MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES

BUDGET CONTRIBUTION
2017/2018

REMARKS

THE HONOURABLE CHERRIE-ANN CRICHLLOW-COCKBURN

MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES

MONDAY 9TH OCTOBER, 2017

10:00 A.M.

LEVELS G-9, TOWER D, INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTER, WRIGHTSON RD,
PORT OF SPAIN
The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Cherrie-Ann Crichlow-Cockburn): Thank you. Madam Speaker, I rise in support of the national budget presented by the Minister of Finance, and to share the Government’s priorities and perspectives with respect to social development in fiscal 2018. At this point, Madam Speaker, I am compelled to express special thanks to the Minister of Finance on behalf of myself, the more than 170,000 social services grant recipients, and, I dare say, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago for delivering a budget that leaves us with hope for a better tomorrow and the faith in our destiny.

Madam Speaker, it is easy to be magnanimous and dole out money left, right and centre when there is plenty. I imagine it is also easy to be profligate in times of plenty, as was evidenced from 2010 to 2015, but it takes creativity, strength and determination to chart the course for a country that has been left almost bankrupt. It also takes dedication and the love for country to allow oneself to be assailed by those who know better, those who should know better, and those who ravaged the country for personal and partisan gain and not respond in like manner. Prior to the budget presentation throughout Trinidad and Tobago, the man in the street, the academics, the technocrats, people all over were predicting a budget of doom and gloom. People also opined that we will have to “suck salt” after this budget. The “we” here being Trinidad and Tobago’s lower and middle income earners. Instead we have been presented with balance and equity, and the burden of adjustment to be shared by all, and, more so, those that can most afford.

This budget that focuses on “Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path” has clearly taken the wind out of our detractors. I listened to the Leader of the Opposition and Members on the Opposite Bench on Friday
and their contributions were somewhat lacklustre. There was no fire. There was no believability. There was very little substance. Madam Speaker, allow me to quote from an article by Keith Subero in today’s Express, entitled, Kamla about ‘power’, not ‘politics’, and he states:

“Beyond the gallerying for television, Mrs. Persad-Bissessar on Friday left us with nothing memorable or elevating.”

Madam Speaker, we may ask ourselves, why, why contributions in that manner, it is because deep down the Members on the opposite bench realize that this Government has done wonderfully well with the hand that we have been dealt, and it is also going to put Trinidad and Tobago’s economy on a sustainable path.

Madam Speaker, times are challenging and there are difficult decisions to be made, but there are two critical positive factors that work in Trinidad and Tobago’s interest, first, the PNM’s based philosophy, which is about caring for people; all people, Madam Speaker, not for supporters, not for family, not for friends, all people, and protecting the vulnerable in society. And, secondly, the Government has an excellent, rational and workable development plan in Vision 2030. Citizens are therefore assured that this Government will not be operating by “vaps” or with knee-jerk reactions, but in a planned and strategic manner. Madam Speaker, on Friday I noted the Leader of the Opposition in her contribution would have indicated that nothing has been put in place to mitigate the effects of the current economic situation. Madam Speaker, I want to inform this august House and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, mindful for its mandate, and in the face of the hon. Prime Minister’s expressed concern for Government’s response to the impact of the economic downturn on the most vulnerable in society, took steps that have resulted in the development of a National Social Mitigation Plan.
Madam Speaker, we sought to ensure that we had input, buy-in and ownership from this plan from the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and, to this end we conducted four national social dialogues in north-east Trinidad, central Trinidad, south Trinidad and in Tobago. We also had conducted outreach service within the rural community. Focus group sessions were held with the youths, with civil society. Interviews were undertaken with social sector experts and questionnaires were administered to social sector ministries, regional corporations and professional associations. This means, Madam Speaker, that we had the widest range possible of contributions to the input in the National Social Mitigation Plan.

Madam Speaker, the data collected was reported on in two working papers, compilation of the national strategic plan for Trinidad and one for Tobago. And, Madam Speaker, the findings in these working papers suggested that not just the people, but institutions, budgets and whole sectors had been impacted by the economic downturn. And we also found that the heaviest burdens were being placed on the poor and indigent, the middle class, the elderly, single parents, persons with disabilities, women, children and the unemployed. The Ministry then engaged the Centre for Health Economics under the leadership of Professor Karl Theodore to develop the plan, and they were guided in the development of this plan by the two working papers and the lessons learned from the Thailand experience.

