



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

**RESPONSE TO BUDGET
PRESENTATION**

**RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF A
GLOBAL PANDEMIC**

Appropriation Bill 2021-2022

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

October 08, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Madam Speaker, I am indeed grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill 2021. In so doing, I would like to offer my congratulations to the Honourable Minister of Finance who, in this his seventh Budget presentation, has continued to more than justify the confidence reposed in him by our Honourable Prime Minister, a leader in whom we are well pleased.

The Budget presented on October 04, was neither for the rich nor for the poor, but was designed to meet the aspirations of every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, because that, Madam Speaker, is what the PNM is all about.

Madam Speaker, neither myself nor any citizen of this great Republic would have been surprised by the negative responses coming from our colleagues on the Opposite side. The Opposition has yet again failed to convince the population that they could form a credible alternative government to the PNM.

Madam Speaker, when the government can get the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association, the Confederation of Chambers of Commerce, the American Chamber, the San Juan Business Association and a host of other organizations to all comment favourably on the measures outlined in the Budget, some even calling it an election budget, then we must have done something right.

Madam Speaker, I am not surprised by the utterances, but I am still a bit disappointed that not one day, not one day, not one of them has anything good to say. Their track record speaks volumes of an Opposition that is void of vision and bereft of ideas.

It was reported that one member went so low to criticise the inclusion of pig tails on the list of items to be zero rated, and the Leader of the Opposition described the budget as a “Biscuit and cheese” budget. What is wrong with eating biscuit and cheese?

Those descriptions Madam Speaker, speak volumes to how out of touch with reality they are. Thousands of Trinbagonians know what is a biscuit and cheese breakfast.

Thousands of Trinbagonians know about using pig tail to flavour the callaloo, or to add to the breadfruit oil down, or even now to barbeque.

Budgetary Measures for the Poor –

The 2021 Budget, in its entirety, offers hope to the population of Trinidad and Tobago, and ensures that adequate provisions are made, through multiple Ministries, for those who are most in need of help.

Since the Budget presentation on Monday, I have been asked how does this Budget help poor people. Madam Speaker, allow me to answer that question directly.

1. The Government has not reduced the dollar value of a single grant disbursed by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, thus ensuring that every single person who is eligible for a senior citizens' pension, public assistance grant, a disability grant, or any other grant, will continue to receive it, as they have in the past, in the same amounts, and on time.

Core Services of the Ministry (Grants) –

Madam Speaker, I am extremely pleased to inform this House that notwithstanding our challenging economic circumstances, this Government has maintained its commitment to the vulnerable segments of our population.

At the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services we remain committed to providing the necessary support to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, as we seek to strengthen the safety net for the most vulnerable and take our country forward through a path to full recovery.

The Food Support Programme, also known as the Food Card or Debit Card is a short-term food assistance and development programme aimed at providing social protection, by promoting nutritional and food security to vulnerable households. As at September 30, 2021, **One Hundred and Seventy-three Million, Five Hundred and Fifty-One Thousand, Seven Hundred and Forty Dollars** (\$173,551,740.00) was expended to provide food support to thirty-one thousand, five hundred and forty-seven (31,547) persons.

The General Assistance Grants offer a range of grants to citizens/legal residents who are in dire need of temporary assistance.

As at September 30, 2021, a total of **Five Million, Four Hundred and twenty-nine Thousand, One Hundred and Eighty-four dollars and thirty-six cents** (\$5,429,184.36) was spent to assist One Thousand and Fifty-seven (1,057) clients with Household Items and **Four Hundred and Seven Thousand, One Hundred and Fifty Dollars** (\$407,150.00) for Rental Assistance.

The Public Assistance Grant is an essential social safety net programme providing financial aid to the nation's vulnerable citizens. It is provided to meet the needs of persons where the household income is deemed inadequate. As of September 30, 2021, Eighteen Thousand, Nine Hundred and Thirty-eight (18,938) persons benefitted from grants amounting to **Three Hundred and Thirty-five Million, Six Hundred and Ninety-two Thousand, Three Hundred and Twenty-one Dollars** (\$335,692,321.00).

