



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

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

SENATE CONTRIBUTION

Monday, October 26, 2020

Thank you Madame President

Madam President, thank you for the opportunity to speak on the Appropriation (Fiscal Year 2021) Bill 2020.

Madam President, about two weeks ago I addressed the other place and described in great detail the comprehensive response of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing necessity of Government intervention to ensure that the most vulnerable amongst us are still afforded the opportunity to engage in a decent quality of life.

Madam President, while I will account for the monies expended by this Government in the last fiscal year, and indicate our plans for the current, it is not my intention today to repeat all the details of that presentation. I intend to focus not only on what the Government has done and will continue to do for persons who find themselves in certain precarious situations, but also what is the Government's plan to take those persons out of those situations and into a place where they can better survive on their own.

Government's COVID-19 expenditure and continued expenditure on the social sector

Madam President, one of the most repeated questions since the 2021 Budget was presented by the Honourable Minister of Finance, was “where the money gone?” Indeed, the Opposition Leader has gone on public record as calling for a forensic audit of the monies expended on citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. I have said it before and I will repeat it in this august Chamber, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has nothing to hide, and we will welcome any probe, by any agency, into the Ministry's operations.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services was faced with the dilemma of continuing to provide services to clients already in the system while, at the same time, providing emergency services to persons affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, Madam President, at no time since the local onset of the pandemic in March, has there been any delay in the payment of senior citizens pensions, disability or public assistance grants, or any of the many grants offered to citizens by this Ministry, and that is in itself a phenomenal achievement.

I can report to this Honourable Chamber, 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, 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. In short, as at September 30th, 2020, this Government provided food, income and other support to more than one-quarter of the entire population of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, 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.

Madam President, the evidence is clear, this is a substantial contribution in the fight against poverty. This investment has been able to close the poverty gap and reduce inequality. The Government's investment through the safety net programmes offered by the Ministry, also contributed to building household resilience during the prevailing pandemic.

Of that figure, Madam President, 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.

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 86,280 persons by the end of Fiscal 2015 to 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. Madame President, more than 85% of our population 65 years and over are currently in receipt of the Senior Citizens Pension.

Madame President, this on its own is quite a phenomenal achievement. Madame President 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, and assures that no older person should be in hunger or poverty.

Madam President, as further testimony of this Government's care for its elderly population, **Seven Hundred and Three Thousand Dollars (\$703,000)** was spent on five (5) Senior Citizens Activity Centres, to ensure that those who have contributed so much to the development of our society have a place where they can still feel and remain productive.

Moreover, mindful of the fact that not every family is in a position to take care of its elderly at home, this Government paid **Three Million, Eight Hundred and Seventy-Four Thousand and Twenty-One Dollars (\$3,874,021.00)** to house 91 residents in Community Care Homes in fiscal 2020, and a further **One Million, One Hundred and Forty-Four Thousand, Three Hundred and Eighty-Four Dollars (\$1,144,384.00)** to house residents in eight (8) Homes for the Aged.

For those elderly persons who need assistance in their homes, Madam President, the Government continued to provide support through the Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme to the tune of **Nineteen Million, Eight Hundred and Fifty-two Thousand Dollars (\$19,852,000.00)** benefiting nine hundred and eighty-eight (988) older persons.

Madam President, as evidence of this Government's commitment to the community of disabled persons, this 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.

Madam President, in Fiscal 2020 the Government also provided support to those in need as follows:

- **Permanent Food Support** - 27,741 households at a cost of One Hundred and Ninety-three Million, Seven Hundred and Three Thousand, Seven Hundred and Ten Dollars (**\$193,703,710.00**).
- **Public Assistance Grants** - 18,942 families at a cost of Three Hundred and Thirty-nine Million, Four Hundred and Nine Thousand, Four Hundred and Fifty-Seven Dollars (**\$339,409,457.00**).
- **Miscellaneous grants** - 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**).
- **Disability Grants** - 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**).

- **Natural disasters** - the Ministry paid 1,554 affected persons a total of Eleven Million, Six Hundred and Fifty-two Thousand dollars (**\$11,652,000**).

