, I could not help but wonder if they live in the same country that I do.

This is a country, Madam Speaker, where the price of bread increased and doubles increased by 20 percent when the price of flour increased, and though flour prices have decreased, the price of bread and doubles have remained the same. This is a country where the price of transportation increases with any increase in the price of gas.

Madam Speaker, can you imagine what would happen if the minimum wage was increased by approximately 43% as suggested by the Opposition Leader, or 71% as suggested by the Trade Union Movement? There is no doubt that food inflation would skyrocket as the increased cost of wages would undoubtedly be passed on to the consumer, thus defeating the primary purpose of increasing the minimum wage in the first

place. It is for this reason, Madam Speaker, we on this side must constantly caution the general public about the positions adopted by those on the other side.

Madam Speaker, in the last fiscal, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services held firm to its course, and persisted in its responsibility to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago, specifically our most vulnerable clients - all in keeping with our social protection mandate.

Poor and Vulnerable Groups (Social Safety Net Initiatives)

During the past fiscal year, the Ministry remained resolute in our determination to provide the necessary financial assistance to the various vulnerable groups in society through a suite of Grants. The cost of this to the taxpayer, Madam Speaker, was approximately Five Billion Six Hundred Million Dollars (TT\$5.6B), as at September 2023. This facilitated the improvement in the socio-economic standard of living of a wide cross section of vulnerable citizens who access the following Grants:

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 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 Twenty Thousand Sixty-three (**20,063**) households/clients receive food support. The total expenditure on Food Support Grants as at September 2023 amounted to approximately One Hundred and Thirty-Six Million, Four Hundred and Forty-Five Thousand, Nine Hundred and Forty-Six Dollars (**\$136,445,946.00**).

General Assistance Grants

During fiscal 2023, the Ministry approved a total of One Thousand, Six Hundred and Thirty-two (**1,632**) applications under the General Assistance Grants Programme, at a cost of approximately Twenty-Eight Million, Eight Hundred and Twelve Thousand, One Hundred and Thirty Dollars (**\$28,812,130.00**). These are grants 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 Grant

Madam Speaker, Nineteen Million, Four Hundred and Fifty-Two Thousand, Four Hundred Dollars (**\$19,452,400**) 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**) households. 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.

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 for essential utility services. 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;

Madam Speaker, 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**).

Madam Speaker, 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 state sponsorship, as their circumstances improve, thereby allowing more persons the opportunity to get assistance.

The Senior Citizens Pension (SCP)

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 either 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.

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 DAG. One Thousand, Seven Hundred and Forty-five (**1,745**) are persons who 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**) persons received the DAGM 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**).

Madam Speaker, you would recall that last year the Minister of Finance announced during the Budget Debate that a One-off Transportation Grant in the sum of One Thousand Dollars (\$1,000) would be paid to recipients of the Senior Citizens Pension, Public Assistance Grant and Disability Grant. A total of 150,422 clients of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services received this One-off Transportation Grant in January, 2023 at a cost of One Hundred and Fifty Million, Four Hundred and Twenty-Two Thousand Dollars (**\$150,422,000.00**). This One-off payment was implemented to alleviate the effect of the increases in the price of fuel.

A breakdown of this payment is as follows:

1. Senior Citizens Pensioners - One Hundred and Nine Million, Five Hundred and Twenty-Three Thousand Dollars (\$109,523,000.00);
2. Social/Public Assistance Grant Recipients - Twenty-One Million, Nine Hundred and Seventy-Eight Thousand Dollars (\$21,978,000.00);
3. Disability Assistance Grant (adults) Fifteen Million, Nine Hundred and Seventy-Eight Thousand Dollars (\$15,978,000.00);
4. Disability Assistance Grant (Minors) - Three Million, Four Thousand Dollars (\$3,004,000.00).

Madam Speaker, in the last fiscal year for grants and services we spent over \$5.4 billion and in the last eight years we spent close to \$45 Billion dollars.

Madam Speaker, all our efforts at the Ministry has been focused on the prudent management of the funds that are allocated to us. We are persistently strengthening our internal controls in order to

increase accountability, transparency and increase checks and balances in order to root out corruption.