The Government has remained committed to ensuring the wellbeing of our elderly. **The Ministry's Senior Citizens Pension**, provides financial assistance to persons aged 65 years and over who meet the qualifying criteria for the grant. As at September 30, 2021, One hundred and Nine Thousand and Four (109,004) persons have received grants totalling **Three Hundred and Fifty-three Million, Two Hundred and Ninety-six Thousand Dollars** (\$353,296,000.00). During fiscal 2021, Six Hundred and Sixty-four (664) new clients were approved for Pension.

The Disability Assistance Grant provides financial assistance to citizens and legal residents who have been medically certified as being permanently disabled from earning and cannot be employed. Similarly, the Disability Grant for Minors, is accessible where a child is deemed to be either severe or completely disabled and where the disability is permanent in nature.

As of September 2021, Twenty-two Thousand, Nine Hundred and Thirty-three (22,933) persons received grants amounting to **Five Hundred and Seventy-five Million, Two Hundred and Twenty-three Thousand, Nine Hundred and Thirty Dollars** (\$575,223,930.00).

Additionally, Two Thousand, Six Hundred and Eleven (2,611) accessed the Disability Assistance Grant for Minors, amounting to **Forty-nine Million, Eight Hundred and Twenty-three Thousand, Four Hundred and Thirty-five Dollars** (\$49,823,435.00).

2. **TTEC Bill Rebate Programme.** This rebate will be increased from 25 to 35 percent on electricity bills that are \$300.00 or lower, and impact approximately Two Hundred and Ten Thousand (210,000) households. This measure, Madam Speaker, has to be seen as well in the context of the provision of LED bulbs to households, all designed to reduce the burden both on the national electricity grid and the average household.

3. **Cash Card Programme for low income and vulnerable groups.** These two cards -

(1) a **Utility Cash Card**, will be made available to low income and vulnerable groups to access subsidies for electricity and water, once the prices for these services are regularized, and

(2) a **Fuel Cash Card** which will be made available to vulnerable groups to offset the cost of increases in the price of fuel.

4. **VAT Removal on basic food items.** The list of basic food items that are exempted from VAT will be further expanded, thus ensuring that those on the lower end of the socio-economic scale are better able to afford their basket of goods.

Some of these items, which will cost less, include: -

- Vegetable/Soya bean oil
- Olive oil
- Ghee
- Peanut butter
- Cereal
- Milk

- Coffee
- Tea
- Water
- Roti Skin
- Pigtail
- Biscuits
- Cheese Slices
- Soya
- Ketchup
- Geera
- Turkey slices
- Fresh juice

(Most commonly used foods).

5. **Removal of VAT and Custom Duties** on specified therapy equipment, hearing impaired, visually impaired, physical mobility disabilities, disability safety peripherals and communication devices, thus assisting persons with disabilities to purchase much needed peripherals and equipment at significantly reduced costs. Approximately Fifty-two Thousand (52,000) persons are expected to benefit from this initiative.

6. **Removal of all import duties and all taxes on all computer hardware, software and peripherals** that are not yet tax free, thus ensuring that the purchase cost of these items is made more affordable to the average man in the street.
7. **Increase in the relief granted for annual contributions to pension funds, approved deferred annuities and, National Insurance payments from Fifty Thousand (\$50,000) to Sixty Thousand Dollars (\$60,000)** thus effectively increasing the non-taxable income of persons. Madam Speaker, some One Hundred Thousand (100,000) persons are expected to benefit from this measure.
8. **Continued funding for the Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development (SEED)** initiative. This programme aims to provide a mechanism to empower lower income citizens who are desirous of starting or improving their own business but are unable to access funding on their own.