Madam Speaker, in the late 1990’s, after a significant financial crisis and economic downturn, Thailand implemented a comprehensive social sector programme that successfully mitigated the adverse social impacts of that crisis, particularly in the labour and social welfare sectors, and Thailand’s plan focused on mitigating short-term impacts and overcoming them in the long term. Madam
Speaker, our National Social Mitigation Plan, appropriately themed, Building Resilience to Secure our Nation, seeks to equip persons affected by the downturn with the resources and tools needed to cope with short-term consequences and to overcome them in the long term. The plan therefore targets those in vulnerable social economic positions, retrenched workers, the unemployed, lower income earners, our youth, persons with disabilities, and poor individuals and families, and it has three main objectives, one, strengthening the social protection system, promoting community and civil society action, and enhancing productivity and innovation.

Madam Speaker, as we implement the National Social Mitigation Plan we will conduct a comprehensive review of our priority social programmes, across Ministries with a view to restructuring them for greater impact, increased efficiency, effectiveness and relevance. We will also undertake a review of our legislative and policy frameworks to determine the need for any amendments or new legislation. A comprehensive assessment of the disability sector will also be done so as to identify what is available and whether there are any gaps. We will also introduce a component in the social programmes to engender a transformation in values, attitudes and behaviours that are necessary for appropriate socio-cultural values. Madam Speaker, and, of course, we will implement a package of short-term relief measures that will provide immediate assistance to the persons most affected by the downturn, and including those recently retrenched.

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to inform this House that the Ministry has secured Cabinet approval for the National Social Mitigation Plan, and has commenced the examination of the priority areas for action, and the development of appropriate action plans. Implementation of this plan will be on a phase basis with $2 million being expended in 2018. And, I dare say, Madam Speaker, that
this National Social Mitigation Plan is positioned to achieve its objectives given its trust on human capital development, sustainability, empowerment, and continuous improvement.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services core responsibility is the delivery of social services, inclusive of income support and the maintenance of a safety net that protects our poor and other vulnerable citizens from the impact of poverty; it improves their lives and livelihoods and strengthens resilience. Madam Speaker, so I was somewhat disappointed when the Member for Couva North on Friday made reference to the safety net and stated that a number of grants were no longer available. Madam Speaker, there is nothing further from the truth. All of the grants that were in existence in 2017 continue into fiscal 2018. Today, I am extremely pleased to inform this House and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that despite our dire economic situation this Government has maintained its social safety network. This is great news, Madam Speaker, for the 168,345 individuals and families who receive the senior citizens’ pension, the disability assistance grant, and the public assistance grant.

Madam Speaker, these three programmes received a total allocation of $4.4 billion, or approximately 96.5 per cent of our Ministry’s total allocation for recurrent expenditure. Madam Speaker, if nothing else this is testimony to this Government’s philosophy of caring for the vulnerable and putting people first. Madam Speaker, this welcomed decision places an even greater responsibility on our Ministry to improve targeting and service delivery, and a reduction in expenditure. So we must ensure that only those who are eligible receive benefits. Steps must also be taken to provide support required to bring beneficiaries to self-sustainability and graduation out of programmes. This has

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started and will continue to be done in 2018.

Madam Speaker, even as we address the issue of poverty we are guided by Government’s national strategic framework, which effectively mandates the development of more cost-effective strategies in the delivery of our services. The need to do as much, or more with less, forces us to improve our targeting mechanisms, and to ensure that improved efficiencies and value for money underpin all of our systems, programmes and initiatives. The Ministry remains committed to breaking the cycles of poverty and dependency in Trinidad and Tobago, and will continue to do so in 2018 through, one, the development of a national poverty reduction strategy in collaboration with the UNDP. This activity will entail the conduct of stakeholder consultations in the 14 municipal corporations. Robust evidence-based policy and programme design are of critical importance and cannot be overemphasized. And I indicate here, Madam Speaker, that the SLC, 2014, because of its shortfalls, effectively hampered progress on the poverty reduction strategy and the regional poverty profiles. But those problems and shortcomings have been identified, and we therefore expect that the SLC, 2018, will guide developments in this area.

