



SENATOR THE HONOURABLE DONNA COX
**MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY
SERVICES**

DOWN SYNDROME FAMILY NETWORK
WORLD DOWN SYNDROME DAY CONFERENCE 2022
HYATT REGENCY, TRINIDAD

MONDAY, MARCH 21, 2022

9:00 A.M.

SALUTATIONS

- Senator the Honourable Paul Richards
- The Honourable Ayanna Webster Roy, Minister, Office of the Prime Minister Gender and Child Affairs;
- The Honourable Nyan Gadsby Dolly, Minister of Education (who will be joining on line);
- Chairman of the Down Syndrome Family Network
Mr. Glen Niles (Host) and members of the Board of Directors of the Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN);
- United Nations Assistant Resident Representative
Mrs. Shariffa Ali- Abdullah;
- Mrs. Sharon Clark Rowley, Attorney at Law and Partner
M.G. Daly and Partners;
- Mrs. Jessamy Tang, Board Trustee Down Syndrome International, UK;
- Mr. Jordan Kough, Executive Director, National Down Syndrome Congress, USA;
- Ms Kandi Pickhard, President and CEO National Down Syndrome Congress;
- Scotia Bank Director Human Resources, Mr. Stephan Lalonde and Senior Manager HR Ms Stacy Dhanessar;
- Self-advocates – Rochelle, Kandi and Eileen;

- Specially Invited Guest, and persons joining us on-line;
- Members of the Media;
- Ladies and gentlemen

Good Morning

Introduction

Allow me to extend sincerest congratulations to the Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN) on the achievement of its 10th Anniversary. I know it has been a long and at times lonely journey, but rest assured, you have touched the lives of numerous families through your advocacy, and for this, all of us gathered here today salute you. Your ability to gather this rich and robust panel of speakers to celebrate with you today, is certainly a testimony of the quality of the collaboration that the Down Syndrome Family Network has developed with local and international stakeholders.

The theme for this year's celebration is “**What Does Inclusion Mean?**” It highlights the ongoing need for the “*full and effective participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in society*” as prioritised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). However, the reality is that some persons with Down Syndrome and other persons with disabilities, still, do not benefit from full inclusion.

I believe that this may be because many persons simply either do not understand the meaning of inclusion, or have yet to be exposed to a model of what an inclusive society actually looks like.

The Down Syndrome Family Network will agree that everyone is precious and has value. This is not dependent on an individual's physical or intellectual capacity, but rather on the simple fact that he or she is a person, created in the image and likeness of God. Moreover, even though a person with a disability or illness often experiences difficulties in life, he or she still deserves the right to live life to the fullest, to be included in everyday activities and to have roles similar to his or her peers. This is what *disability inclusion is about and today, we recognize the Down Syndrome Family Network's advocacy for a more inclusive society for persons with disabilities.*

Collaboration and Opportunities for Research

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has, at the core of its mandate, the provision of support to the most vulnerable sectors of the national community, which includes persons with disabilities. In executing its mandate, the Ministry continues to maintain strategic partnerships with public and private entities, as well as, advocacy groups, such as the Down Syndrome Family Network, whose mission and vision align with ours.

One area where this has become necessary, is continued collaboration with regional and international partners to address the current inadequacy of primary research and usable data on the disability sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

Data on persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago, derived from the 2011 Population and Housing Census, estimated that there are approximately 52,244 persons living with a disability. This represents at least 4% of the total population.

Mindful of this, I am happy to advise that presently, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is reviewing the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities. We are also reviewing the legislation with a view to ensuring alignment with the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Ministry was actively involved with PAHO in the Induction Training workshop on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, both as facilitators and participants. Ministry personnel were also actively involved on the Steering Committee for the Situational Analysis on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. Going forward, the Ministry will continue working with PAHO as they implement a full joint programme from March 2022 to December 2024, on a number of projects related to:

- Capacity building of the members of the organizations that work with persons with disabilities, policy advisors, legal staff, and support technicians across the Government Ministries.
- Reviewing and amending key pieces of legislation to support the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

- Establishing guidelines for the collection of disability data that will be consistent with international standards, among others.