It also seeks to provide an opportunity for existing welfare recipients of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to start micro-small enterprises and become more independent and self-sufficient.

Madam Speaker, I have taken the time to highlight these initiatives, demonstrating that there is a whole of Government approach to the eradication of poverty in this country, but more so, to indicate that this Government is mindful of the extent of the problem, and is prepared to do whatever is necessary to ensure that the most vulnerable amongst us, are treated with respect and dignity. We will not achieve this by denigrating what they eat, or the choices they may have made, simply because we are unaware of the options that are available to them.

Our role Madam Speaker, as a caring government is to ensure that going forward, they are helped, they are empowered, and their lives are transformed.

The ultimate effect of these measures outlined in the 2021 Fiscal package, is the immediate alleviation of the hardship being experienced by our citizens, and the laying of the groundwork to eventually wean them off Government assistance, because Madam Speaker, we on this side do not believe, that the poor should always be with us. It is important that we break the cycle of dependence on grants, our aim is to empower them.

COVID-19 Assistance Measures –

As the nation continues to cope with the effects of the pandemic, the Ministry continued to deliver social support measures to cushion the repercussions of the lock down measures, given the number of persons who were retrenched, terminated or experienced a reduced income.

In both Fiscal 2020 and 2021, affected persons were able to receive support through the Government's grants system. In COVID Phase I, the government spent **Three Hundred and Forty-seven Million Dollars** (M\$347) and about One hundred and seventy-eight thousand (178,000) individuals and families who required food, rental and income support benefited from this initiative.

COVID-19 PAYMENTS for 2021 –

On June 10, 2021, the Income Support Grant Phase II Project was opened to receive applicants using the Ministry's online application platform and a total of One thousand, one hundred and fifty-eight (1,158) applicants were processed as of September 30, 2021 at a cost of just over **Three Million** dollars.

➤ COVID-19 Phase I Recipients:

| Industry |
|---|
| Bar Industry |
| Construction Industry |
| Entertainment Industry |
| Gaming Industry |
| Persons who sell or offer for sale food or drink as a street vendor |
| Restaurant |
| Retail Establishments (In accordance with Public Health Ordinances) |
| Spa Industry (hairdressers, barbers, nail technicians etc.) |
| Tourism Industry |
| Workers in the Gym/Fitness industry |
| |

Food Support for vulnerable persons through Faith Based Organisations –

The Government also partnered with the Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) to provide additional food support aimed at assisting families in providing the nutritional requirements for their dependents. In June of 2020, \$30 million was provided over a three-month period and in March 2021 an additional \$10 million was provided to assist with providing food to vulnerable individuals and families within various communities in the country over a three-month period.

One hundred and thirty-four (134) faith based organisations participated in this distribution issuing Eighty-one Thousand (81,000) hampers/food vouchers and impacting over Forty-five Thousand (45,000) families.

Food Vouchers/Market Boxes Provided to Families –

The Ministry also collaborated with the Ministry of Agriculture Land and Fisheries (MALF) on the Market Box Initiative to provide emergency food support to families in need during the stay-at-home period.

Starting in May 2020, for a period of three (3) months, Local Food Baskets were distributed across the country. Recipients received a \$250.00 supermarket voucher and a box of locally-grown fresh fruit, vegetables and chicken. The food box was supplied by NAMDEVCO and produce sourced from farmers across the country. Recipients were drawn from those persons who were unable to access the social support grants as well as those households with children under the School Feeding Programme.

The Ministry reached Twenty-four thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine (24,999) families under this initiative at a cost of approximately **Fifteen Million Dollars** (M\$15). This was a very welcome development and we have received very positive feedback from recipients who told us that this initiative was a very welcome support during the stay-at-home period.