With specific reference to the support to citizens affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as at September 30th, 2020, this Government has 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)**.

This support came in the form of rental relief paid directly to landlords, loss of income support, food support for families, as well as for households where children were supported through the school feeding programme.

Madam President, I have outlined these programmes and the cost to the national economy, if only to indicate to those opposite where the money was spent.

Madam President, for various reasons, including double dipping and attempts at fraud, not all those who applied for assistance were able to receive such. The Ministry had cause to reject almost 5,000 applications. Some reasons for rejection include:

- Some applicants were non-nationals;
- Students;
- Lack of the required documentation, in some cases, unwillingness to supply the necessary documentation;
- Some applicants had income that exceeded the qualifying limit.

Madam President, some of the applications were blatant attempts to mislead and defraud the Government. All these things made them ineligible for the grant. More importantly, and this is of grave concern to me Madam President, they clogged the system and stopped genuine applicants from accessing support quicker.

At the end of the day though, the Ministry is satisfied that we have done our best in providing support to citizens of our beloved nation in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. I wish to publicly commend all the NGOs, CBOs, FBOs and all others who stepped up to the plate to ensure that no one was left without.

Proverbs 14:31 says, “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt to his maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.”

We, at the MSDFS, have accepted this as our mandate, to be compassionate to **all** our fellow Trinbagonians who are poor and needy, but we have gone one step further to ensure that through the programmes I will now outline, they are presented with opportunities not only to help themselves, but also to maintain a decent standard of living.

Madam President, the Ministry has been delivering on our mandate. Can we do more? The answer is yes. Can we do better? The answer is yes. Can we be more efficient? The answer is yes.

We intend to redouble our efforts in the new fiscal year to fulfil our mandate to reach the most vulnerable in our beloved country.

Launch of Website – Benefits

And perhaps Madam President, I could begin with the Ministry's last public initiative, which is the re-launch of the Ministry's website. As the Government progresses to a state of full digitalisation of the economy, a Ministry's website becomes an essential tool, both in bridging the communication gaps that exist between Government and end users, and ensuring greater efficiency and impact in the delivery of government's services. In this regard, the Ministry's website was re-designed and relaunched to ensure that, as far as possible, all forms, processes, information about the different grants etc., are readily available to those who need it most.

This new website was therefore developed with three (3) principal functions in mind:

- 1) to offer a more desirable, user-friendly service to our clients;
- 2) to facilitate greater and easier collaboration among our partners; and

3) to support the work of our internal teams.

Madam President, I am extremely elated to use this opportunity to thank the Executive and Staff of the Ministry, as well as other key stakeholders, who all played critical roles in ensuring that this re-designed website met and surpassed the expectations of all for whom it is intended to serve. One such group, Madam President is the Community of Persons With Disabilities who were integral partners in the website's re-design. This was an exercise in collaboration and mutual respect, and demonstrated among other things, Government's commitment to establish a greater sense of inclusion, equity and the creation of opportunity for all citizens of our beloved country.

Sustainable Poverty Reduction Initiatives

Madame President, the eradication of poverty, social injustice and inequality depend on a lot more than the distribution of grants and services. It is against this background, that many of our programmes, grants and services at the Ministry are designed to help persons transition from dependence to self-reliance and sustainability.

In this regard, there are a number of additional developments coming from the Ministry that need to be highlighted in the interest of empowering those who are considered to be the most vulnerable amongst us. Among such are the Adult Education Programme, the SEED Grant and the STEP-UP Programme.

Adult Education Programme

The AEP is a long standing programme designed to develop and empower adults through the opportunity of a free second chance at acquiring their Primary, Secondary and Technical Vocational Education. Delivered at Community Centres throughout the country, mainly by our retired educators. Persons who avail themselves of this opportunity are trained in literacy, numeracy and, equally important, courses through which they can in fact obtain an income. These courses include beauty culture, garment construction, cake decoration, home décor, mixed crafts, tile laying, masonry, plumbing, electrical installation, welding and fabrication, among others.