Madam Speaker, the effective administration of social protection grants, via the provision of 13 social service grants, including general assistance grants, dietary grants, educational assistance grants, rental assistance, funeral grants, continued in 2017, with 1,035 persons being beneficiaries of these grants. There were also 377 families benefitting from minor house repair, house wiring and sanitary plumbing grants to a cost of $7.4 million. Madam Speaker, this budget speaks in terms of changing paradigms, and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services’ understanding and bracing of the need for a shift in the paradigm, and the ability to effectively to do was most evident in the aftermath of

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Tropical Storm Bret when we secured approval for a change in the payment process for general assistance grants that resulted in the faster processing of applications and payments. I am pleased to advise that the Ministry was able to make its first set of payments within two weeks, and that cheques were delivered to recipients, the 1,643 of them within their communities, Madam Speaker, and this helped to ensure a return to normalcy and to bring restoration in the shortest possible time.

Madam Speaker, the recipients were very, very appreciative of this and commended the Ministry on many occasions for its timely payments. This, Madam Speaker, is evidence of our caring for and putting people first. Madam Speaker, the Member for Couva North also indicated that food cards are not available. Madam Speaker, there is nothing further from the truth. The Ministry continues to provide food support to persons who are eligible, and this is done via the debit card and a cheque system. And the Members of this House will recall last year, I would have informed this honourable House that in the interest of reducing expenditure and being more cost-effective, it was required of us to utilize cheque payment for some recipients.

So, Madam Speaker, I say to this House, and to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who may have been misinformed, that despite reports to the contrary, the Ministry continues to provide food support to our poor and vulnerable and those affected by natural or manmade disasters. I also want to remind the population that food support is intended to be short-term assistance for the poor and vulnerable families who are unable to meet their nutritional requirements due to limited income. Eligibility is determined by the administration of a means test that applies to four variables, net income, education, asset and housing, with net income being the major variable. Madam Speaker, food card or food support was never intended
for distribution by MPs to their supporters to be used as an election ploy, or to be retained indefinitely. And now more than ever our economic circumstances require that we employ the most effective targeting and allocation mechanisms.

The Ministry has therefore been ensuring that the means test is applied in every instance, that there are reviews and recertification exercise as mandated by our policies, and over the last two years, Madam Speaker, this has resulted in the removal of approximately 18,900 recipients who had either died, migrated, failed to provide requested information, or their income situation had improved and they would no longer qualify. Madam Speaker, no food cards were taken back from anyone. And, I dare say, Madam Speaker, these activities resulted in savings of approximately $159.6 million for redistribution. And this was seen in 2017, when 6,810 new beneficiaries received food support, and as at September, 2017, 27,435 individuals and families were receiving food support.

Madam Speaker, Vision 2030 reminds us that effective governance serves as a catalyst for social transformation, and the key to this transformation is improving service delivery and pursuing service excellence. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has long recognized the critical importance of efficient and effective service delivery, and has implemented several initiatives towards this end. First and most importantly, Madam Speaker, the people we serve must be aware of our benefits and services, the eligibility criteria, and how and where they can be accessed. Feedback from the public during our general consultations and outreach programmes, and from counsellors and community groups suggested that there was a high level of ignorance of the system and misinformation in the public domain. And so during 2017 the Ministry responded by embarking on a series of public information, education and sensitization
sessions throughout Trinidad.

Madam Speaker, for ease of convenience we did it within the constituencies, and we have covered all constituencies in Trinidad, and we will be going to Tobago within 2018, and we will be doing a second rounds within communities in those 39 constituencies in Trinidad. Because the aim is, Madam Speaker, that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago must have an increased knowledge and awareness about the Ministry’s products and services, and we in the Ministry must be able to improve our targeting through the identification of poor, vulnerable, and other at-risk groups. But, Madam Speaker, having an excellent suite of benefits and an informed public cannot by themselves bring about the required change. The Ministry’s service must be timely and of a high quality, and this is only achievable when the persons who deliver the service are well trained, knowledgeable, and have the right skills and attitude. Mindful of this, Madam Speaker, and of the theme two of Vision 2030, which speaks to delivering service excellence, the Ministry has embarked on an extensive training and retraining exercise in client care for all of our staff. The priority objective being, to produce sustained culture change and a customer-centric approach by staff.