During May to August 2021, this Government through NAMDEVCO has delivered market boxes, valued at **Five Hundred and Eighty-one Dollars** (\$581) each, to One hundred and thirty-nine thousand, nine hundred and six (139,906) families and totalling **Eighty-one Million, Three Hundred Thousand Dollars** (M\$81.3). These were distributed through Members of Parliament of all Forty-one (41) constituencies in Trinidad and Tobago Local Government representatives and Non-Governmental Organisations who are all ‘on the ground’ in their communities.

Mandate of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services re the Vulnerable –

And it is precisely in that context, Madam Speaker, that I wish to contextualize the critical role being played by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, in ensuring that those who are most marginalized, those who are most deserving, those who are the most economically and socially vulnerable in our society, are in receipt of goods and services which will not only impact significantly on their daily lives, but ultimately move them to a place of empowerment and self-sufficiency.

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 parents, single-income households, widows and those families now placed on the poverty line, due to COVID-19.

More focus is being placed on identifying those who are in need of our support and working closer with Non-Government Organizations, Civil Society, Faith Based Organizations, and other Ministries, agencies and private partnerships, to fulfil the needs of the vulnerable.

We recently partnered with Parts World, Angostura, Maritime Financial Group to assist some persons in need. For example, provision of hampers to persons in quarantine, with the assistance of the Disaster Management Unit, Local Government and Regional Health Authorities.

Roadmap to Recovery –

At the Ministry, we have taken on board the recommendations of The Roadmap to Recovery Committee, which was established to chart the way forward in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee recommended six strategic areas that are most directly related to the Ministry.

Under the pillar of **‘Social Protection - Leave No One Behind,’** the core objective identified was that of *‘Protecting the Vulnerable and the Displaced and Using the Social Safety Net to build a stronger Trinidad and Tobago’*. The Ministry has already begun implementation of the recommended strategies, some of which were already in train before COVID-19.

As a definitive approach, the Ministry undertook to re-engineer its work processes, concentrating on specific areas which would help in meeting its new and existing mandate of empowering and transforming lives, in keeping with their recommendations.

Some of the various initiatives undertaken includes:

- The advancing of our digitalisation agenda;
- We have launched developmental programmes, including the establishment of a Social Services and Empowerment Unit to provide greater support to the vulnerable;
- We are currently assessing the civil society sector and engaging entities and other partner agencies in relation to providing support to the vulnerable;
- Engaging Ministers of Government and Members of Parliament in support of vulnerable citizenry; and
- Conducting active review of policies and legislation relevant to the Ministry's operations and work programme.

Digitalisation –

Madam Speaker, all of us in this Chamber are acutely aware of the challenges faced by Ministries in the implementation of new policies and in the re-engineering of existing policies and procedures, whilst simultaneously attending to the day to day needs and demands of the wider public. It is akin to attempting to fix a car whilst it is still driving, and in many cases, the efficacy of that exercise becomes compromised.

There is no denial though, that the Ministry's ability to effectively deliver the suite of programmes available to the public is sometimes compromised by the bureaucracy involved, by the amount of manual processes still embedded in the system, and unfortunately, by the seeming inflexibility of our approach on occasions. There is an inability to move, at times, with the agility and immediacy that most situations demand.

To this end, Madam Speaker, a major thrust of the Ministry over the next fiscal year will be the continued digitalisation of our service offerings. Indeed, as the Government advancing its digitalisation programme for the country and in particular, the public sector.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has been identified as a priority Ministry for digitalisation. The digitalisation of social services therefore forms a major strategy to enhance access and create greater efficiency in the delivery of social services. In this regard, the following have been pursued:

Establishment and implementation of an Integrated Social Enterprise Management System (ISEMS) –

During the last year the Ministry has advanced the process of digitalisation through the establishment and implementation of an Integrated Social Enterprise Management System which targets all aspects of its operations. This Enterprise Resource Planning and Case Management solution will provide a single door approach for accessing social services. It is the single most important digitalisation project which will allow for the consolidation of the major programmes/delivery units in the Ministry. The Ministry's clients will benefit from 24-hour access to services, improved efficiency and more user-friendly social services.