Investigations and Compliance

During fiscal 2023, the Ministry's Investigations and Compliance Unit (ICU) consistently advanced its efforts in combatting error, fraud and corruption within the Ministry. Specifically, in fiscal 2023, the ICU recorded a decrease in the number of incidents of fraud and corruption within the Ministry. The clear evidence suggests that most of the cases examined originated from previous fiscal years.

Eradication of fraud and corruption in the Ministry

Madam Speaker, the commitment of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is to protect the most vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago from the scourge of Error, Fraud, and Corruption in the delivery of social services. We - THIS ADMINISTRATION, under the astute leadership of

Dr. the Honourable Keith Christopher Rowley stand as guardians of integrity and champions of accountability.

In our pursuit of this noble mission, we must acknowledge that the path has not always been clear.

Madam Speaker, what I will say in the next few minutes emanate from the desire of this Government to shield the vulnerable from those who would exploit and undermine the social safety net. Criminal activities, as we have come to know it, Madam Speaker, does not only occur at the end of the barrel of a gun. We have therefore adopted a zero tolerance position to any crime or evidence of criminal activity uncovered at the Ministry, and like our Honourable Prime Minister constantly says, let the chips fall where they may.

Madam Speaker, I have had cause to assemble at the Ministry, a formidable team of investigators and compliance officers, dedicated to the cause of unearthing and eradicating fraud and corruption within the Ministry. We have joined hands with the

Trinidad and Tobago Police Service because we recognize that their work is not only about enforcing the law; it's also about restoring faith in our social institutions, instilling confidence in our citizens, and securing a brighter future for all. Together our mission is clear, and our cause is just.

Madam Speaker of the One Hundred and Nine (109) completed investigations under the ERROR category, the ICU was able to restore benefits for Ninety Percent (90%) of the beneficiaries.

Madam Speaker, the ICU identified one hundred and twenty-three (123) cases of fraud from 2021 to 2023. These cases involved cashing of large cheques at supermarkets, using identical birth certificates to access grants, receiving grants while residing abroad, and the emergence of ghost beneficiaries on the payroll.

Madam Speaker, during the 2022 Christmas period, fifty-six (56) counterfeit cheques under the guise of public assistance grants

(PAG) were discovered by the Central Bank. This information is in the hands of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and they are actively investigating as I speak. We are hoping to bring this investigation to a close soon.

This tells us that we have to protect the vulnerable populations from the scourge of criminal activity. It also speaks to the stewardship of public funds as these activities erode public trust in government institutions. But this is not all.

Madam Speaker, the ICU also uncovered disturbing trends and instances of corruption within the system. Cheques returned to local boards upon clients' demise were being cashed, (REPEAT) raising questions about internal controls. Similarly, cheques returned by TT Post to the Social Welfare Division for deceased or unclaimed individuals resurfaced as cashed (REPEAT), indicating potential collusion between employees of the Ministry and business establishments, including supermarkets. Particularly concerning is the manipulation of disbursement cheques intended for first-time clients, with retroactive lump sums. These cheques

are being misappropriated by unauthorized individuals, both internally and externally.

Our investigators unearthed collusion between employees and supermarkets, where cheques belonging to deceased clients were cashed. Information submitted to senior management revealed the presence of approximately Twenty-Eight Thousand Sixty-Four (28,064) ineligible recipients leading to an estimated monthly leakage of approximately Eleven Million Dollars (\$11,000,000.00). Clients were reported as deactivated from the system when they were still kept on the system for payment. Also, the unauthorized use of Food Cards by unnamed employees of the Social Welfare Division was also identified, but this trend has been existing for a long time.

I want to draw your attention to a deeply troubling discovery, namely, of a prepaid Master card program introduced by the PP government led by the current Opposition Leader, during its administration. The prepaid Master card programme was created by Cabinet Minute 2377-2012/0906 to allow for the production

of Two Thousand, Three Hundred (2,300) reloadable prepaid Master card for a onetime grant payment of Five Hundred and Ten Dollars (\$510.00) commencing September 3, 2012. For ease of reference let me quote:

Section 4 (a) of the Cabinet minute *agreed to the provision of a one-off grant of 510.00 to a total of 2,050 needy children, comprising 50 children to be identified by each of the 41 members of Parliament for the purchase of school supplies for the school term commencing September 3, 2012 and;*