Since the programme’s inception in March, 2017, 660 members of staff from all levels have been trained. During 2018 we will be implementing, monitoring and evaluation, and audit exercises. We are going to be deploying feedback boxes so we can get feedback from the public. We will also adopt the mystery shopper approach so that we can get even more feedback. And we emphasize, Madam Speaker, it cannot be emphasized enough, that we continue to train and retrain members of the public and the staff of the Ministry. Madam Speaker, the current configuration of our social service delivery system represents a silo approach, and this can result in double-dipping, timewasting, inefficiencies, frustrations, and

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persons in need not being able to successfully access available benefits and services. These circumstances, Madam Speaker, demand significant change, and so the Ministry has begun moving towards and will fully embrace the adoption of an integrated approach to service delivery in 2018.

Madam Speaker, in 2016 I informed this honourable House and the country that the Ministry’s bankers has deemed our debit card obsoleted, its continued use, high risk, and had therefore stopped issuing new cards. We are going to be implementing a new, more secure debit card before the end of the first quarter. This provides us with an opportunity to assess all current food card recipients, and we expect by the end of that exercise only those who are eligible for food support will be in receipt of a debit card. Madam Speaker, regrettably, the developmental component of the food support, which was called “rise up”, was never fully implemented. This resulted in few people graduating out of the programme. The Ministry will be vigorously implementing our new developmental component, which is called, Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme, Uplifting People, or STEP UP. This will be done over the next three years, Madam Speaker, and this developmental component is intended to steer beneficiaries on a path of resilience and reduce dependency on social assistance.

They will be provided with opportunities to become gainfully employed. We will enrol them in adult educational programmes, and we will seek to enhance their communication skills, and also provide them with funding for microenterprises via the SEED grant. Madam Speaker, and in this vein I am particularly heartened by Government’s plans to include CEPEP in agriculture, because this presents an opportunity for our clients and others to, while earning income, also develop agricultural skills that will equip them to produce food for their family’s consumption and/or to supplement their income. So I thank
the Minister of Finance for that.

Another major change that occurred in 2017, Madam Speaker, was the incorporation into social welfare of the food support. Madam Speaker, the Ministry initiated a transitioning exercise overseen by an internal change management team to ensure that the process was seamless. And I report, Madam Speaker, that the initial challenges have been overcome, and members of staff are now on board. So the public of Trinidad and Tobago, when they enter one of the Ministry’s regional offices can now go to anyone of the customer reps and not only apply for senior citizens’ pension or disability grant, but can also apply right there for food support.

Madam Speaker, at present each division within the Ministry administered their own, and sometimes a different means test. This was not in keeping with best practice, this is not in the interest of improved service delivery. So, Madam Speaker, we have developed a standardized means test, and that means test will now determine the eligibility for all programmes and grants offered by the Ministry. This will ensure more effective targeting for all programmes and grants to those most in need.

Madam Speaker, I dare say that this means test, this standard means test, can become a universal means test across all Ministries in keeping with the approach that will be adopted under the National Social Mitigation Plan.

10.30 a.m.

We have also instituted a single intake form. At present, members of the public who seek to access grants of the Ministry have to make separate applications for each grant. That is time consuming; it can lead to frustration, it can also lead to double dipping and wastage. So we have developed a single intake form, and that form can be utilized for all and every grant. It also affords the
Ministry, the opportunity to do a holistic assessment of each applicant, and this will also facilitate the timely approval of grants.

It is beyond imagination that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has functioned all of these years without an integrated management system. It is not surprising, therefore, that we had problems with managing our grant portfolio, keeping administrative costs down, and our data at times is questionable. And given our shift to an integrated approach, this can only be achieved if there is an integrated IT system. And so, Madam Speaker, in 2018 the Ministry will commence implementation of an integrated IT system. This system is expected to result in reduced administrative costs, linking of clients to case management records, reduction in duplications, effective management of our grant portfolio, the elimination of double dipping and it will also facilitate the monitoring, evaluation and auditing of programmes.