We also provide free computer literacy courses and associated ICT studies through this programme. As a reminder, a few weeks ago, this Ministry commissioned Trinidad and Tobago's first *wholly owned and operated* ICT lab by government, for participants of the Adult Education Programme.

These programmes have the benefit, Madam President, of offering to participants the opportunity to now earn an independent and sustainable income, and in so doing, lift themselves out of their current circumstances. Eight thousand, two hundred and four (8,204) persons graduated from the Adult Education Programme since 2015. Today, I want to encourage our citizens to register for these courses, find what you like and take that second chance at learning.

SEED Grant

The Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development (SEED) initiative provides financial assistance to persons in difficult socio economic circumstances.

This grant, Madam President, is not merely a cash grant to spend on daily requirements, but rather seed assistance for persons to either establish, expand or grow their small business venture, as well as develop requisite business management competencies through its training component.

Madam President, there are many of us who, because of geography, social standing and a host of other circumstances, look down on the poor and those in poverty, and decry them with the demand that they pull themselves up by their bootstraps. The harsh reality, is that many of our poor have neither boots nor straps, and therefore these initiatives are designed to get them to at least stand on their own, towards sustainable poverty reduction and meaningful participation in the domestic economy.

STEP –UP

Madam President, another initiative to be rolled out during this fiscal year is the Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme – Uplifting People (STEP-UP). This programme will be implemented across the Ministry to work with families/households with a view to building resilience and graduate from their programmes.

STEP-UP is a holistic approach designed to work with economically challenged and other vulnerable families who are experiencing psycho-social barriers in their family life.

Madame President, this approach will allow for the examination of key areas of family life that directly impact or cause poverty. This will form the basis of our poverty reduction efforts; such areas include education, employment, income, family dynamics, health, personal identification, housing and safety and security.

STEP-UP is not only designed to treat with the multi-dimensional nature of poverty but other forms of vulnerability and more importantly impact the overall quality of family life.

Supporting Grandparents who are taking care of their Grandchildren

Madame President, I am certain there are many amongst us who have fond memories of spending weekends or extended breaks from school with our grandparents. There are many of us who were in fact raised by our grandparents, due to the absence of our parents, for one reason or another.

Today, grandparents continue to provide invaluable social support to their families, particularly in these times of socio-economic constraints. Grandparents raising grandchildren is a common feature of life in Trinidad and Tobago. However, when that care involves full time responsibility, when the biological parents are absent for any reason, then the picture changes significantly.

The evidence is now emerging that in these circumstances grandparents become very vulnerable and can suffer from many challenges, some very severe, including: financial hardship, physical, emotional and psychological stress, isolation and poverty. Some grandparents have difficulty accessing services for their grandchildren as they do not have legal custody of their charges and may have to undergo extensive legal battles to secure these rights.

In some situations, because of issues with parents, grandchildren can themselves suffer from a variety of developmental, behavioural, emotional and other challenges such as depression, ADHD, learning disabilities and may display feelings of resentment, frustration, rejection and anger.

Parenting in these circumstances, pose added difficulties for grandparents whose already limited resources may be diverted to psychological and medical support, to overcome the adverse mental and physical consequences of these challenges.

The Ministry recognizes this as a major social dilemma. In this regard, we are working on a package of services for grandparents who are taking care of their grandchildren. These will include: parenting skills; psychological support for themselves and their grandchildren through our National Family Services Division. Our Division of Ageing will provide assistance with respect to social isolation and loneliness; and through our enhanced communication efforts we will make sure they are aware of all the services of the Ministry that are available to them.

There are two points to be made about this, Madam President. The first is that increasingly, the age of becoming a grandparent has been decreasing as the cycle of teenage pregnancy continues in many households.

The second is that there are many grandparents who are limited in their ability to provide care and support for their younger loved ones for a variety of reasons. As such, through the combined efforts of the various Divisions of the Ministry, older persons who are charged with the care of minors can receive support.

