



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

SENATE

October 19, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Madam President, it is indeed a privilege not only to add my voice to the growing chorus of persons who have expressed their support for the measures outlined in the 2021 Budget, but to account to the nation as well for my stewardship in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Allow me though to congratulate the Honourable Minister of Finance for presenting an Appropriation Bill that touched on the salient points of this country's drive towards economic growth while staying true to our Government's desire to ensure that no one is left behind. It is indeed a budget for everyone.

I also commend the Honourable Prime Minister for his astute leadership and for facilitating the measures outlined in the budget, especially on behalf of the vulnerable people of Trinidad and Tobago.

BUDGETARY MEASURES FOR THE POOR –

Madam President, every day I receive emails, WhatsApp messages and phone calls about the provisions made for the vulnerable. People are saying how happy they are about the measures outlined in the budget that take care of those who are experiencing tough times. In this regard, we are very pleased to announce that:

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 meet the criteria for a 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 President, 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.

In other words, Madam President, we are keeping faith with the people of Trinidad and Tobago, so much so that, up to September 30th 2021, I can report to this Honourable House, the following:

- Our **Food Support Programme**, also known as the Food Card or Debit Card provided support to thirty-one thousand, five hundred and forty-seven (31,547) persons at a cost of **One Hundred and Seventy-three Million, Five Hundred and Fifty-One Thousand, Seven Hundred and Forty Dollars (\$173,551,740.00).**
- The **General Assistance Grants** helped One Thousand and Fifty-seven (1,057) citizens/residents with household items valued at **Five Million, Four Hundred and twenty-nine Thousand, One Hundred and Eighty-four dollars and thirty-six cents (\$5,429,184.36).**

An additional **Four Hundred and Seven Thousand, One Hundred and Fifty Dollars** (\$407,150.00) went to those in need of rental assistance.

- The **Public Assistance Grant** provided financial aid to Eighteen Thousand, Nine Hundred and Thirty-eight (18,938) persons whose existing household incomes were deemed inadequate. These 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 **Senior Citizens Pension**, provided financial assistance to One Hundred and Nine Thousand and Four (109,004) persons, aged 65 years and over who met the qualifying criteria at a cost of **Three Hundred and Fifty-three Million, Two Hundred and Ninety-six Thousand Dollars** (\$353,296,000.00).

Madam President, we remain committed to ensuring the wellbeing of our older persons.

- In terms of the **Disability Assistance Grant**, Madam President, 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).
- Under the **National Social Development Programme**, for fiscal 2021, **Nine Hundred and Sixty-nine Thousand Dollars** (\$969,000.00) was distributed to sixty-one (61) families to complete minor house repairs;

Twenty-one (21) beneficiaries received **Two Hundred and Thirty-six Thousand Dollars** (\$236,000.00) to upgrade their sanitary plumbing; and

Two Hundred and Seventy-four Thousand Dollars (\$274,000.00) was provided to twenty-eight (28) recipients for house wiring.

2. VAT Removal on forty-five (45) basic food items.

The expansion of the list of basic food items that will be exempted from VAT from 1st November, 2021 will ensure that many of our families will be in a better position to afford more nutritious meals.

Madam President, the efforts of the government on behalf of citizens are being fully recognized in the public domain. The removal of VAT on most basic food prices has been noted by the Supermarkets Association of Trinidad and Tobago. It's President Mr. Rajiv Diptee remarked that VAT removal will save customers money, "*removing the VAT from these items is removing 12.5% from your bill*" (Daily Express, Thursday 7th October, 2021, pp.10).

These sentiments were echoed by a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, Nigel Seenathsingh of San Fernando, writing to the Editor of the Trinidad Guardian on Friday 8th October, 2021 pp 18.

He indicated that it was *‘a brilliant and welcomed budget presented by the Government to reignite productivity while enhancing the lives of all as best as humanly possible’*, demonstrating Madam President, that the man in the street recognizes what the government is doing and supports these initiatives.

3. **The removal of VAT and Custom Duties** on identified devices, equipment and peripherals utilized by persons with disabilities, making these items more affordable, will leave extra cash in the pockets of Fifty-two Thousand (52,000) persons with disabilities who are expected to benefit from this initiative.

In response to this measure, the Executive Officer of the Blind Welfare Association of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Kenneth Suratt stated, *“I’m seeing it’s going to benefit our community, not only the blind, but walkers, wheelchairs, hearing aids, so many things for the disabled. I’m very pleased with what the government has done from that aspect to remove taxes for special devices we would use”* (Newsday Section A, Wednesday, October 6, 2021 pp.15).

