



## **Feature Address**

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

# **WORLD SOCIAL WORK DAY SYMPOSIUM**

## **MARRIOTT HOTEL**

**Thursday March 17, 2022**

**9:00 a.m**

It is both a pleasure and a privilege for me to welcome you today to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' World Social Work Day Symposium.

The theme of this year's celebration – “**The Time is Right for Social Work**” is as timely as it is necessary. If ever there was need for a national conversation on the role of social workers and their tremendous contribution to the national agenda, that time is now.

The development of social work in Trinidad and Tobago can be traced to the formation of the Coterie of Social Workers in 1921 by the late Audrey Jeffers. Ms Jeffers was a social worker who advocated strenuously for the rights of women, irrespective of their marital or educational status. She provided free lunches to poor school children and went on to establish homes for the elderly, the blind, "women in distress" and day nurseries.

She was also at the forefront of the establishment of the Breakfast Shed in 1926, a forerunner to the School Feeding Programme, and ten (10) years later, in 1936, became the first female to be elected to a seat on the Port of Spain City Council. Today, the highway on the Foreshore ‘**The Audrey Jeffers Highway**’ is named after her, indicative of the extremely

impactful contribution she made to the landscape of social work in Trinidad and Tobago.

More than a century later, as this country slowly emerges from the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role played by Social Workers during the pandemic must be examined. Aligned, as it is, with the overall theme of World Social Work Day 2022 ‘Co-building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving no one behind’, today’s symposium is but one way for practioners to consider the evolving trends in the profession, with the aim of providing even more effective social services to the vulnerable.

It is expected that today’s event will serve as an opportunity for social workers all over the country to share information, build knowledge and establish networks of support. I am indeed impressed by the laudable objectives anticipated from this Symposium, namely:

- to profile and provide higher value and visibility for the work done by the Ministry;
- to highlight the evolving roles of the Social Worker; and finally,
- to further the development of a cohesive, holistic and coordinated “Network of support for Social Workers.”

I also recognize the valuable contribution of the Trinidad and Tobago

Association of Social Workers for its partnership with the Ministry in hosting this very important Symposium.

Today, as we commemorate World Social Work Day, I want to pay tribute and express my sincerest gratitude to the many dedicated Social Workers of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and indeed, all Social Workers. I want to express a heartfelt *thank you* for your towering level of expertise, service and commitment.

### **The work of Social Workers during COVID**

Your commitment and extra-ordinary skill-sets were evident especially in the crisis management aspects of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The timely interventions to casework, group work, and community emergencies brought tangible relief to thousands of citizens and opened up the prospect of enhanced resilience for all of us. This was particularly critical over the past two (2) years and contributed to this Ministry's ability to deliver, without interruption, the much-needed COVID-19 Social Support measures initiated by the Government.

Quite appropriately categorized as “essential staff”, Social Workers remained on active duty throughout and were instrumental during the assessment and verification phases of Phase 1 and 2 COVID-19 income support relief.

One of our clients, in recommending the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services in a Social Media Post of August 10, 2021 remarked, *“The MSDFS is the only Ministry that kept serving the people of Trinidad and Tobago throughout the Pandemic. We all know that a country’s greatest strength in trying times is its Human Services.”*

This client is absolutely correct.

Our Social Workers:

- provided technical knowledge and expertise to the management of the Ministry’s Call Centres, which fielded numerous calls on a daily basis from citizens seeking assistance;
- provided psychosocial support to existing and new clients of the Ministry;
- conducted verification and certification of applicants for grants;
- partnered with NGOs, CBOs and FBOs to deliver hampers to hundreds of families who were negatively impacted by COVID-19, including those who were terminated, retrenched and displaced; and
- provided technical support to the design, construction and operations of a temporary shelter for socially displaced persons.

The latter was particularly crucial during the restrictive phases of the COVID-19 pandemic management.

Throughout the social service sector, social workers worked arduously and creatively, sometimes redesigning their intervention strategies to better suit the changing environment. Using several digital platforms, and in instances where online services were inaccessible, social workers continued to provide in-person services.

There can be no denying therefore that through their myriad roles of advocate, counsellor, therapist, educator, coach, and networker, social workers have been going beyond the call of duty to meet the needs of our nations' most vulnerable persons. We commend and encourage such proactive behaviours, as the modern-day social worker must transcend typical expectations and must be capable of rising and adapting to the new needs and challenges of society.

## **Collaboration**

In an attempt to effectively manage the social safety net, the Ministry anchors its efforts within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, namely **Goal 1 - Poverty Eradication**, which it delivers through the consistent allocation of Public Assistance Grants, Food Support Grants, COVID-19 and General Assistance Grants to vulnerable persons in various communities.

The Ministry also aligns its work with **Goal 16 - Peace Justice and Strong Institution**, which seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development; provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, at all levels.

We continue to collaborate with Non-Government Organizations such as our partners for this event, the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Social Workers. We also work in partnership with community-based organizations (CBOs), faith-based organizations (FBOs) and other stakeholders, as part of our expanded, multi-faceted, responsive approach to protecting the vulnerable. Such collaborations focus on the impact of service delivery on individuals and families, helping them to realize their full potential, thereby reducing their vulnerability and alleviating poverty.

### **Social Workers and Resilience**

As we reflect on the sterling contribution of Social Workers, throughout the social services sector, I urge you to continue to nurture and build resilience in the midst of these uncertain times.

A major component in developing resilience is care of oneself.

Paula Lopez, the Managing Director at the Department of Psychological and Educational Consultation at the Fairview University in the United States, in her contribution to Self Care: **The Ethical Link to Practice**, sees self care in helping professions such as social work, as important because it *“presents the key ability for professionals helping other people to face their problems, helps them to get the satisfaction from work, to preserve the strength to provide help, to eliminate the negative effects of their profession and to sustain emotional, physical and mental wellbeing.”*

### **Social Workers as Advocates**

Social Workers, you are change agents and drivers of social action.

You have a responsibility to ensure that no one is left behind and that policies and legislation that promote the dignity of our most vulnerable are supported. I encourage you to continue to advance purposeful actions that promote social justice, particularly among vulnerable groups, including the socially and economically disadvantaged, whose situations have worsened during the COVID-19 Pandemic.



Today, I give you the assurance that Social Workers will continue to have the support and respect from the executive and management team of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services as we work together to help, empower and transform the lives of our clients.

Together we can make a change.

In this regard, I have the distinct pleasure of announcing the inauguration of the first ever Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' Social Worker of the Year Award. Beginning in 2023, this award will recognize the Social Worker whose contribution to advancing the mandate of the Ministry has been most outstanding and impactful. Further details on this award will be made available at a later date.

As I close, I express my heartfelt thanks to all of you who sincerely committed to this event to make it a success. Most notably, I would like to thank the distinguished panelists whose composition and expertise are as diverse as the society we serve.

I extend my best wishes for a productive and informative symposium, as the time is always right for social work! Let us all work together as we navigate life in this new normal.

I thank you for the courtesy of your attention and may God continue to bless us all.