



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

PRESENTATION ON

**Supplementation and Variation of
Appropriation Bill**

Fiscal 2021-2022

January 26, 2022

Thank you Madam President.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on behalf of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has consistently, without wavering, supported hundreds of thousands of citizens in our beloved Republic who find themselves, many through no fault of their own, some because of choices they made and others because of factors over which they had no control, were unable to adequately provide for themselves and their families. On this side, we have made this commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and we have held to this position, while in government over the past 66 years, starting with our Founding Father, Dr. Eric Williams and continuing today with our current Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley. So, Madam President, today we are again holding fast, deepening and keeping our promise to take care of our poor and vulnerable.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the already challenging circumstances many persons face. Madam President, Governments throughout the world responded to their citizens in different ways, but the common thread running through the different plans, was the need to provide a cushion for those who were most affected. We are proud of our efforts to reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic on the less fortunate, the vulnerable, and those already on the state's welfare system.

The Ministry received the additional sum of **\$40 million** specifically for COVID-19-related expenditure for Fiscal 2021. These funds were needed to process additional Income Support Grants for Phase 2 of the COVID-19 relief programme. A total of **\$17.2 million** was expended for both Phases I and II in Fiscal 2021, with **\$14.2 million** paid to over **50,000 applicants** for Income Support for Phase I and **\$3 million** paid to some **1,200** persons for Phase II Income Support.

The Ministry can justify the need for the funds that were paid out under this allocation, which supported thousands of families. Madam President, notwithstanding the challenges of the times, I think that the people of Trinidad and Tobago can rest assured that its Government provided resources and took decisions in the national interest, not *our interest* Madam President, but on behalf of all our citizens.

In response to Wade Mark's question re forecasting and projected numbers related to senior citizens pension The Ministry Requested - \$4,552,194,276 in anticipation of an 8,000 increase in Senior Citizens who may apply for Pension. This is based on the average of 13% of the population over 65 years of age. The actual amount of new pensioners added was 7,935. The Ministry was allocated - \$3,819,210,577 resulted in an estimated shortfall of \$732,983,699 The actual expenditure Spent - \$4,184,026,943 making the shortfall for Senior Citizen Pension \$418,315,156. This was provided for via the \$531,053,225 of the sums allocated via the appropriation bill. The Ministry engaged in an exercise in August and September to interrogate its data with those at the EBC and Registrar General and removed 2,876 pensioners who were deemed deceased based on the Registrar General and the EBC records.

And Madam President, this we continue to pursue, even to this very minute. Additional funding was also required to meet the needs of vulnerable households through the three (3) major grants, namely, the public assistance Grant, Senior Citizens Pension and the Disability Assistance Grant. This supplemental funding amounted to **Five Hundred and Forty-eight Million, Five Hundred and Thirty-three Thousand, Five Hundred and Seventy-eight Dollars (\$548,533,578.00)**. We expended **Five Hundred and Thirty-one million, Fifty-three thousand, Two Hundred and Twenty-five Dollars (\$531,053,225.00)**.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services applauded the additional funding that was allocated to address a shortfall for the months of August and September, 2021. It is in this context that we took care of our citizens who needed our help. Through this funding we were able to feed more persons, shelter more persons, and clothe more persons. With this additional funding, Madam President, we ensured that our core grants: Senior Citizens Pensions, Public Assistance and Disability Grants for adults and children were paid on time, all the time, without disruption, thus contributing to the stability of thousands of lives throughout the length and breadth of this country.

Madam President, I am sure it has not been lost on the national community that the Ministry received by far the largest allocation under this supplemental funding, in fact, a full 92% of the total allocation. You will agree, that the Government had countless demands to which these funds could easily have been diverted but chose instead to secure our commitment to the vulnerable within our midst and for this, we are grateful. The funds we received were applied in the following ways:

- Senior Citizens Pension - \$418,315,156.00 (**109,132 clients benefited**)
- Public Assistance - \$13, 108, 970.00 (**18,851 clients benefited**)
- Disability Assistance - \$99,629,099 (**22, 856 clients benefited**).

Madam President altogether **150,839 households** have been and continue to be supported financially by the government through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services utilising these grants. In fact, Trinidad and Tobago has the second highest total expenditure on social protection (excluding health) in the English-speaking Caribbean, according to the World Social Protection Report 2020-22 published by the International Labour Organisation ILO (Geneva, 2021). This report demonstrates that Trinidad and Tobago's non-contributory pension of **TT\$3,500** administered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is one of the highest in the world. What this means for us is that ALL of our citizens over 65 years old can expect to receive an income once they retire and meet specific income and residential criteria.

The funds allocated to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services were critical because they ensured the maintenance of a social safety net to protect vulnerable citizens. In other words, Madam President, it is the Government's responsibility to take care of those who are having difficulty in the face of economic and social pressures and this Government will never turn its back on our citizens. We have done it and we will continue to do so. This Government puts people first!

Madam President, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, indeed, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, remains committed to ensuring that no citizen is left behind.

We understand fully that it takes cash to care, and the supplemental funding received by the Ministry continues to reach those for whom it is intended, the vulnerable amongst us.

Psycho-Social Support –

Madam President, we are aware that many families are enduring significant challenges at the present time with regards to Covid-19. In this regard, our National Family Services has extended its outreach services to families and is assisting with additional counselling, advice, referrals, advocacy and training to those who may need it most.

So Madam President, when we hear people saying that we are not doing anything, it is very painful because we know that we are doing good by our people, we know that thousands upon thousands, and they know who they are, have benefitted and continue to benefit from many of our initiatives. In the last Fiscal Year (2021) Madam President, the Ministry spent approximately **\$5b** on grants for the vulnerable and needy in our society.

Madam President, I give this Honourable House the assurance that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services remains committed to ensuring that every dollar received by the Ministry is spent to make the lives of our citizens healthier, happier and more abundant.

To ensure the highest level of probity in our operations, Madam President, the Ministry has embarked on the digitization of our processes, our records, and streamlining of our service delivery to more accurately target and serve the vulnerable amongst us.

Moreover, we continue to place focus on the removal of wastage, duplication and mismanagement within the Ministry's operations, and to find instead more efficient and cost-effective ways of providing our grants and services to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, thereby freeing millions of public funds for other beneficial programmes and projects that serve the national interest. We have pledged to continuously monitor and review our operations, whilst educating and sensitizing the citizenry and transitioning our clients through the welfare system to more independent and prosperous lifestyles of which we can all be proud.

So there is no talk about stopping the grants. All that we are talking about is just reviewing the programme to allow for greater efficiency. It is for this reason that I am in full support, Madam President, of reviewing any programme, to weed out any untoward activity, so that the greatest number of our citizens can benefit all the time. While reviewing, we have found that there are still dead persons on our system. There have been some human errors with regard to inputting clients' information. There is a report of ghost clients on the system; we have found that there have been some dead persons whose cheques are still being cashed; therefore, I do not think that anyone would like us to just leave this as it is. There must be a review; there must be an investigation and this is what is taking place. At no point did the Ministry or the Government ever speak about stopping any grants. So there are some persons going down that road; that is not the case.

We shall remain steadfast in our promise to our people to support those who need us, regardless of who they are and on which side of the political divide they stand. The additional funds that we have received were applied to persons in need of our help – those who had no or reduced income due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our senior citizens, those in need of public assistance and adults and children with disabilities. At the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services this is our mandate. We see it as our sacred duty.

I thank the Executive and Staff of the Ministry who, every day, diligently go out in front to help, empower and transform the lives of our people. I encourage them to maintain their commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago as we continue to enhance our service to the nation.

Madam President, I thank you.