Madam President, these and other measures announced by the Minister of Finance demonstrate that this government cares about our vulnerable citizens and remain committed to their wellbeing. The Ministry is placing all of its resources into helping, empowering and transforming the lives of our most vulnerable, family by family.

MANDATE OF THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES RE THE VULNERABLE –

And it is precisely in that context, Madam President, 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 we are working closer with Non-Government Organizations, Civil Society Organizations, Faith Based Organizations, other Ministries, agencies and private entities, to fulfil the needs of the vulnerable.

Madam President, we know that the outcome of all the initiatives identified earlier, will be the **immediate** alleviation of the economic challenges being experienced by some of our citizens. In other words, they will be able to put food on the table for their children, but we know that we cannot stop there. We intend to do more. We are also laying the groundwork for their future prosperity so that they will become resilient and will be able to ‘stand on their own two feet’.

To do this, we must gently but steadily wean them off Government assistance, each according to his capacity, helping them to become stronger, more independent and more dignified.

We know that for some persons, their current circumstances are temporary. They are going through a ‘bad patch’ or a ‘bad season’ because they lost their job or became ill, or the breadwinner of the family passed away, but they will bounce back, with some help. These require some funding and psycho-social support to get back on their feet. These are the persons that the Ministry has been assisting over the past fiscal year.

SEED - The Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development Programme –

The Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development (SEED) Programme, administered as part of our National Social Development Programme, is especially targeted to vulnerable citizens who dream of starting or improving their own business but are unable to gain access to traditional sources of funding. They may not have the necessary collateral to secure a loan.

This SEED programme allows them to get started by providing up to **Fifteen Thousand Dollars** (\$15,000.00) in goods/equipment to establish or expand their micro business. Madam President, what is unique about this programme is that it also facilitates skills development through a grant of a further **Seven Thousand, Five Hundred Dollars** (\$7,500) for training at a recognized / accredited institution of their choice.

This combination allows young entrepreneurs and vulnerable persons to participate in the national economy, build their skills, generate wealth and ultimately build a strong business and take care of their families.

Madam President, for fiscal 2021, 107 beneficiaries have received grant funding in this programme. The Ministry will continue to encourage the use of this grant among our vulnerable citizens. We fully expect these entrepreneurs to build their businesses with the support of the Ministry. We have many success stories of which we are so proud. Time does not permit for me to share some with this House today.

ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMME (AEP) –

The Ministry is re-purposing its Adult Education Programme to more effectively respond to the needs of our vulnerable clients. A new ‘fit for purpose’ AEP will enhance our clients’ ability to transition from welfare to self-sufficiency, focusing on areas such as micro enterprise, coaching, mentoring, accessing domestic and export markets and money management, among others. We expect our clients participating in the Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development (SEED) Programme to take full advantage of this programme.

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 restrictive 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.

Phase I: 2020

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.

Phase II: 2021

In June 2021, the Income Support Grant Phase II was opened to receive applications from eligible citizens, using the Ministry's online application platform. A total of One thousand, one hundred and fifty-eight (1,158) applicants were approved and paid as of September 30, 2021 at a cost of just over **Three Million Dollars** (M\$3).

Food Support for vulnerable persons through Faith Based Organisations –

The Government also partnered with 134 Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) to provide additional food support aimed at assisting families in providing the nutritional requirements for their dependents. Altogether, Eighty-one Thousand (81,000) hampers and food vouchers were distributed.

In June of 2020, **Thirty Million Dollars** (M\$30) was provided over a three-month period and additionally, in March 2021 **Ten Million Dollars** (M\$10) was provided to assist with providing food to vulnerable individuals and families within various communities in the country over a three-month period.

Food Vouchers/Market Boxes Provided to Families –

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

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). We received very positive feedback from recipients who told us that this initiative was a very welcome support during the stay-at-home period.

ENGAGEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY –

Madam President, the Ministry has recognized, and I am certain my colleagues will concur, that one of the key contributors to poverty alleviation in any society is the Government's ability to meaningfully engage with civil society.

We acknowledge that inherent in that body of Non-Governmental Organizations, Community-Based Organizations, Faith-Based Organizations, Youth Clubs, and other specific interest groups, is a level of passion and commitment to serve vulnerable populations that, when coupled with access to Government's resources, can only redound to the benefit of all whom we seek to serve. To this end, initiatives were undertaken to support social sector NGOs through capacity building, partnerships, collaboration and funding.