These initiatives will create a deeper level of collaboration among the community of persons with disabilities, government and the private sector.

The Work of the Ministry in promoting inclusion

Furthermore, in an effort to encourage greater inclusion of persons with disabilities, the Ministry hosted two (2) specific initiatives. In April 2021, the Disability Affairs Unit held a poster competition, entitled “**What does an ICT Inclusive Society Mean to You**”.

Additionally, as a part of the commemoration of International Day of Persons with Disabilities in December 2021, the Unit enlisted the assistance of several NGOs within Trinidad and Tobago to have children with and without disabilities submit short videos explaining their understanding of the meaning of inclusion. Adults were also asked to showcase the advances made in ensuring inclusion and access in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as highlight some of the barriers that may still exist.

The artwork and videos submitted will become part of a national sensitization campaign to be launched in the coming months.

Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' Initiatives to Promote Awareness

At the Ministry we are resolute in our view that increased awareness of the capacity and potential of persons with disabilities, will lead to a reduction in the misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding those living with disabilities.

When attitudes are changed, interaction between persons with and without disabilities become more impactful and positive. Consequently, as the Ministry works towards fulfilling the mandates of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, strong focus has been placed on sensitization and awareness, as well as achieving the objectives of the Action Plan of the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities.

In this regard, the Ministry's Disability Affairs Unit recently collaborated with the Caribbean Sign Language Centre to host three (3) awareness and sign language sessions. The sessions targeted frontline and other staff members of the financial, information and communication sectors, as well as specific Ministries and Government Agencies. These sessions were designed to ensure that frontline staff were fully equipped with the skills necessary to competently communicate with the deaf and hearing impaired.

We are also currently in the process of reviewing the Ministry's Disability Assistance Grant and other similar type programmes that are accessed by persons with disabilities. The purpose of this project is to ensure that our grants and programmes are meeting the needs of persons with disabilities and further, to ensure that the right persons are able to access these grants. These initiatives form a part of the Action Plan of the National Policy on Persons with Disability to ensure an adequate standard of living for persons with disabilities.

Support for NGOs

The Ministry is cognizant that despite the best intentions of many NGOs, there still exists a capacity deficit, in terms of structure, policies, financial management and standard operating procedures, to name a few. To this end, the Ministry has been hosting capacity-building workshops for NGOs that provide services for persons with disabilities, so as to ensure that they are capable of performing at optimal levels and are better able to efficiently serve the community of persons with disabilities.

The Ministry is preparing an “easy read” version of the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities to ensure persons with intellectual disabilities are aware of their rights. Additionally, we are collaborating with the Ministry of Digital Transformation to ensure that all of the Ministry’s digital platforms are fully accessible to persons with disabilities. This will expand on our initial project in 2020 where we created a microsite to increase usage by persons with disabilities on our website.

We also continue to support organisations that facilitate persons with disabilities, for example, in the last three (3) years the Ministry provided over One Hundred and Thirty-two Million Dollars (**\$132m**) in subventions and one-off grants to organisations supporting persons with disabilities.

Conclusion

In closing, I take this opportunity to warmly congratulate the members of Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN) for their vision and commitment to persons with Down Syndrome in this nation.

I give you the assurance that the Ministry will continue to provide the requisite support towards all efforts made to help, empower and transform the lives of persons with disabilities, including those with Down Syndrome.

On behalf of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, I wish you well in all your endeavours and leave with you our best wishes for a successful celebration and a productive year ahead.

Accessibility benefits everyone, not just persons with disabilities. So let us create an inclusive society. Let us work together to ensure that no one is left behind.

I thank you for the courtesy of your attention and may God richly bless you all!

Senator the Honourable Donna Cox