IGovTT has already been engaged to procure and manage implementation of the IITMS project at a cost of $331,147. Ten million dollars has been allocated in this budget for this project which will be implemented on a phased basis. The first phase being due for completion by the end of fiscal 2018. This allocation signals Government’s understanding of the critical importance of having an integrated IT system to the success of service delivery excellence within the Ministry.

The Ministry is mindful that achievement of the objectives of the integrated approach will also require changes to some structures, some systems, policies and procedures. In 2018, the Ministry will therefore embark on a restructuring exercise which will entail a review and maybe revision of programmes and rationalization of some existing units. Some units may become obsolete, for example TCCTP, which has now been integrated into the Social Welfare Unit. Some units will increase in size and structure, as have already happened with the Social Welfare
Unit, and we may have the introduction of new units such as our Social Support and Empowerment Unit, which is one of the mechanisms for the introduction of the integrated model within the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and across Ministries.

Madam Speaker, I also want to give the public the assurance, however, that this restructuring exercise, we do not anticipate increases in our total staff complement as a result of it, because we are very mindful of the need to operate within our budget allocation and to not increase costs.

Madam Speaker, other initiatives that we have implemented in the interest of promoting service delivery excellence, is the direct method of payment. I am pleased to inform this House and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that 2,700 senior citizen pensioners were paid via direct deposit in August, and this month for the very first time, we were able to pay 2,500 recipients of the Disability Assistance Grant and Public Assistance Grants via direct deposit to their bank accounts.

Madam Speaker, we will also be removing the life certificate process. We have already signed the MOU with the Registrar General’s office. They will be providing us with information on deaths, and so we expect as of January 2018 our senior citizens will no long have to come to the Ministry’s office to certify that they are still alive.

Madam Speaker, I turn now to the socially displaced. Despite implementation of numerous initiatives over the years, the issue of street dwellers continue to be a major problem. If ever there is need for a shift in paradigm, it is in this area. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services recognize that this problem does not require just a new creative approach, but also a collaborative effort across Ministries and the private sector, and so we convened a meeting.

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This meeting was attended by the Ministers of Rural and Local Development, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services—it escapes me now, but there were four key Ministers attending that session—and the Minister of National Security. At that meeting we also invited all mayors. Unfortunately the mayor of Chaguanas chose not to attend, but all other mayors attended. We also had the private sector represented by DOMA.

At the end of that meeting, it was decided that we would establish a working committee. That working committee met over a 15-week period, at the end of which, they produced a report, and I dare say that was an excellent and comprehensive report. Some of the findings in that report included the fact that the current legislation only provides for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and Health personnel removing street dwellers. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services cannot involuntarily remove street dwellers. It is only if they voluntarily agree to be removed, and very little of them do so. It was also established that 30 per cent of the persons on the street have mental health issues, and the accommodation at the St. Ann’s Hospital and the other hospitals is inadequate to accommodate them. It was also found that the current care options available to street dwellers are inadequate and the standards of delivery require improvements.

There is an urgent need for reliable data. Despite doing numerous head counts, at the end of it all we are unable in a definitive way to say what is the total population of street dwellers. There are no assessment centres at present. There is an absence of health service delivery mechanism except for the mentally ill. There is a lack of employment opportunities for those who have been rehabilitated, and very importantly, the Socially Displaced Persons Act, No. 59 of 2000, a major piece of legislation to deal with street dwellers, was never proclaimed. There is
also the non-existence of dedicated transitional housing.

Madam Speaker, having made these findings, the committee then looked at how we approach this, and what are the recommendations going forward. The recommendations made by that committee represent a major change in thinking and approach. They have recommended a four-step continuum of care, the first step of which is engagement. One of the major changes, even in this first step, is that they are going to adopt the reform of local government approach, in that, the local government, the corporations, are going to be responsible, together with the Ministry of Health, for removal of street dwellers. This is important because we need the members of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to be treating with the Minister’s crime plan so we can utilize the municipal police to treat with street dwellers.

