



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

**THE APPROPRIATION
(FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL 2020**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Madam Speaker

Allow me to begin my contribution to the Appropriation Bill 2020 with a quotation from a former President of the United States of America, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who said: *“The test of progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, (but rather) it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”* Madam Speaker, that quotation sums up quite appropriately, not just the gist of my own contribution today, but the undergirding philosophy of the Budget statement, enunciated on Monday by my colleague, the Honourable Minister of Finance.

Throughout my presentation today, Madam Speaker, you will recognize the erstwhile efforts of a Government who, in the midst of very strained economic circumstances, deliberately implemented policies and projects to ensure that no citizen who needed, was left without; that no citizen who, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, was left behind. As I account to the nation through this Honourable House on the programmes and initiatives undertaken by this Government, the one thread you will see being woven through this narrative, is the thread of compassion and care for the citizenry of our beloved nation, especially those who are susceptible to the prevailing socio-economic and other life challenges which they may be experiencing.

Madame Speaker, it is now obvious that increases in unemployment, underemployment, hunger and poverty, homelessness and mental health issues, have all emerged worldwide with the arrival of COVID-19. In the midst of it all, the efforts of this Government have ensured that those affected the most, have, for the most part, still been able to put food on their tables, to care for their loved ones, and to continue to make an effort to be productive. And that could only have happened, Madam Speaker, because of the astute leadership of our Honourable Prime Minister, and the contributions of the teams around him.

In that light, I wish to place on the public record my own appreciation for the sterling contributions made by the two strong women who preceded me in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and on whose shoulders I am now able to stand. The foundation which they built, has provided me with the assurance that the rock on which I now stand is solid, firm, and secure.

Madam Speaker, as I listened to the predictions of doom and gloom from the many political pundits in the days prior to the delivery of the Budget, I often had cause to wonder whether I am living in the same Trinidad and Tobago as they are.

You see, Madam Speaker, while I know this Government is led by a Prime Minister who is unafraid to take necessary decisions in the interest of our country, I also know that we are led by a gentleman who understands poverty, who understands what it means to be in need, and who genuinely wants to offer the generations to come, the chances that were unavailable in his generation and mine.

Madam Speaker, I read in the newspapers that the Opposition Leader's dear friend, and soon to be challenger, stated that this Budget does nothing for youth and the elderly. Madam Speaker, I don't know where he has been hiding, **but this Government created an entire Ministry dedicated to youth and youth development, and that Ministry is being funded in this Budget.** We are ensuring that none of our young people fall through the cracks where the provision of learning devices and training is concerned, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries is rolling out plans to increase the youth input in agriculture.

Used Car Dealers

Madam Speaker, I saw in the media a gentleman from an Automotive Dealers Association who said that the Finance Minister's removal of concessions on the importation of motor vehicles is callous and will lead to the shutdown of the used car industry.

Madam Speaker, I bought a car from that same man and first of all I got it with one key; when I raised that issue with him he callously stated that that is how it came.

Secondly, just after three months, a serious problem occurred with the engine. When I called and told him about it he callously said that the vehicle's warranty was for three months. So I had to spend thousands of dollars to fix a high-end vehicle and purchase a new key from England.

Madam Speaker, if you buy a fan today you get a three month guarantee. Poor service and poor quality products from dealers is what will shut down the industry.

Madam Speaker, the very philosophy behind the Minister of Finance's plan to examine the need to extend the retirement age to 65, is a recognition that our health systems are causing people to live longer, healthier and more productive lives. It is to recognize that the vast majority of our 60 year olds still have valuable contributions to make to the development of this country.

Madam Speaker, this Government respects, honours and cherishes the contributions of all citizens, but we will continue to pay special attention to the youth and the elderly, as no other government has done before. Later in my presentation, I will outline the many provisions the Government has put in place for the elderly.

Madam Speaker, I for one, was not in the least bit surprised by the title of our Budget Statement “**Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation**”, if only because it represents a balancing of our priorities with our expectations, our suit style with the amount of cloth available.

I am confident that this Government will continue to work with every citizen of our beloved country, to propel our economy towards full recovery, as the burden of adjustment is shared by all; with the clear understanding that things are only going to get better when we all work together. It is indeed an open secret that it will take endurance and resilience, creativity and innovation, strength and determination to chart a course to full recovery to secure and advance every son and daughter of this beloved country, but I remain confident Madam Speaker, that we have the will, we have the wisdom, and through this Budget, we will find our way.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has a simple, yet intensely significant mandate; that is, to *help, empower and transform* the lives of the most vulnerable of our country; ensuring that *no one is left behind*. That's it.