- ***Recommissioned the Ministry's Website*** in Fiscal 2021 and launched a Microsite specific to the persons with disabilities.

Persons with Disabilities benefit from the microsite. The site ensures that persons who are visually impaired could now feel included on the website. The microsite is in direct support of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, which speaks to Government's intent to establish an inclusive and nurturing environment for all persons. Specifically, it will cater exclusively to the needs of the blind, visually-impaired, deaf or hard-of-hearing thereby ensuring equity in opportunities for learning and advancement.

The microsite has also been designed with universally acceptable standards of colour and text, and more outstandingly, the inclusion of screen reader software to make its perusal more accessible.

- ***Signed a Memorandum of Understanding with iGovTT*** to utilise its call center and chat robot to assist with queries about the Ministry's grants and services.

- Additionally, the Ministry has engaged some Ministries/agencies and intends to engage others, for sharing of data via a MOU. Those we have already approached are the Ministry of Finance, the Immigration Division, the Child Affairs Division, Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs. This will have a positive impact on all our clients by reducing their interaction time and will save them the trouble of going from office to office to complete their paperwork.

- ***Launched the online Senior Citizens' Pension (SCP) application, through ttConnect,*** which will allow persons who qualify for SCP to apply for this service without leaving the comfort of their homes. As of August 31, 2021 there were 308 new applications via this online system.

- Further to this, the Ministry has embarked on a Data Migration Project, which seeks to have reliable client data in the system that can be accessed in real-time, allowing for ease of access, proactive decision making and allowing a holistic view of clients and services provided. This will be supported by a stronger business continuity system.

Reengineering the Ministry –

Digitalisation alone though, will not secure the increased efficiency demanded by our clients, and so the Ministry has also expended and will continue to expend considerable resources in the coming fiscal to ensure that our policies and procedures are re-engineered to the greater benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Social Welfare Local Boards –

The Ministry proposes to:

- disaggregate larger local boards to facilitate better management of clients. Based on the population increases and shifts within the country since 2002 and the increased work load of the current Local Boards over the years, the Ministry is giving active consideration to the geographical boundaries of the local Board coverage in an effort to better serve communities.

The Ministry is giving careful consideration to the subdivision of the following Local Boards - San Juan/Laventille, Tunapuna/Piarco and Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo.

Investigation and Compliance Unit

- establish an Investigations and Compliance Unit to support the challenges associated with irregular applications and payments. The Ministry is unique in terms of the timeliness of its payments, as it services the vulnerable groups in society, which is now estimated to be Two Hundred and Fifteen Thousand (215,000), including approximately Thirty Thousand (30,000) temporary clients since COVID-19.

Therefore, it is important that an investigative and compliance function is deployed at all levels to ensure adherence to public service and accounting regulations at the highest level.

There are several core Divisions which are required to undertake complex investigations into the financial and personal circumstances of clients so that the Ministry can base its decisions on correct information. Prolong investigations retards the decision making process, causing delays and increasing hardship for bona fide applicants.

Applicants who may be attempting to defraud the state may make it extremely difficult for Officers to do their work or may collude with others to obscure the truth, submit false documents and the like.

Moreover, there is also no doubt that bureaucratic inefficiency and a multiplicity of manual processes can provide the feeding ground for corruption and unethical practices. Corruption is a two-way process, Madam Speaker, someone must be willing to pay a bribe in whatever form, and someone must be willing to accept it. The greater the inefficiency, the lengthier the bureaucracy, the greater the opportunity for corruption.

Investigation summary

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services –
Madam Speaker, allow me to turn my attention to investigations within the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, where fraudulent practices have been engaging the attention of the Financial Investigation Bureau, the Anti-Corruption Investigation Bureau and the Fraud Squad of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS).