Section 4(b) of the Cabinet minute *established that the Minister of the People and Social Development be responsible for an additional 250 one-off grants of (\$510.00) for the allocation to very needy children including those identified from within the databases of the Ministry of the People and Social Development.*

Let me state that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services investigated these reloadable Prepaid Master Cards. The application form which accompanied the Master Cards stated that

the cards could load up to a staggering Thirty Thousand (30,000.00) per day. This simple arithmetic reveals an alarming fact: Two Thousand and Three Hundred (2300) cards multiplied by 30,000 TTD per day equals a potential daily sum of Sixty-Nine Million Dollars (\$69,000,000.00) that could have been laundered through this programme. This inconsistency between the Cabinet Minute and the Five Hundred and Ten Dollars (\$510.00) one-off payment and the contract/application form which showed that Thirty Thousand Dollars (\$30,000) could have been uploaded per day, is of significant concern!

This isn't just a financial figure; it is a moral and ethical concern and a massive red flag for financial impropriety. The sheer volume of funds that can flow through these cards is astounding.

The questions that beg to be answered are these:

1. Why did the PP Government decide to issue a one-off grant payment on a reloadable Master card to the value of Thirty Thousand Dollars (\$30,000)?

2. Was this about serving the people, or was an underlying nefarious agenda lurking beneath the surface?
3. Who were these cards truly intended to benefit from this scheme?
4. Was there a manipulation of beneficiaries – meaning, beneficiaries could unknowingly participate in fraudulent activities? The card already had names and then it was attached to an application form (I have samples of the cards and the forms).
5. Weren't there other ways that the regime could have provided the grant without creating a reloadable prepaid Master Card?
6. Wasn't there at that time an already existing framework which had the necessary policy, procedures, and controls to guide and facilitate this one-off payment of \$510?
7. Was this Master card system chosen and preferred to avoid scrutiny, bypassing restrictions, controls, and auditing procedures?
8. Was this an avenue for money laundering as reloadable prepaid Master Cards can be used to move illicit funds more discreetly and without detection?

9. Why did the PP government introduce such a complex system that had the capacity to facilitate a high level of money laundering?

As the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, charged with taking care of the vulnerable I cannot and will not let this matter and these lingering questions go to the wind.

Stay with me colleagues as I tell you about the intricacies, anomalies and inefficiencies created by these Master Cards. Financial impropriety is not a victimless crime. Madam Speaker, I am sure you will agree that our democracy rests on transparency, accountability, and the trust we place in our leaders.

Madam Speaker a deeper scrutiny of Cabinet Note 2377/2012-0906 where this bewildering move with unnecessary complexity was made by the PP Government under the leadership of the now Opposition leader which produced these two thousand three hundred (2300) reloadable prepaid Master card for a one-time

payment of just Five Hundred and Ten Dollars (\$510). These Master Cards were addressed to named beneficiaries and left either in the care of the Social Welfare Division (SWD) Head Office or some Constituency Offices along with an application form.

Let me establish up front that I was the MP for Laventille East/Morvant during the relevant period but at no time did I participate in or was aware of that prepaid Master card programme. For completeness, I have since made enquiries with some of my colleagues who were also MPs at that time, and they too had never heard of the prepaid Master card Programme for needy and very needy children and they were never offered these cards for their constituents. Madam Speaker, I would like to know who received these Two Thousand Three Hundred (2,300) cards.

But Madam Speaker, I want you to note the cart before the horse in this story. The cards were left in the care of the Social Welfare Division or Constituency Office along with the application forms, for beneficiaries who were already named. Madam speaker how

can something be created and sent to a beneficiary who has yet to apply. It should be noted that the application form which accompanied the cards did not identify the 510 TTD limit per beneficiary. This raises concerns about transparency and informed consent. Beneficiaries may not have even been aware of the limitations on their cards, which could lead to unintended misuse.

Investigation conducted thus far, discovered 40 of these cards still in the possession of the Ministry addressed to named beneficiaries in care of the Ministry Head office or a constituency. Madam Speaker let me reiterate the card was to be loaded with a maximum of Five Hundred and Ten Dollars (\$510) according to the cabinet minute but the application and card was sent to the beneficiary with the possibility of loading Thirty Thousand Dollars (\$30,000.00) per day.