And we have identified the most vulnerable segments of the population amongst us as our senior citizens, at-risk youth, persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS, street dwellers, single fathers, single mothers and single-income households, and most certainly, the family as the cornerstone of our society. Our task is to ensure that there is a social safety net available for those vulnerable population segments, that they know about it, they know how to access it, and they do in fact benefit from it.

Social Protection

Madam Speaker, I am extremely pleased to inform this House that notwithstanding our challenging economic circumstances, this Government has not shirked its duty and commitment to the vulnerable population segments to which I alluded earlier. Moreover, in spite of the doomsday predictions of many, and consistent with the quote from President Franklyn D. Roosevelt that we measure progress by our ability to provide for those who have little, there has been no reduction in any of the benefits presently being offered to persons in need. More importantly, Madam Speaker, there hasn't been a single month when any of these payments was late. Like clockwork, the Government ensured that our pensioners received their pensions on time, that our disability grant recipients received theirs on time, that our public assistance recipients received theirs on time. This Government, Madam Speaker, understands the importance of the grants and allowances to the vulnerable and moreso, our responsibility to provide for them.

Indeed, our task at the Ministry, going forward, is to ensure that all those who might have fallen through the cracks, for one reason or another, are captured once and for all.

Indeed, Madam Speaker, I can report to this Honourable House, that as at September 2020, the Ministry provided support to one hundred and seventy-four thousand, seven hundred and ninety-eight (174,798) individuals and households through the various core social programmes.

Outside of this, Madame Speaker, the Ministry provided assistance in the form of income, food or rental support to over 173,000 individuals and families who were impacted by the measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Madame Speaker, this is a phenomenal achievement.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry, and certainly this Minister, is quite cognizant of the fact that we cannot accomplish all that we set out to do by ourselves. There are several hardworking, well-intentioned individuals and organizations on the national landscape who are doing fantastic work in ensuring that our vulnerable populations are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve.

Indeed, Madam Speaker, it is a well-established fact that incorporating civil society as part of the business model in the social services delivery system is crucial to sustainable development, especially in these times when reaching the vulnerable is threatened by restrictions in our movements and the new normal of limited contact.

As core partners, NGOs, CBOs FBOS and other civil society organizations are also facing the harsh economic realities of compressed financial and human resources required for their efficiency and effectiveness. It therefore calls for greater collaboration, closer engagement and navigation in these relationships as we continue to protect and empower the most vulnerable in our society.

In Fiscal 2020, the Ministry disbursed the sum of **Forty-seven Million, Two Hundred and Seventy-eight Thousand, Nine Hundred and Twelve Dollars (\$47,278,912.00) TTD** in subventions to twenty-two (22) NGOs, inclusive of three (3) Statutory Boards, to support their work and facilitate the delivery of specialized services for persons with disabilities in their care.

Madame Speaker, in Fiscal 2020, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services touched the lives of more than 700,000 citizens of this country. The provision of these grants and services, which include senior citizens pension, public assistance, disability grants, food cards etc., cost the taxpayer approximately Five Billion, One Hundred and Thirteen Million (**TT\$5.13**) dollars.

That is why, Madam Speaker, we could give the assurance to all of our pensioners, and all our grant recipients, that this Government will continue to pay special attention to your needs, and fulfill our promises to ensure that you are not left behind. Madame Speaker, I will now provide some further insights on the human capital investment made by this Government through the Ministry in 2020.

Older Persons

Our elderly are our most valued asset. This Government views their care and protection as high priority. It is for this reason that the lion's share of the Ministry's allocation goes towards the care and wellbeing of older persons.

➤ Senior Citizens' Pension

Over the last five years, Government introduced measures aimed at providing greater protection to our elderly population. These measures resulted in an increase in the number of older persons accessing the Senior Citizens Pension from eighty-six thousand, two hundred and eighty (86,280) persons by the end of Fiscal 2015 to one hundred and four thousand, and seven (104,007) persons by the end of Fiscal 2020. Between October 2015, to September 2020, more than 41,000 new persons were added to the system, inclusive of 9,417 in Fiscal 2020. Older persons are now in a better position to overcome the many challenges they encounter. More than 71% are receiving the maximum Senior Citizens Pension of \$3,500 per month.