In the last 12 months an astounding increase in the number of clients affected by malicious, subculture behaviour has been observed. In this period there was a 241% increase in the number of reports to the TTPS, with the majority of cases (151%) involving senior citizens' pension.

Madam Speaker, while on one hand the Government is taking care of its senior citizens and adequately providing for them, there are others in society who see this as an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of our older persons.

Rest assured Madame Speaker, and I want every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago to know that every effort is being made to ensure that the nation's resources, intended to support the vulnerable will reach them and that any and all nefarious activity will be halted, investigated and where possible prosecuted. Madame Speaker for the year 2020, sixty-eight (68) such cases have engaged the attention of the TTPS.

It does not stop there, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services database was triangulated against data from the Elections and Boundaries Commission and Death Registry of the Register General Department and found that One thousand, nine hundred and fifty-five (1,955) persons to whom cheques were issued as recently as August 2021 were confirmed dead.

Madam Speaker, some of the disability and pension cheques belonging to those 1,955 individuals are being cashed, the most significant, 81 percent, being Senior Citizens' Pension cheques. A further Three thousand, nine hundred and two (3,902) grants were identified for investigation. This represents a marked increase in fraudulent activities across all grants and One hundred and sixty-five (165) cases are under review by the fraud squad.

A large number of grant recipients are residing abroad and are ineligible for support from the State. However, many are attempting to defraud this good country through amendments that I heard were made under the UNC administration, to receive social support when they do not qualify.

These individuals live outside of the country and do not meet the residential eligibility, are making claims for social support. We are aware of this and a heightened sense of vigilance now abounds.

We at the ministry are moving with haste to ensure that incidents of irregularities, wherever they may be, are thoroughly investigated internally to determine if human error is the root cause of some of the irregularities that exist and to mitigate the occurrence of such. When instances of fraud, corruption and collusion is suspected or apparent we have and will continue to move with haste to hand these over to the TTPS.

Madam Speaker, in light of this, the need for an internal Investigation and Compliance Unit is clear.

A strong investigative and compliance function will have several positive consequences for the Ministry and its service delivery apparatus, including:

- Reducing the bottlenecks and delays caused by protracted investigations and the consequential deferral of decisions and productivity lags, which can cause significant hardship for clients who really need the support.
- Enhancing a system, which may have motivated fraudsters to challenge the system.
- Creating efficiency in the public spend and halting the loss of scarce public funds.
- Promoting confidence in the system of payments being made for over 18 grants.
- Enhancing and expediting the problem solving capability and capacity of the Ministry, in all matters, prompted by account and audit enquiries and the Auditor Generals Reports, to name a few.

The Ministry has received the approval to proceed with this Unit and intends to implement by the first quarter of Fiscal 2022.

New/Ongoing Initiatives undertaken by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services

➤ Direct Deposit Initiative –

Madam Speaker, as the Ministry continues to protect the most vulnerable in the population, we have recognized the prevalence of financial abuse, in the form of fraudulent activities related to the encashment mainly of Senior Citizens Pension cheques. Hence, as part of the thrust to reduce fraudulent conversion of pensioners' cheques, the Ministry will streamline its efforts to make direct payments into our clients bank account.

This Initiative aims to bring the remaining Sixty-three Thousand (63,000) individuals or 61% of the Pensioners onto the direct deposit system.

➤ The National Register of Vulnerable Persons

Madam Speaker, as we look ahead, a critical element in understanding the needs of the vulnerable is identifying the levels of vulnerability amongst those deemed as such.

With this in mind, the Ministry is pursuing the development of a National Register for Vulnerable Persons, which is an essential element in the overall strategy to address poverty and vulnerability in Trinidad and Tobago. In fiscal 2021, the Ministry developed a brief document for the introduction of the Register.