We have also looked at the Socially Displaced Persons Act. While the Act could be improved, given our current circumstances it is felt it is sufficient for us to start during this phase to utilize that Act. So we are liaising with the Ministry of the Attorney General to have that Act proclaimed as quickly as possible. We will also together look at it in terms of any necessary amendments and bring that on to Parliament later on.

We then looked at the second level which is temporary care. This speaks to developing care facilities and assessment centres. The committee has identified a parcel of land at the corner of Piccadilly Street and South Quay for construction of an assessment centre and shelter. But we recognize that that is probably going to take us two to three years, so in the short-term we have identified a building on Independence Square that is currently being assessed to determine whether it is structurally sound and whether it can be retrofitted to be utilized as an assessment centre in the short-term. The devolution of responsibility for oversight of these
centres would be again to the regional corporations. We are also looking at the possibility of having centres within communities, so that the corporations in the respective areas will be responsible for treating with the socially displaced within their communities. Of course we are going to contract the NGOs to provide services at these centres.

Then we look at the issue of primary care. The provision of mental health and general medical care is key to the success of this exercise. We are working very closely with the Ministry of Health to have dedicated health personnel to work in these centres. Rehabilitation will also include skills training and employment placement. Madam Speaker, we have identified our facility New Horizons in Piparo, and we are going to be transferring to the Ministry of Health so that it can be better utilized to treat with those persons who have mental health issues.

We then come to the issue of advanced care. We can take the street dwellers off the street, we can treat them, we can rehabilitate them, but if at the end of that exercise there is nowhere for them to live they will return to the streets. So to avoid that we are looking at the issue of transitional housing upon the completion of rehabilitation. We will be liaising with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development because we would need to develop our social housing facility.

I expect that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, after having listened to that continuum of care that we are going to provide to our socially displaced, will agree with us that we are going to be very much closer to dealing effectively with the issue of street dwelling in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry is of the firm view that the private sector has a key role to play in street dwelling. To this end, we met with the representatives of DOMA and they indicated that some members of the private sector are willing to
support Government plans. A similar meeting will be held in other cities and municipal corporations. I am pleased to inform this august House that Cabinet has accepted the working committee’s report and agreed to the implementation of the recommendations. And so in 2018 you can expect that we will commence implementation of the recommendations, including the acquisition of land, the establishment of a centre on Independence Square, the identification of suitable buildings for regional centres and proclamation of the SDP Act, 2000.

I now look at the issue of aging. The Ministry continued to cater to the needs of the elderly population in the form of income support and opportunities for them to pursue an active lifestyle and contribute to the development of the nation. This Government is ever mindful of protecting and caring for the vulnerable in society, and so we have ensured that the increase in licence fee for private hospitals are not applicable to homes for the aged. Thereby ensuring that the elderly do not experience any added financial pressure.

The family is one of the most important institutions in our society, and can be the heartbeat of a productive society. A draft national parenting policy that aims to improve parenting practices in Trinidad and Tobago has been laid in Parliament, and during the first quarter of fiscal 2018 it will be the basis of national consultations. During 2017 we continued to provide counselling to couples and families in order to reduce family dysfunction, violence, abuse and to mitigate suicide. To this end, 3,684 clients received counselling and 2,401 received advice and information.

Madam Speaker, in our support of persons with disabilities, we have been seeking to review the national policy on persons with disabilities, and to this end we held four stakeholder consultations. The views there were varied and divergent and it has affected our ability to finalize the document. As a result, a decision was
made to have an independent committee comprised of representatives from CODO, academia, the disability sector and civil society to review and finalize the second draft of this national policy, and we expect that it should be finalized by the first quarter of 2018.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry is seeking to partner with the Ministry of Health to establish assessment and therapeutic centres in communities within the 14 regional corporations, to facilitate greater and easier access for persons with disabilities. It is impossible for this Government to be able to put centres within all communities, and so we are looking at health centres and hospitals in the first instance to have these community facilities.