In a 2017 Report titled, *“Caribbean Synthesis Report on the Implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing”* and the *“San Jose Charter on the Rights of Older Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean”*, ECLAC cited that Trinidad and Tobago has the most comprehensive contributory and non-contributory pension scheme in CARICOM.

The Report also cited that the pension scheme has evolved to become the highest per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean region.

Madame Speaker as at September 2020, the Ministry expended **Four Billion, Twelve Million, Three Hundred and Forty-Four Thousand, One Hundred and Twenty-One Dollars (\$4,012,344,121.00) on the Senior Citizens Pension.**

➤ **Senior Activity Centres Programme**

The Senior Activity Centres Programme was designed to provide the necessary physical, social and mental stimulation, and support mechanisms to enable older persons aged 55 years and over to remain active and healthy. The Centres serve as multi-service facilities, which are the focal points where older persons come together for services, educational and recreational activities that enhance their dignity, support their independence and encourage their involvement in the community. Seniors are participants in **Five (5)** environs: **Maloney, Barataria, Rio Claro, Princes Town and Point a Pierre**. Total membership across the regions was Nine Hundred and Eighty-five (**985**) seniors. In 2020, **Seven Hundred and Three Thousand Dollars (\$703,000)** was spent on this programme.

➤ **Community Care Programme**

Ninety-One (91) residents are currently housed in Eighteen (18) homes under the Community Care Programme. This programme offers accommodation and care for older persons who do not have such support available to them.

For Fiscal 2020, Three Million, Eight Hundred and Seventy-Four Thousand and Twenty-One Dollars (**\$3,874,021.00**) was paid to these Homes.

➤ **Homes for the Aged**

The Ministry continues to support eight (8) Homes for the Aged in collaboration with Management Committees comprised of volunteers from within the communities. These Homes are located in Toco, Sangre Grande, Couva, Chaguanas, Point Fortin, La Brea, San Fernando and Siparia. Approximately 150 older persons are provided with residential accommodation at these homes. In 2020 the total amount of One Million, One Hundred and Forty-Four Thousand, Three Hundred and Eighty-Four Dollars (**\$1,144,384.00**) was disbursed by the Ministry to the eight (8) Homes.

➤ **Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme**

The Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme (GAPP) is an intensive short-term Intergenerational Training Programme aimed at empowering young persons between the ages of 17-35, to respond to the growing and complex needs of an ageing population. Graduates of this programme are placed with older persons to provide a range of care services for a specified period. In fiscal 2020, nine hundred and eighty-eight (988) older persons were provided with care by trained care givers of GAPP. The investment associated with this measure was Nineteen Million, Eight Hundred and Fifty-two Thousand Dollars (**\$19,852,000.00**).

Special Achievers

There are a number of persons who made significant contributions to the development of Trinidad and Tobago and who are experiencing challenges in their older years.

A Special Achiever is considered to be a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago whose record of service and/or performance is publicly distinguishable as an extraordinary contribution to the international profile of Trinidad and Tobago and nation building in such fields as, but not limited to, sport, culture, education, community and social services, human resource development, business and international relations. In 2020, the Ministry provided financial support to 37 such persons. The expenditure associated with this initiative is One Million, Seven Hundred and Eleven Thousand, Three Hundred and Fifty-six Dollars **(\$1,711,356.00)**

Families

Promoting and Supporting Healthy, Functioning Families

Madam Speaker, one way to ensure that no one is left behind is to ensure that no family is left behind. The family remains one of the most important institutions in our society and can be the heartbeat of a productive and crime free nation. As the bedrock of our society, the family must therefore be provided with all the support that is required, particularly at this time when we are in the face of unprecedented challenges to our socio economic and human capital. To this end, the Ministry's National Family Services Division (NFSD) increased its outreach services to families.

Up to August 2020, the NFSD managed a total of 2,885 cases of which 1,485 were new and 1,400 were on-going assessments. Services included individual and group counselling, co-parenting counselling, referral, advocacy, and advisory services.

As part of its annual public education series, the Division also initiated new radio and television programmes, bringing together Executive and staff of the MSDFS, as well as, subject matter experts to discuss the delicate nature of family dynamics within the Stay at Home period of restrictions.