Social Support and Empowerment Unit (SSE)

During this new fiscal year, the Ministry will accelerate the establishment of its Social Support and Empowerment Unit. This Unit will be operationalized as an integrated *one stop shop* to enable citizens to access all the Ministry's services with a single office visit or visit to our website. We intend to ensure that this model serves as a response to the multi-faceted and complex needs of our families. The SSE will also facilitate coordinated social intervention by the Ministry in an efficient manner, wherever and whenever the need arises.

Madame President, within recent years, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) has undergone significant changes in organizational structure and mandate. The new mandate though, suggests a developmental oriented framework rather than a passive one. One where *focus is on prevention and early recovery in social programmes, rather than one of maintenance, which offers no assistance in lifting persons out of poverty.*

Government has committed to paying greater *focus on the needs of the elderly, single parents, children, persons with a disability and other disadvantaged groups.* However, the current configuration of the social services protection system can sometimes miss the mark for many citizens, so we intend to move from the one dimensional siloed strategy in service delivery.

Specifically, the trend is suggesting that an increasing number of families experience interrelated barriers in life that cross delivery units and programmes (e.g. poverty, health issues, unemployment, and homelessness and others).

Families seeking help are treated in isolation. They have complex needs but are seen by multiple agencies and caseworkers, which can be confusing and time consuming for clients and results in duplicated processes. Our strategic priority therefore is to enhance customer experience in a more targeted approach through an integrated environment.

Integrated Community First Responders System

This is a strategy for a more responsive family-focused, social service delivery system.

Madam President, we believe resilient communities form the bedrock of our nation. A key component of a strong, resilient community is stable relationships among residents that will endure over time. Residents of such communities, much like what existed before, invest their time, talent and treasure to protect and support each other so that the community thrives. It is with this understanding that the Ministry proposes to lead the thrust towards establishing the Community First Responders System.

This is particularly true of communities where there may be senior citizens, pregnant or nursing mothers, single parents, abused persons and persons with disabilities, who will require immediate attention.

This is a family support, community-based system, consisting of a network of public, private, NGOs, Civil Society organisations and individual volunteers, who come together to protect and support families during times of crises, bearing in mind that the concept of family also includes single adults, living alone. Crises may be unexpected events such as natural or manmade disasters, bereavement, critical illness or family disputes that have a physical, psychological or emotional impact on families within that community.

We are all familiar with the critical role played by the Police, Fire Services, Regional Corporations, the ODPM and international NGOs such as the Red Cross and Is There Not a Cause during times of crisis. They will remain an integral part of the Integrated Community First Responders System in their existing capacities.

How is it different from our current First Responder System?

The Integrated Community First Responders System is guided by the National Policy for Sustainable Community Development and will be activated for *any family* within a community upon the occurrence of any one of the following:

1. A public expression of assistance for families and individuals due to losses resulting in homelessness, need for counselling or other services provided by the Ministry;
2. A critical incident that would affect families/individuals that is brought to the attention of the Head Office and the District Offices of the Ministry;
3. A review of statistical reports indicating a family is or will be in crisis;
4. Retrenchment and/or closing down of businesses due to structural adjustments in the economy, which affects the family;
5. Referral by a Division or Unit within the Ministry, partner Ministry or agency.

How will it work?

This will be led by the National Family Services Division of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, ONCE alerted, the relevant members of the Ministry will be activated, briefed and, utilising the case management approach, deliver the appropriate team response, with critical designated roles for each member of the team.

Standard Operating Procedures and individual and group protocols will be established to govern the seamless functioning of the team. Training will be provided for all members of the system.

Performance Monitoring

Performance will be monitored and evaluated using critical incident analysis protocols, response times, client satisfaction and other metrics.

The integrated Community 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.

MI-FI

Madam President, in keeping with Government's intention to create a digital society (via MI-FI), the Ministry endorses the initiative 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.

Integrated Social Enterprise Management System (ISEMS)

Madam President, if this Ministry 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 only way forward if we are to reduce duplication and increase efficiency, and there is no better time for its implementation than now.

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

What will ISEMS do?