Seeking to be more data-driven in its approach, the Ministry has engaged The Cropper Foundation 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 has embarked on a number of social sector initiatives such as:

➤ **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Programme –**

This initiative is guided by the approach to National Parenting and Family Policies of the Government. 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 requires support from the Ministry, bearing in mind always 'the best interests of the child'.

➤ **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. 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. This programme will officially commence in January 2022.

Madam President, on Sunday I visited with Ms Marjorie Roach from Jubilee Street, Tunapuna who celebrated her 106th birthday. It was indeed a memorable experience for me. We must continue to cherish and celebrate our elderly.

➤ **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. It will be manned by personnel who are customer-focused and results-oriented.

These persons will be committed to delivering only the highest levels of professional and efficient service, focusing on answering questions, following up on queries and solving problems in a timely manner. This Unit will provide easier access and response times to the public, Members of Parliament and NGOs, in response to their requests. It will be supported by the call centre and Tobago Desk initiatives, which are already in place.

Outreach to Organizations/Promotion of the Ministry's Services –

As part of our outreach and deeper engagement with civil society groups, Madam President, the Ministry has hosted several virtual Public Information Education Sessions, referred to as PIES, geared towards providing information on the social services available at the Ministry and how these could be accessed by those most in need. These sessions also foster opportunities for partnership on the many and varied social issues impacting the vulnerable, and contribute towards empowering them to achieve more independent living.

Thus far, Sessions have been held with organizations such as:

1. Is there Not a Cause
2. Vision on Mission
3. Widows Association and Widows Support TT
4. LoveUntil Foundation
5. Islamic Ladies Social & Cultural Association (ILSCA)
6. The Bankers Association of Trinidad and Tobago
7. Cultural entities including:
 - Pan Trinbago,

- Copyright Association of Trinidad and Tobago and
- Trinbago Unified Calypsonians Organisation - TUCO

8. Angels of Light
9. The Autistic Society
10. The Autism Trinidad and Tobago
11. Cerebral Palsy Association
12. The Judiciary
13. Constituency Offices – Oropouche East, Oropouche West, Princes Town, San Fernando East, Tunapuna, Sangre Grande, Point Fortin and La Brea;
14. Mayor of Point Fortin, Aldermen and Councillors of the Borough.

The Ministry will continue to expand this initiative in the coming months in a virtual setting and if COVID-19 Protocols allow, face to face, in communities throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

➤ **Establishment of a Suicide Prevention Hotline –**

We are advancing our plans to establish a dedicated no-cost telephone and online counselling hotline service to provide an additional layer of psycho-social support that is offered through the National Family Services Division.

This service will provide prevention, rehabilitation and support interventions to persons who find themselves overwhelmed by their circumstances and are having difficulty coping with the many challenges posed by the COVID-19 Pandemic, also illness, bereavement, unemployment, family disputes, relationship issues and other complex personal or professional situations. The line will connect persons to other social services and coordinate referrals as necessary, to ensure that the callers receive the social support needed.

➤ **Revised Policy for Special Achievers Grant –**

Madam President, having reviewed the existing policy and solicited feedback from key stakeholders, the Ministry will relaunch the Special Achievers Grant, which was first introduced in 2005.

We define a Special Achiever as 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 the country and/or to national development. This grant is specifically targeted to such individuals, who may be experiencing financial hardship and are deemed vulnerable. This approach is consistent with the Ministry's mandate to assist those who are in need.

Investigation and Compliance Unit

Madam President, notwithstanding our best efforts, and our appeals to citizens to do what is right, simply because it is the right thing to do, there will always be those who, for their own selfish purposes, deliberately attempt to scam the system.

After several rounds of discussions and consultations with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and other key stakeholders, the Ministry has decided to establish an Investigations and Compliance Unit to deal with the high incidence of irregular applications and payments.

The Ministry is unique in terms of the timeliness of its payments, as it services the vulnerable groups in society, now estimated to be around 215,000, including approximately 30,000 temporary clients since COVID-19. This investigative and compliance function will be deployed at all levels to ensure adherence to public service and accounting regulations at the highest level.

Many of the Ministry's operations require sensitive follow-up investigations related to the financial and other affairs of our clients in order to make sound decisions on the approval or non-approval of applications for grants. Sometimes these investigations can become quite complex, prolonged and go beyond the position descriptions of the officers concerned.

Sometimes, these investigations can take several months to complete, causing delays in decision making and creating anxiety and suffering among our clients who are in need of urgent support.