Significant strides have been made, Madam Speaker, towards the development of a national register for persons with disabilities and we have been doing that in collaboration with UNDP. We have also provided assisted devices to our clients to improve their quality of life, and to this end we spent $1.6 million to provide 44 persons with prostheses.

Madam Speaker, over 1,500 clients are currently serviced by ELDAMO with the bus service and this has increased their mobility and participation in the society. Discussions are ongoing with PTSC as we strive to provide a more relevant and efficient bus service. The Government clearly articulated at the commencement of its term that civil society engagement is a key success factor for sustainable development. The Ministry therefore partners and is greatly assisted by civil society in its delivery of services to the displaced, elderly and persons with disabilities. In fiscal 2017, 24 NGOs received a total of $43,632,513 to support their work and to facilitate delivery of specialized services for persons with disabilities in their care. We also provided one-off grants to 20 NGOs to assist in the execution of social development projects with funds totalling $463,786, and
one-off grants of under $10,000 were distributed to 110 organizations amounting to $744,801.

In fiscal 2018, Madam Speaker, we will continue to work with civil society to build capacity within the community for effective service delivery and to equip them to adequately undertake their mandate. Greater attention will also be given to addressing issues of accountability and value for money in the provision of subventions to civil society.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, your original 45 minutes are now spent. You are entitled to a further 10 minutes.

Hon. C. Crichlow-Cockburn: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will utilize my remaining 10 minutes to speak to my constituents in Lopinot/Bon Air West. I take this opportunity to thank each and every constituent of Lopinot/Bon Air West for their support, for their assistance, for their patience and understanding during the last two years. I also thank them for coming out to our MEL sessions and contributing, letting us be aware of what their concerns are, what their issues are and also providing advice and ideas for moving Lopinot/Bon Air West and this Government forward.

Madam Speaker, the main campaign promise I made—and I made very few—was the provision of water in taps to the homeowners in Windy Hill and Edna Hill. I am very pleased to indicate that WASA, who has been working against all odds to make this a reality, has indicated that water would be in Windy Hill and Edna Hill by November of this year. Granted that water will be on a phased basis, but I am sure the residents of those two areas will be extremely happy to at last be provided with tap borne water in their homes.

The residents of Mc David Trace in Surrey Village, Lopinot, I also am pleased to inform them that the intake has been completed within Mc David Trace,
and they are also going to be provided with water from that intake, and these are the people of lower Lopinot, Soap Hill, Mc David Trace. They are now going to be serviced by the intake that has been constructed in Mc David Trace. This is no mean achievement because these projects were not on WASA’s strategic plan, but having spoken to them and explaining the situation, the people at WASA rose to the occasion, and we are now in a position where this Government can provide these residents with a reliable pipe borne supply of water.

I also want to inform constituents that the Minister of Works and Transport has indicated that the works identified during his tour of the constituency would commence this year. This is good news I am sure for residents of Victory Heights in Arima, Paradise in Tacarigua, Five Rivers, La Resource, La Florissante, Thomas Trace in Arouca, and Lopinot. Constituents, your patience will pay off because we are going to commence these projects in 2018.

Government’s plans as articulated in the budget are also very welcomed. Madam Speaker, on any given office day, at least 70 per cent of my constituents come to me seeking assistance in securing housing. So the fact that we anticipate an additional 1,000 houses being produced through our collaboration with the private sector is very welcome for my constituents. There are also a number of them who at this point in time may not be able to afford a mortgage, so the issue of rent-to-own and rental is very, very welcome and will make those constituents extremely happy.

Madam Speaker, as I close I want to thank the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, for without them we would not have been able to achieve all that we have over the last two years. We would not have been able to make the shifts in paradigm that we have made that have effectively improved efficiency and effectiveness in the Ministry. It is all due to their dedication. I also
want to thank the staff of the Lopinot/Bon Air West constituency office and, of course, all of the public servants that would have contributed to the preparation of the national budget.

As I close, I want to assure the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that the social safety net is intact and is in very good hands. For this Government to interfere with their benefits it would have to that water is more than flour, and water is not more than flour now. The Prime Minister has indicated that we will not travel on the road to the IMF, so they can rest assured that they will continue to receive all of the grants, all of the benefits at the 2017 level.

Madam Speaker, I thank you.