In July and August of 2020, the NFSD launched its first cycle of blended parenting workshops via remote technology for interested parents and individuals. Through this approach, the Ministry was able to facilitate a wider cross-section of participants, thereby creating a more inclusive approach to parenting education. Two of the sessions were open for general participants, while the third *was exclusively* for adult males, who were parents, grandparents, uncles or mentors within their communities. Men who were not yet parents, were also encouraged to register.

In Fiscal 2020, the Ministry partnered with several NGOs in the provision of family life and counselling services of a specialized nature. The Ministry views these services as crucial in the preservation of family life. The investment in this area was Two Million, One Hundred and Thirteen Thousand, Three Hundred and Ninety-three dollars (\$2,113,393.00).

At September 2020, 27,741 households are in receipt of permanent food support. In Fiscal 2020, 5,728 new households were added to the system.

Investment in this area is One Hundred and Ninety-three Million, Seven Hundred and Three Thousand, Seven Hundred and Ten Dollars **(\$193,703,710.00)**.

In fiscal 2020, the Ministry supported eighteen thousand, nine hundred and forty-two (18,942) economically disadvantaged families through the Public Assistance Grants. Over 2,700 new families were introduced to the grant in fiscal 2020. The investment associated with this measure was Three Hundred and Thirty-nine Million, Four Hundred and Nine Thousand, Four Hundred and Fifty-Seven Dollars **(\$339,409,457.00)**.

A further 1,004 families also benefitted from a number of other grants like household furnishing, medical equipment, funeral grants, house repairs, along with others at a cost of Five Million, Nine Hundred and Ninety-four Thousand, Three Hundred and Ninety-two Dollars **(\$5,994,392.00)** in fiscal 2020.

Madame Speaker, over the years we have witnessed an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters. The devastating effects of these acts of nature on family life are well known to all of us in this chamber.

Despite the challenges in determining the veracity of the many claims, the Ministry paid 1,554 affected persons. The expenditure associated with this is Eleven Million, Six Hundred and Fifty-two Thousand dollars (**\$11,652,000**).

Domestic Violence

I now wish to highlight the difficult and thorny issue that has been plaguing our society for some time – ‘domestic violence’. This scourge of our day has been increasing at an alarming rate. Madame Speaker, in some cases, it has resulted in the ultimate – murder and/or suicide, creating lasting traumas on family members and the wider community.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, through the National Family Services Division, understands the importance of having relevant interventions that neutralizes conflict, support victims and perpetrators alike, and save lives. The Ministry’s Domestic Violence Counselling Services are readily available to assist those in need of support. Over the years, the Division has done intensive interventions in cases of domestic abuse such as conflict and anger management, mediation, problem solving techniques and family group therapy, among others. It engages in regular collaboration with other Ministries, faith-based and non-governmental organisations to host workshops, seminars and community outreaches of various types.

Today, we encourage our citizens to reach out if you or someone you know are in need of support. Let us work together to prevent domestic violence. We are here to serve you.

Initiatives to Support Persons with Disabilities

Madam Speaker, I am certain that every one of us here knows someone who is affected by a disability. Mindful of our commitment to persons with disabilities, the Government amended the Public Assistance Act Chapter 32:03 to allow children with a disability to access the Disability Assistance Grant. Madame Speaker, as at September 2020, 25,149 persons are in receipt of the Disability Assistance Grant, this includes 2,134 children with a disability. The investment made in 2020 was Five Hundred and Sixty-seven Million, and Three Thousand, Five Hundred and Ninety-four Dollars (**\$567,003,594.00**).

Madame Speaker, 101 persons received assistance with assistive devices, such as wheelchairs and prostheses at a value of One Million and Ninety Thousand, Seven Hundred Dollars (**\$1,090,700.00**).

The Ministry has a long-standing relationship with several NGOs, inclusive of three Statutory Boards, who act for and on behalf of persons with a disability. In Fiscal 2020, the Ministry provided Forty-one Million, Two Hundred and Sixty-nine Thousand, Four Hundred and Nineteen Dollars (**\$41,269,419.00**) to these NGOs to allow them to provide services in various areas relative to persons with a disability.

We have gone a step further and approved the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities as a White Paper and have made significant steps towards the operationalization of the National Enrichment Center. Cabinet has also approved the establishment of an Inter-Agency Committee to promote, monitor and evaluate the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities for a period of two years.