Madam President, we also acknowledge that some of our processes, meant to create checks and balances in the system, which provides for good governance and accountability, may actually be having the opposite effect.

Investigation summary

Let me outline for this Honourable House, as I did in another place, some of the instances of fraudulent practices which have been uncovered at the Ministry that have been occupying the attention of law enforcement officers of the Financial Investigation Bureau, the Anti-Corruption Investigation Bureau and the Fraud Squad of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

- Within the last 12 months there has been a 241% increase in the number of reports to the TTPS, with the majority of cases (151%) involving senior citizens' pension;
- For the year 2020, sixty-eight (68) such cases have already engaged the attention of the TTPS;
- As recently as August 2021, cheques were issued to 1,955 persons who were confirmed dead;

- 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 3,902 grants were identified for investigation. This represents a marked increase in fraudulent activities across all grants;
- I can advise that 165 cases are already under review by the fraud squad;
- A large number of these grant recipients are residing abroad and are therefore ineligible for support from the State.

We are moving with haste to ensure that incidents of irregularities, wherever they may be, are thoroughly investigated internally to determine if human error is partially responsible and to take the relevant action. A strong investigative and compliance function will reduce long delays and facilitate better and faster decision making; Creating efficiency in the public spend; Promoting greater confidence in the system; and enhancing and expediting the problem solving capability and capacity of the Ministry.

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

Direct Deposit Initiative –

Madam President, I am certain that like me, you have seen the long lines of our senior citizens snaking around corners outside our financial institutions on the first and 15th days of every month. Many of our elders are experiencing financial abuse such as misplaced or lost cheques. Many of these ‘lost’ cheques are actually being cashed at supermarkets.

Hence, as part of the thrust to reduce fraudulent conversion of pensioners’ cheques, the Ministry is streamlining its efforts to make direct payments into the bank accounts of 63,000 clients a priority, 61% of whom are senior citizens.

➤ The National Register of Vulnerable Persons

Madam President, 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.

In short, Madam President, we need to identify who are the poor amongst us.

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. This project will help to identify those who are languishing, outside the awareness of the Ministry and who are in need of our help. In fiscal 2021, our job is to go out and find these persons, wherever they are and offer them our support. The Ministry has developed a draft document for the introduction of the Register.

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.

Legislative Agenda –

Madam President, all our proposed initiatives will come to nought if we continue to operate under the rubric of the same archaic and cumbersome legislation that is partly responsible for our current state.

In this regard, the Ministry embarked upon a review of the main pieces of legislation governing the social sector, with a view towards their further alignment with regional and international best practices/standards.

These include the following:

1. Senior Citizens' Pension Act, Chap. 32:02;
2. Public Assistance Act, Chap. 32:03;
3. Socially Displaced Persons Act; Act No. 59 of 2000;
4. Homes for Older Persons Act, No. 20 of 2007;
5. Introduction of legislation with regard to persons with disabilities.

The proposed amendments to the identified pieces of legislation will seek to revise the provisions in light of contemporary issues, the need for digitisation of the administrative and other processes required to fulfil the Ministry's mandate, and to ensure compliance with and enforcement of the relevant statutory provisions.

➤ **SERVICES FOR FAMILIES**

Madam President, priority is to be placed on ensuring that no family is left behind.

As Kofi Annan once said, *“The happiness of any society begins with the well-being of the families that live in it.”*

With this in mind, the Ministry's National Family Services Division has increased its outreach services to families and assists individuals, groups, couples and families through counselling, advice, advocacy, parenting training, referrals and placements.

The Division also disseminates information on healthy family life through community workshops, its Radio Programme (It's Family Time, Let's Talk), outreaches via lectures, upon request by various organizations (Governmental and Non-Governmental) and through social media.

Between July to September, the Division again held online parenting workshops which allowed a wider cross-section of participants to be facilitated. The first session was exclusively for males, addressing gender, masculinity and its impact on parenting.

Parenting in a Pandemic was also addressed and covered topics on strategies for managing during the pandemic, online schooling and support for children through COVID-19; a co-parenting workshop was also held which addressed the challenges in co-parenting and provided strategies to better co-parent, including stress and anger management. A workshop targeting grandparents will be held late this month.

SERVICES FOR STREET DWELLERS –

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services remains steadfast in strengthening legislation to bring about greater efficacy in the system of engagement, treatment, care and rehabilitation of street dwellers.