The electronic Register is expected to consist of input captured and derived from information disseminated by the key business units of the Ministry as well as other social sector agencies in both the private and public sectors. This database when developed will provide for real-time information to identify and assess the vulnerable, to address their specific needs in and out of crisis situations. The Ministry intends to build the Registry in the first half of fiscal 2022, with the support of other social protection agencies and the University of the West Indies.

➤ **Engagement of Civil Society –**

Madam Speaker, the Ministry has recognized, and I am sure that my colleagues would agree, that collaboration with civil society is crucial to sustainable development.

During Fiscal 2021, the Ministry has been more intentional in establishing partnerships with Non-Governmental Organizations, Community-Based Organizations and Faith-Based Organizations which are dedicated to ensuring that our vulnerable populations are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. To this end, initiatives were undertaken to support social sector NGOs through capacity building, partnerships and collaboration with the Ministry.

Furthermore, the Ministry has engaged The Cropper Foundation (TCF) to undertake an assessment of the civil society sector, with the aim of increasing the Ministry's understanding of the civil society sector and its contribution to and alignment with social protection and resilience.

The Ministry intends to synchronise the work of the NGO sector with its own service delivery efforts in Fiscal 2022.

➤ **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Programme –**

This initiative is guided by the approach to National Parenting and Family Policies of this Government in Trinidad and Tobago.

Its introduction within the Ministry has become necessary at this time due to the recognition of grandparents' critical role within the family and their contribution to the stability of the wider society. However, their increasing vulnerability in this role require support from the Ministry, bearing in mind always 'the best interests of the child'. This training commences this month.

➤ **Induction of Widows as a Vulnerable Group –**

In Fiscal 2021, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, inducted widows as a recognised vulnerable group and committed to ensuring they receive their full rights in society. Established in commemoration of the United Nations' International Widow's Day 2021, the Ministry will extend its resources and programmes to provide an enabling environment to facilitate their empowerment and will explore future partnerships to ensure that the fraternity is afforded a comfortable standard of living and an enhanced quality of life.

➤ **The Centenarian Programme –**

The Centenarian Programme is designed to ensure all of Trinidad and Tobago's centenarians and centenarians-plus, who are desirous of participating in this initiative, are celebrated and honoured. The recognition of our centenarians would be ongoing and should climax annually with a function, which will be incorporated in the celebration of "National Centenarians Day" (September 22) once COVID-19 regulations allow for such. This forum will be utilized to celebrate our centenarians, highlight their unique perspective and wisdom about life and serve as an opportunity to salute their achievements and contributions to Trinidad and Tobago. This programme will officially commence in January 2022.

➤ **Citizen Engagement and Outreach Unit –**

The Ministry is well on its way to establishing its Citizens Engagement and Outreach Unit. The Unit will build more positive working relationships between the public and the Ministry, at the highest level.

This initiative will be a major plank in a wider strategy for advancing the work of the Ministry; bringing stakeholders and the public nearer, in order to build mutual understanding among them; and generating more robust operating results for the organization. This will be piloted in the first quarter of Fiscal 2022.

It will be supported by the call centre and Tobago Desk initiatives, which are already in place, and other customer engagement activities such as the Community First Responder System, a framework for roll-out already exists in the form of the Critical Incident Reporting System. This Critical Incident Reporting System is an interim 24-hour system used to alert all core service delivery units within the Ministry of a crisis situation requiring urgent attention.

CONCLUSION

Madam Speaker, through you, I have outlined for this House and the wider national community, the work of the Government and the work plan of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, both entities working in tandem with each

other, to achieve an enhancement in the quality of life available to our citizens.

I hold firm to the view that through the underlying philosophy and the measures articulated in the 2021 Appropriation Bill, this Government has pointed this country towards a path of recovery after the socioeconomic challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Our focus in the next year is on building resilience among the citizenry, while simultaneously strengthening the safety net for the most vulnerable in our midst.

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 this remarkable budget for Fiscal 2021/2022.

I also thank God, for He is worthy of all the praise.

I thank you.