- ✓ Provide a single door approach for accessing social services;
- ✓ Address many of the overwhelming operational and technological challenges in the delivery of social services;
- ✓ Provide technological framework for the decentralisation of social services;
- ✓ Improve the effectiveness of the social services through automation and integration of business processes thereby allowing data and information sharing across the organisation;
- ✓ Provide real time reporting and analysis of social services data;
- ✓ Client Portal, so that clients can interact directly with the Ministry.

This would enable greater efficiency and effectiveness in the processing of grants. The introduction of this technology will also facilitate an integrated, more dynamic and responsive system, and by extension, a more effective solution to the issues often raised by our end users.

The principal benefit of this exercise, Madam President is the decrease in the Ministry's response time to persons who are in need of assistance. The digitalisation of recipients' information has an additional quality control benefit, which will now enable persons to share this information on a real time basis with other Ministries and agencies to remove the possibility of persons "double dipping" into already scarce resources.

This is but one step, Madam President, in an overall initiative that would see all Ministries, NGOs, FBOs, civil society organizations, community groups, and the private sector working closely together to establish a more integrated and whole of government approach to social services delivery.

Social Engagement and Outreach Unit

This Unit will maximize opportunities for citizen engagement, beyond those that already exist.

The Social Engagement and Outreach Unit will operate in collaboration with the Tobago Desk, and will be the flagship service for resolving client challenges and reaching out to communities to identify needs and offer appropriate solutions.

It will foster better relationships, build rapport and engage citizens; troubleshoot problems, facilitate the removal of bottlenecks within the Ministry and provide the most direct and practical solutions, in a caring and professional manner.

Our outreach activities will seek to increase access to the Ministry's services by expanding the communication channels between our clients and the Ministry and vice versa. In this regard, we will offer a prudent, cost-effective mix of engagement options including: traditional and social media; socially distanced, face-to-face meetings and community walkabouts to meet with communities, discover what is happening in those areas and respond appropriately. This will not be a once-size-fits-all approach.

We have begun reaching out to partner Ministries, MPs, members of the private sector and other community organisations to meet with us in their local communities. All 41 MPs throughout Trinidad and Tobago would have received letters from me inviting them to meet with the Ministry's Technical Teams in their constituency offices or elsewhere in their community to begin the process of collaboration and dialogue on the specific needs of their local areas.

We shall engage and find solutions to national problems, one constituency at a time.

This will be our initial steps towards mapping out our First Responder System by identifying the products and services in the community; the location of the most vulnerable in the community: the aged, persons with disabilities; the homeless; the single parent; the barber, the hairdresser, the doctor, the seamstress, etc. This will be done to develop a directory of services within the community, which services are required but are not being delivered and individuals to whom first responders must go to provide support at a time of crisis.

Tobago Outreach Desk

Part of the strategy for the Ministry becoming more attentive and responsive to the needs of our citizens was the establishment of the Tobago Desk on October 1st 2020. This serves to resolve all matters which fall under the purview of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, inclusive of all matters related to COVID-19. This decision came out of a series of consultations with stakeholders in Tobago, the Division of Health, Wellness and Family Development and the Members of Parliament for Tobago East and West, when I visited in September.

At this Desk, all issues related to the COVID-19 support measures are being promptly and professionally addressed, ensuring that no one is left behind. Equal access and feedback relative to COVID-19 social support grants are offered to our clients in Tobago as is being done for those in Trinidad. Since the establishment of the desk, in the first 20 days of operation, we have fielded over **1,000** queries including calls, emails and WhatsApp messages.

Since establishing this desk we received positive feedback from residents of Tobago.

Values, Attitudes and Behaviors Campaign (VABs)

Madam President, 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 President, 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, and 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 recently launched the internal aspect of the Values, Attitudes and 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.

CONCLUSION

Madam President, I am of the firm view that Trinidad and Tobago continues to be fortunate, in that, we have had the benefit of a caring and prudent government to guide our country through past and present challenging times.

At the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, we are therefore proud to carry the mantle for the resetting of our economy for growth and innovation, through the revitalization and modernization of the social services sector.

As I close Madam President, I wish to thank the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for their hard work especially during this COVID-19 pandemic. I also wish to thank you and this House for the opportunity to make this presentation 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 and beyond.

I thank you.