Street Dwellers

To deal effectively with the issue of street dwelling requires the collaboration of a number of important stakeholders. Although the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is the lead agency, it requires the support of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, including the Mayors and Regional Corporations, the Municipal Police, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the Private Sector and NGOs involved in caring for street dwellers, among others.

It must be noted however, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services does not have the authority to move persons off the streets, hence the reason why this collaborative approach is necessary to get the job done

The Ministry engaged these stakeholders in three high level discussions on the way forward. A Technical Committee was established to work out the mechanics and areas of collaboration and they developed a plan of action. However, some legal matters remain to be worked out and this is high on the Ministry's legislative agenda, going forward.

Counselling & Rehabilitation –

Our Social Displacement Unit (SDU) during the last fiscal year has engaged One Thousand, Two Hundred and Seventy-eight (1,278) persons with a view to their rehabilitation and included the following activities:

- 13 Deportees counselled;
- 236 referrals to rehabilitation;
- 45 shelter and care referrals (18-54 years);
- 34 referrals for accommodation under community care;
- 225 social work interventions; and
- 725 engagements/investigations of persons living on the streets.

Assessment Centre –

- We continue to look for a suitable site to establish an Assessment facility, designed to assess individuals' personal service needs and placement options, once removed from the streets.

Transitional & Emergency Housing –

- Completion of the review and evaluation of sites in Penal, Point-a-Pierre, and Couva for the Transitional and Emergency housing accommodation Programme.

SERVICES FOR OLDER PERSONS –

Community Care Programme

In further support of services for the elderly, the Ministry instituted the Community Care Programme (CCP), which facilitates the placement of vulnerable older persons aged 55 years and over who have been medically discharged from public health institutions but are in need of advanced care and support. These persons are placed into Homes for Older Persons in the community that provide living accommodation with suitable care, once the older person meets the relevant criteria for inclusion in the programme.

Homes for Older Persons

The Ministry continues to support seven (7) Homes for Older Persons located in Toco, Sangre Grande, Couva, Point Fortin, La Brea, San Fernando and Siparia. Approximately 150 socially-isolated and/or indigent older persons aged 60 years and over are provided with residential accommodation care at these Homes.

The Division of Ageing continues to work in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other key stakeholders to set standards and to regularise the management of these Homes to ensure that the duty of care of our older persons is maintained. For fiscal 2021, ten inspections were conducted at Homes for Older Persons, several of which were collaborative visits with the Ministry of Health to ensure compliance and care standards are maintained.

Older Persons Information Help Desk (OPIC)

The Ministry received over three hundred and seventy-seven (377) requests, which included requests for information about

the Senior Citizens Grant, Home Placement for senior citizens, referrals for geriatric services, COVID-19 information and questions about ageing at the Older Persons Information Help Desk: **800-6742 (OPIC)**.

Elder Abuse Data

Provisional data for fiscal 2021 revealed that there were one hundred and fifty-four (154) reported cases of elder abuse in private residences and thirty-two (32) at Home for Older Persons. The Ministry's referral of these abuses to the Ministry of Health, the Police Service, the National Family Services and Homes for the Aged increased by 76% in fiscal 2021.

➤ SERVICES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES –

Madame President, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago maintains its commitment to the inclusion and promotion of the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities.

Assistive Mobile Devices Initiative with TSTT

The Ministry has continued with its Assistive Mobile Devices Initiative which, in collaboration with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, is geared towards increasing access to information through ICT, for persons with disabilities.

Madam President, while there will always be those who exist on the margins and peripheries of our society, we on this side do not believe they should dwell there forever. While there are those who are vulnerable in our midst, consequential upon choices they might have made, our role is not to judge, because we are unaware of the options they had.

The strength of a nation is not only in terms of its Gross Domestic Product, or level of foreign reserves. The strength of a nation could also be found in the resilience of its people, in the individual stories of conquest in the face of daunting challenges, in the collective will of its people to do better, and be better, and in the decisions of a Government that empowers.

The 2021 Budget, aptly entitled “Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic” has provided us with a roadmap for growth.

It has presented us with an opportunity to reset our economy, and present real possibilities for persons to emerge from poverty, to come out of their vulnerable positions, and emerge as contributing citizens to this great Republic.

At this juncture, I would like to thank the executive and staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for their continued support and dedication to the task ahead.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, through its more robust technological interface, through its Investigation and Compliance Unit, through its enhanced collaboration with civil society networks, through greater networking with other Government Ministries and other key stakeholders, together with the slew of new initiatives I have outlined, will continue to do its part to ensure that ***no one is left behind.***

Madam President, I thank you.