



## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

Tuesday, 05 December 2023

### **LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

Dear Editor,

#### **Ministry of Social Development and Family Services committed to supporting all persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago**

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) takes note of several articles published in the media recently, on issues related to caring for persons with disabilities and their families. In particular, the Express Editorial of December 4, 2023 titled: “Caring for our Disabled Citizens” and another article published on December 3<sup>rd</sup> entitled “Asking for a Chance”; both highlighted the need for support for families, so that its members could achieve their highest potential, regardless of mental, physical, or medical conditions.

It should be noted that all grants administered by the Ministry at present, are targeted at vulnerable individuals and families. With regards to the disability assistance for adults and minors, these grants are fixed and not every person with a disability is vulnerable or may be in need of grant funding. As a responsible Government agency, the Ministry attempts to ensure that the grants are distributed based on need, so that there is accountability and transparency for the taxpayers’ dollars being expended. To date, there are approximately **22, 000** persons receiving the disability assistance grant for adults, while just around **3,600** children are in receipt of the Disability Assistance Grant for Minors.

The Public Assistance Act Chap 32:03, section 3C (i) states that the public assistance grant may be given to:

***any single parent who— (i) is unable to earn a living due to caring for his child who has a physical or mental disability; and (ii) whose household income is deemed inadequate.***

Therefore, in such circumstances, the parent(s) may apply for funding through the public assistance grant. In fact, there are several households in receipt of the Disability Assistance Grant and also Public Assistance Grant and/or Food Support. To date the Ministry’s records, show that approximately **17,000** persons are receipt of public assistance from the Government.

Through the Disabilities Affairs Unit, the Ministry invited organizations that work with Persons with Disabilities, Government Ministries, and Academia to provide feedback on a **Draft Bill** to enact legislation to protect the rights of Persons with Disabilities. Persons with and without disabilities were also able to provide feedback through this process. The Ministry continues to work diligently towards completion of the necessary reviews, consultations and amendments, with the intention that the Disabilities Act would be unanimously passed by Parliament.

From the feedback received, the Ministry also recognizes that its policies and programmes must shift from the *one size fits all* model of service delivery. This shift will include a move away from dependency on grant funding for all clients, and will be achieved through the Ministry's transformation and empowerment project which aims to ensure that all persons with disabilities are catered for, consistent with their circumstances. Both the IT solution called ISEMs, as well as the Ministry's Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme-Uplifting People **STEP-UP** Programme will cater to this.

**From the article referring to a mother - a 52-year old widow, Carmen, who serves as a caregiver to her 22-year-old son with cerebral palsy, and consequently is unable to engage in full time employment, the Ministry provides support through:**

- STEP-UP Programme which is a process where short term assistance in the form of grants ( like the Disability Assistance Grants and the Disability Assistance for Minors, as well as the Public Assistance Grant) are combined with developmental programmes (re-education, life skills, training and other skill enhancing tools, micro enterprise opportunities) over a period not exceeding two years to effect the desired change in participating families and individual to make them sustainable and self-sufficient;
- The Integrated Social Enterprise Management System - an ICT solution will capture and target the needs of all vulnerable individuals and families, via real time data, so that families like Carmen and her son are not left behind. Also the Ministry is developing a National Register for Vulnerable Persons to ensure that all vulnerable households are identified and targeted for the required assistance.
- The MSDFS is advocating for amendments to key pieces of legislation which will ensure that persons with disabilities will receive equitable standards of education, healthcare, social support, housing, accessibility and opportunities for independent living;
- The National Therapeutic and Resource Centre. This Centre which will be available to ALL persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago, **will provide enhanced and state of the art rehabilitative services to persons**

**with disabilities.** The Centre aims to use a community – based therapeutic approach (though the support from NGO and CBOs) in order to improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities by providing adequate and effective habilitative and rehabilitative services, with the aim of reducing the plethora of health conditions, illnesses and injuries that result from their disability. It will be equipped with tools and resources to conduct physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and behavioural therapy. The new facility will be commissioned in early 2024.;

- Parenting workshops which are specifically designed to help parents of children with disabilities, as it relates to their children’s development, through teaching of parental skills, how to balance their stress levels and achieve physical and mental well-being etc;
- Counselling and psychosocial support through the National Family Services Division for relatives who serve as caregivers for persons with disabilities;
- Close and continued collaborations with governmental and non-governmental organisations/stakeholders like the Ministry of Health, to ensure that the community of persons with disability is adequately serviced, as well as the Ministry of Works and Transport for accessible transport, roads and duty-free imports for equipment and assistive devices; and NGOs for information sharing, advocacy and support.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services remains fervent in its remit to provide support, resources, and an enabling environment for all persons with disabilities and their families, living in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Sincerely,**  
**Senator The Honourable Donna Cox**