The Government has also moved to ensure that the community of persons with a disability is not left disadvantaged by the digital divide. Two important steps were taken to ensure that the members of this community are able to participate as fully as possible in their own development.

The first was through the installation of the Job Access With Speech Software (JAWS) at the National Enrichment Centre. This screen reading software allows visually impaired persons to interface more easily with computers. It also allows organizations working with persons who are visually impaired to conduct computer literacy training and other training courses for their clients. These training programmes allow persons who are visually impaired to gain additional skills, become more marketable, pursue employment and educational opportunities, and increase their access to information available online. The cost of outfitting these computers was Fifty-two Thousand Dollars **(\$52,000.00)**.

The second initiative was an amendment to the Copyright Bill which was successfully passed through both Houses of Parliament, and gave effect to the Marrakesh Treaty, thereby facilitating access to published works for persons who are blind, visually impaired or otherwise print disabled.

This Bill brought print equity to persons who are members of the visually impaired community and provided for greater inclusion and access to reading literature for these groups of persons. The Bill also empowered the National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS) to make previously inaccessible material, printed in formats such as Braille and digital audio files, more readily accessible to this community.

Social Support Interventions for COVID-19

Madam Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event in the current global social landscape. Governments, the world over, are adopting as best as they can, mitigation measures designed to curb the spread of the virus and “flatten the curve”. However, those measures carry with them socioeconomic and psychosocial consequences for citizens that may undoubtedly have long term and far reaching effects.

It is clear, however, that in anticipation of the impact and what has unfolded so far during the crisis, the Government has led the private sector and civil society organisations in implementing various strategies to alleviate the severity of these effects.

There can be no doubt that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services played a significant role in the implementation of these measures. While most of the support was financial, the National Family Services Division has, through collaboration with its key stakeholders, also provided much needed counselling and psycho-social support to affected persons and their families. As at September 2020, the Ministry provided assistance to one hundred and seventy-three thousand, and twenty (173,020) individuals and families at a cost of Three Hundred and Twenty-nine Million, Six Hundred Thousand, Two Hundred and Forty Dollars (\$329,600,240.00).

Contrary to the comments of the Leader of the Opposition that persons have not gotten support with respect to COVID-19, here is the list of the number of persons who received support.

Among the measures implemented were:

- Top up to existing food support beneficiaries 25,101
- Food support to families where a member was retrenched, terminated or experienced reduced income 49,486
- Food Support to persons who applied for Senior Citizens' Pension or Disability Assistance but whose applications were pending 3,306
- Food Support to households that receive meals from the School Feeding Programme 20,497
- Food Vouchers/Market Boxes provided to families, in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture 24,999

➤ Emergency Food Hampers	1,400
➤ Income support to existing beneficiaries of the Public Assistance and Disability Assistance Grants	42,451
➤ Income support to families where a member was retrenched terminated or experienced reduced income	47,774
➤ Rental Assistance	3,770

As it relates to Tobago, Madame Speaker, persons received both food and income support. The total expenditure associated with these measures was Twelve Million and Twenty-eight Thousand, Three Hundred and Eighty Dollars (**\$12,028,380.00**) up to September, 2020:

➤ Top up to existing food card beneficiaries	1,864
➤ Food Support for families where a member was retrenched, or experienced reduced income	1,841
➤ Top up to existing public assistance and disability Grant recipients	731
➤ Food support for parents with children on the School Feeding Programme	1,099

Tobago Service Desk

The Tobago Service Desk was established on October 1st, 2020. This will serve to resolve all matters which fall under the purview of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, inclusive of matters related to Covid-19.

The decision was made during my visit to Tobago when I met with the Secretary of the Division of Health, Wellness and Family Development as well as the Members of Parliament for Tobago East and West.

At this Desk, all issues related to the Covid-19 support measures will be promptly, fairly and professionally dealt with, ensuring that no one is left behind. Equal access and feedback relative to Covid-19 social support grants will continue to be provided to clients of Tobago as is being done for those in Trinidad. Since the establishment of the desk we have fielded over 400 queries including calls, emails and WhatsApp messages.

Madam Speaker, none of us gathered in this Chamber could predict with any degree of certainty when the world will return to some semblance of normalcy. We have moved from trying to keep the virus out, to learning how to live with it, and there is no doubt that there are thousands of families who remain traumatized and affected by this virus.