So between 2012 to 2015 (that's the year the reloadable pre-paid Master Cards that have since come into my possession was expected to expire) there was a potential to launder Sixty-nine

Million Trinidad and Tobago Dollars (TT\$69,000,000) per day if all Two Thousand Three Hundred (2,300) cards were loaded with the maximum allowed. This amount is significant and highlights the severity of the risks associated with the reloadable pre-paid Master Card in question. More concerning is that the Minister who sat as Minister of Finance in the Cabinet at that time was the past CEO of the bank that approved these cards. I say nothing more in that regard.

A similar scheme was executed in 2014, which is also under investigation but I hasten to add that election was called on June 13, 2015 by the then PP Government, Cabinet went on to agree on July 2015 to provide 4,000 prepaid cards repeating the same scheme as was done in 2012 and 2014.

Madam speaker creating reloadable prepaid Master Cards for a one-off benefit payment defies logic, as prepaid card programmes typically come with various expenses such as:

- a. Card Issuance Costs: There are costs associated with producing and customizing each prepaid card, including card manufacturing, design, and personalization.
- b. Processing Fees: Payment processors and card networks often charge fees for each card transaction, which can add up quickly if numerous small-value transactions are processed.
- c. Activation Fees: There may be activation fees associated with each card, whether they are paid by the government or the cardholder.
- d. Distribution Costs: Distributing the cards to beneficiaries can be costly, involving logistics, shipping, and administrative expenses.
- e. Administrative Overheads: Managing the prepaid card program requires staff, customer service, and resources to handle inquiries, replacements, and card-related issues.
- f. Maintenance Fees: Ongoing operational costs, including account maintenance fees, fraud prevention measures, and transaction monitoring, can further increase the program's cost.

These extemporaneous cost would have been well known by the then Minister of Finance. Madam Speaker, it may have been more prudent to use any of the existing grant payment methods which were available at the time, such as cheque/direct deposit bank transfers. Madam Speaker, you know that people like to say if we know thing send it to the police well, we did just that. As I stand here making my contribution, there has already been collaboration with the police on the issue of potential fraud and money laundering activities that may have taken place during the implementation of this Master Card fiasco.

As a government we cannot ignore the potential implications of this ruse. It is our duty as responsible citizens to hold our governments accountable for its actions and decisions and we must ensure that our systems are designed to protect the interests of the people and not to facilitate illicit activities.

Madam Speaker, only this week, five (5) persons have been charged with conspiracy to defraud the Government of Nine Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$900,000.00), almost a million

dollars for the purpose of operating a Home for Older Persons. One of these persons is a former employee of the Ministry.

This is one of many cases that is receiving the attention of the officers of the Fraud Squad. The challenges with corruption in the Ministry are real, but our efforts to combat them are not insurmountable. It is our duty to address them head-on, and we are committed to doing so. And as the Investigations and Compliance Unit continues its work in the Ministry it will continue to investigate all cases of error, fraud and corruption. Our goal is to follow up on all cases reported to the police.

The work of the Investigations and Compliance Unit is only just beginning, I want to reiterate that our commitment to protecting the most vulnerable citizens of Trinidad and Tobago is unwavering. It is a commitment rooted in our values, and it drives us to work tirelessly to ensure that every citizen can live a life of dignity and security.

Partnering with NGOs

Madam Speaker, in its drive to fulfil its mandate, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has continued to support vulnerable groups through the provision of financial assistance to NGOs, through annual subventions or financing for one-off grants for specialised programmes or projects.

For fiscal 2022/2023, the sum of approximately Fifty-One Million, Nine Hundred and Twelve Thousand Dollars (**\$51,912,000.00**) was allocated to twenty-two (**22**) NGOs, inclusive of three (3) Statutory Boards, to support the work of these organisations and to facilitate the delivery of specialised services for vulnerable clients.

It must be noted however, as part of the Ministry's "**value for money**" approach, several NGOs that previously received a subvention were not complying with the Cabinet approved mandate and the other requirements for funding. We have been working with these organizations to ensure compliance.

Of the twenty-two (**22**) NGOs, seventeen (**17**) and three (3) Statutory Bodies received financial support for fiscal 2023 in the sum of Thirty-Eight Million, Two Hundred and Eighty-Five Thousand, Eight Hundred and Ninety-Eight Dollars (**\$38,285,898.00**). These NGOs primarily deliver services in the areas of support for socially displaced persons; support for women and victims of all forms of violence; psychosocial and clinical interventions; services for persons with disabilities; and several youth organisations.

The Ministry also provided support for special projects and programmes by NGOs that were aligned to the Ministry's overall mandate, via the provision of one-off grants.

As at September 2023, the sum of Sixty-six Thousand, Five Hundred Dollars (**\$66,500.00**) was spent on one-off grant funding to support key areas such as support for persons with disabilities; assistance for transitional housing programmes; education and wellness initiatives targeting senior citizens; family intervention programming with a special focus on healthy marriages and the

family unit; support for victims of domestic violence; grief support for widows, and mental health first aid as a means of treating with suicide ideation.

Initiatives were also undertaken to support social sector NGOs through capacity building, knowledge exchange and information sessions as well as to promote deeper partnerships with the Ministry and other social sector NGOs. These included **Virtual Knowledge Sharing Initiatives** which facilitated the transfer of knowledge and learning opportunities to NGOs on best practices for operational and programmatic development.

Sessions included tips and tools on navigating virtual environments safely, specifically as it pertained to vulnerable groups such as older persons, children and youth; how to safeguard themselves from online predators, romance scams and financial risk; and orientation and sensitisation on Sign Language inclusion for NGOs towards more inclusive service delivery. Approximately sixty-three (**63**) NGO participants benefitted from these sessions.

Additionally, the Ministry partnered with the Cropper Foundation for *World NGO Day 2023*. Eighty (**80**) NGO representatives participated in virtual discussions and NGO information sharing on challenges and experiences in a post-COVID-19 climate, digitization efforts and opportunities for civil society.

Support for Persons with Disabilities

During fiscal 2023, the Ministry conducted a careful review of the clauses of the Trinidad and Tobago Disabilities Bill, plus invited Organizations that work with persons with disabilities, Government Ministries, a representative from UWI to provide feedback. Persons with and without disabilities were able to provide feedback through this process. It is our desire Madam Speaker, that when we bring the Bill to this House it would have gone through a rigorous review so that it is unanimously passed by Members of this House and Members of the other House.

To date, 15 Ministries and 9 organizations that work with persons with disabilities responded. Madam Speaker, 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.

In fiscal 2024, the Ministry will finalize the outfitting of the National Therapeutic and Resource Centre with therapeutic equipment to facilitate the treatment/rehabilitation of the various categories of disabilities. Tenders went out to facilitate the infrastructural upgrades. Work will also be undertaken to install a 7ft x 7ft elevator at the Centre.

The Centre will serve as a multidisciplinary resource centre for persons with disabilities; providing assessment, therapy and training. 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 *habilitative and rehabilitative services*.

The suite of services will be offered in phases, where Phase 1 would include Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Behavioural Therapy. Phase 11 would offer Aqua Therapy, Physio Therapy, Music, Art and Drama. Further, parents and caregivers would be equipped with necessary skills to continue therapy at home and student social workers and therapists will also have the opportunity to be trained there.

Additionally, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Digicel Foundation on Friday 29, September 2023. This Agreement will see the Digicel Foundation donating approximately **Six Hundred Thousand Dollars (600,000.00)** in equipment to outfit the NTRC. 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.

Social Displacement

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.

This 5-storey facility that our homeless citizens can call home is located on a;

- Site Area is about half acre with a floor area of 62,000 square feet, spread over 5-storeys
- It will host a minimum 200 homeless persons and 25 staff at a time with adequate accommodation for a 6-week minimum 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 with 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 females dormitories including TV rooms/gathering space
- The Top Level features administrative offices and family dormitories with shared living, kitchen and laundry services.

The cost of construction and outfitting with tamper-proof furniture and fittings is approximately Fifty-Five Million (\$55,000,000) dollars. The price tag 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.

Conclusion

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will continue to help, empower and transform the lives of the poor and vulnerable among us. We will continue to fight against corruption, we will ensure that there is a high level of accountability and transparency when it comes to spending the money that has been allocated to help all the persons who are currently beneficiaries of the Ministry's grants and programmes

and those that will be beneficiaries in the future. We are committed to ensuring that no one is left behind.