I give the assurance today, as the Honourable Minister of Finance did in his presentation, that this Government will not abandon its citizens in their hour of darkness, but will continue to engage all stakeholders to ensure that no citizen is left behind, that no citizen in need of help, is neglected.

Madam Speaker, it is my belief that the Ministry has been delivering on this mandate with great success. Can we do more? Can we do better? Can we be more efficient? The answer to all three questions is solidly in the affirmative. The Ministry will redouble its efforts in the new fiscal year to fulfill its call to service to reach the persons in need.

National Social Mitigation Plan - Looking Ahead

Madam Speaker, as we look ahead, The National Social Mitigation Programme (NSMP) emerges directly from the National Roadmap to Recovery Plan and represents one part of government's response to the present and future impacts of the challenging economic risks now being faced across the globe.

The implementation of key recommendations contained in the National Social Mitigation Plan is one of the key steps in transforming the Ministry.

Appropriately themed “**Building Resilience to Secure our Nation**”, the NSMP seeks to equip affected persons with resources and tools to cope firstly, with the short term consequences of the downturn, and ultimately, help them to overcome these circumstances in the medium to long term.

The plan therefore targets persons who are in vulnerable socio/economic positions, such as recently retrenched workers, unemployed persons, low income earners, at-risk-youth, persons with disabilities, and individuals and families currently living below the established poverty line.

The NSMP is focused on achieving 3 main objectives:

1. Strengthening the social protection system
2. Promoting community and civil society action
3. Enhancing productivity and innovation.

The new system will be the liaison point with other Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) to implement a one stop, more integrated and holistic programme of assistance for the vulnerable and families.

Madam Speaker, I remain confident that the process will result ultimately in the transformation of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services into a modern, client-centered and high-performance organization.

Steps to Improve the Operations of the Ministry

Madam Speaker, not only have we recognized that we cannot do it alone, we also recognize that there is a need even within the Ministry to become more agile, more responsive, more service driven, more customer centric, and more outcome oriented, if we are to deliver on our mandate to be our brothers and sisters keeper.

To this end, the Ministry has done its own introspection and undertaken a number of initiatives which we believe will both strengthen and improve our operations.

These include the following:

- A new model for the delivery of social services that best suits the multi-faceted and complex needs of our families. Specifically, the trend is suggesting that an increasing number of families experience interrelated barriers in life. The Ministry will accelerate the establishment of the Social Support and Empowerment Unit which is an integrated ‘one stop shop’ designed to enable citizens to access all of our services with a single visit to one of our offices, whether it is for urgent temporary assistance, counseling and others.
- Madame Speaker, as you look around, as you read the newspaper, as you go about life in your own communities, on a daily basis, you see families in distressing situations. Some of these situations have a paralyzing effect with unnecessary loss of life or broken families.

- Many, at this time are either unaware or simply unable to seek support services. In their state, there is a need for an immediate response. The Ministry will accelerate the development of a critical incidents protocol. The design will involve a collaboration with key stakeholders.

First Responders System

Resilient Communities are the bedrock of a Nation. A key component of a strong, resilient community is stable relationships among the people that will endure over time. Members of such communities invest of their time and love to protect and support each other so that the community thrives. It is with this understanding that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will lead the thrust towards establishing the Community First Responders System.

In times of crisis, due to natural disasters or threats to the wellbeing of individuals or families in the communities, the capacity to deal with this must emerge from within communities at the local level, as far as possible, so that a network of first responders is there to facilitate a quick, proactive response to those in need. The Ministry recognizes that our traditional First Responders, Police, Fire Services, the Defence Force and others, will always be important to us.

However our aim is to build even greater protection into communities by establishing an integrated support system that will also offer psychosocial and other support to families when they face different crises such as bereavement, critical illness or family disputes.

The integrated First Responders System will be an important factor in building resilience and more positive relations within communities. When fully implemented it is expected to usher in a new era of national peace and stability.

The Ministry has already identified the broad framework for such collaboration and has begun reaching out to MPs, partner Ministries and other individuals and groups. We will continue to do so over the coming months.

Establishment of an Integrated Social Enterprise Management System (ISEMS)

If the MSDFS is to live out its brand promise of good governance and service excellence, a comprehensive information system to administer the Ministry's various programmes, grants and services cannot be over emphasized. It is in fact the way forward and there is no better time for its implementation than now.

I am pleased to inform this House that in 2021 fiscal we expect to see the digitization of all of our grants that are not currently in our electronic database through the Integrated Social Enterprise Management System (ISEMS).

This would enable greater efficiency and effectiveness in the processing of grants. The introduction of this technology will facilitate an integrated, more dynamic and responsive system, and by extension, a more effective solution.

Citizens Engagement Unit

The Service Standards and Outreach Unit will work in conjunction with the Tobago Desk and will also resolve matters which fall under the purview of the Ministry.

This initiative will enhance the performance of the Ministry in the delivery of services to citizens, identifying their needs and responding positively to their concerns. In so doing we are saying to the public, “We care about the issues that you encounter on a daily basis and we are here to support you”. This Unit will maximize opportunities for citizen engagement, beyond those that already exist; build a more substantial rapport between the Ministry and citizens; identify and trouble shoot problems; and effect solutions in the most direct, caring and efficient manner.

Through our outreach efforts, we will expand communication by utilizing an integrated mix of mechanisms including traditional and social media, person-to-person meetings and community walk about(s) to meet with communities, learn of their issues and respond appropriately.

We have already started by reaching out to stakeholders including our partner Ministries, MPs, the private sector and other community organisations. We will continuously measure what we do, to ensure that we are meeting our goals and regularly provide feedback on our performance to the national community.

The Ministry intends to establish a fully functional toll free call-centre, to assist the general population in accessing information about social services across the social Sector. The MSDFS in collaboration with the UWI has produced a Handbook on Social Services for this purpose.

Additionally, the Ministry signed an MOU with iGovTT (TTConnect) to utilize its Call Centre and chat robot to assist with any gaps which may arise and also provide real time responses to online queries via the Ministry's website.

The Ministry will examine and introduce a Revised Means Test. The prevailing socioeconomic conditions will certainly inform the revised test.

We are presently seeking an MOU with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development to assist with the provision of transitional and low income housing to meet the needs of our clients.

Values, Attitudes and Behaviors Campaign (VABs)

Madam Speaker, none of the great initiatives I have outlined would be possible if the one final piece of the puzzle is not in place, and that is, a change in our values, attitudes and behaviors to emphasize acceptance of personal responsibility, to recognize that our actions and behaviors have knock-on effects on our fellow citizens, and to normalize delayed rather than instant gratification.

Madam Speaker, Chapter 4 of the National Development Plan (Vision 2030) speaks to the need for more concentration on a positive value system to be embedded in our families, workplaces, and places of worship among others.

Now more than ever as our world is at risk with the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all called upon as a nation to unite, to reflect on what keeps us together, what will help us to recover, and how we will achieve full restoration.

MSDFS has launched an internal aspects of the Values, Attitudes, Behaviours (VABs) Campaign to initiate the transformation among the staff of the Ministry. It is our intention to launch at a national level. It is my hope that this initiative will re-energize our citizenry to rally around each other, and restore family life and our society with the love, discipline, respect and productivity that we all know is possible.

Supporting Grandparents who are taking care of their Grandchildren

It is important that we highlight the excellent and important supportive role being undertaken by grandparents in support of their grandchildren.

There are times when the grandparents' role is very critical such as in a fulltime care situation due to death, illness, migration, incarceration or other family circumstances.

There is a need for greater recognition of the vulnerability of grandparents when they perform these roles, even more so, if they are caring for children who are ill or those with disabilities.

In these circumstances grandparents can suffer from a number of issues including, financial hardship, physical, emotional and psychological stress, isolation and poverty.

It is therefore incumbent upon us to provide support to these unsung heroes who often give without complaining or asking anything in return.

Some of the provisions we intend to make in support of this group include: Parental Training, specifically designed for the specific needs of Grandparents; Counselling services; and Support Groups and Networks, among others.

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.

We remain committed to its thrust in maintaining the high levels of investment in the social sector, in order to mitigate existing and emergent economic impacts.

CONCLUSION

As I close Madam Speaker, I wish to thank you and this House for the opportunity to make these remarks in support of the remarkable budget presentation for fiscal 2020/2021.

The Budget ensured that the most vulnerable in our society have access to a multifaceted safety net, especially at this time of a pandemic.

It is my firm belief that this Government is poised to take our country forward as it continues to place in focus, the strengthening of the safety net for the most vulnerable in our midst.

I thank you.