



# **REMARKS**

**BY THE**

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**M.P.,**

**MINISTER OF SOCIAL SERVICES AND**

**URBAN DEVELOPMENT**

**REPORT TO THE NATION ON COVID-19**

**INITIATIVES**

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2020**

In these times of crisis, disaster and uncertainty, I have reflected on those who have gone before me, on whose shoulders, I - we stand, indeed, the world stands. Mother Theresa, the child of compassionate parents, advocate, founder of the Order of the Missionaries of Charity, a Roman Catholic congregation of women dedicated to helping the poor, Nobel Peace Prize recipient and later considered one of the 20th Century's greatest humanitarians, canonized as Saint Teresa of Calcutta in 2016, said “At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in”.

Her words put into perspective the need to maintain our ‘Humanity’- be our brother’s keeper, that we must all have a ‘social conscience’. COVID-19 is a virus that does not discriminate between the rich and poor, between women or men, the elderly, the youth, the sick or those healthy- its effects are highly uneven. Healthcare and food security has become “a matter of life and death”. As the Minister for Social Services, my heart is toward the people of The Bahamas who have stepped outside of the normal way of life, in the face of unbending obstacles, stubborn challenges and have broken new paths to survive. I applaud you. I stand with you, as a husband responsible for his family, as a father, an older man with increased chances for transmission, as a Minister with a duty to meet and work on the ground with each social worker, each probation

officer, as a Member of Parliament walking the lines and ensuring that food parcels are distributed (collected). I understand, I have not forgotten and I applaud you.

I commend all the hard-working, responsible staff within my Ministry. In the face of this global pandemic, I am concerned about the general public, and equally concerned about my staff. We are just as vulnerable as anyone else to becoming infected with and affected by COVID-19. Therefore, we encourage clients to practice safety protocols, which we practice ourselves. Notwithstanding our measures, some of our sub-offices had to be closed for deep sanitization. Despite this, we made every attempt to accommodate as many persons as possible and continue our efforts to ensure that all of premises are fully functional.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, The Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development has been dedicated to enhancing risk communication and community preparedness, provide critical supplies, improved water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services throughout our facilities for our employees and clients. The COVID-19 pandemic is of great concern to everyone. As a Ministry, facing the unprecedented threat of COVID19, we realized, that in order to come to the aid of the ultra-vulnerable, we would need to engage the minds of those most innovative, those creative and competent. The Ministry embarked upon an aggressive dual change strategy that is both transformational and incremental to make provisions for those most vulnerable. We knew there were thousands of people who were least able to protect themselves during this

pandemic. Older persons, persons with chronic illness and persons with disabilities, face particular disproportionate risks, and require an all-out effort to save their lives and protect their future. This **WAS** and **IS** a matter of basic human solidarity (*shown on screen*)

Our strategy included:

1. Analyzing our infrastructure to ensure that our clients had access to our full spectrum of products, and range of social assistance to stem the impact of COVID-19 in an already vulnerable humanitarian contexts, and simultaneously;
2. Continue and maintain support for existing humanitarian services which more than 20% of our population depend on.

COVID-19 is nowhere near removed from our immediate future, the Prime Minister has referred to our joint commitment to survive this threat as “a marathon”, and we are committed to providing services to the people of The Bahamas, to the best of our competencies.

I shall begin with The Department of Social Services:

### **Department of Social Services**

While the various Divisions within the Department of Social Services continue to offer a full complement of services, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced workers to change case management processes and to find innovative ways to assist clients. It has also compelled us to identify new initiatives that would address the economic fallout

which occurred as a result. These changes and initiatives are as follows:

### **Disability Affairs Division**

- Emergency Food Assistance coupons are now issued directly from the Division to persons with disabilities
- From March to the present, 179 persons have been assisted, totaling \$10,230.00.
- Disability Allowance payments to 81 children continued at a cost of \$330,000.00

**School Welfare Unit** continued its daily work while:

- Interviews for enrollment in the public preschool were conducted via telephone, and the selection process is done virtually
- 781 applications have been completed
- Home visits continue to be conducted for students of PACE (The teen mothers program, Providing Access to Continue Education) currently totaling 41



## **Health Social Services – Princess Margaret Hospital**

We have not forgotten our elderly, and those with health challenges in the face of COVID-19. Their continued health is most important. Hence, Social Services has found ways to continue to ensure that medicine and prescriptions are filled and delivered.

- All services continue to be provided including home visits which are done via WhatsApp video calls where possible.
- The information obtained is included in the client's assessment report.
- 861 Medcards have been processed from March to date, thus assisting clients in receiving medication and lab work.
- 206 other medical services were assessed including assistance for MRIs, Radiation, Chemotherapy, medication, heart procedures, etc.)
- 153 verification reports were submitted to the National Insurance Board for clients to access the National Prescription Drug Plan

- In a combined initiative, the Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development, and the Ministry of Health worked in tandem to relocate the boarders from the Princess Margaret Hospital, to senior residential facilities. This joint effort is budgeted to cost approximately \$800,000.00 in the first year for the care and needs of the residents. The relocation of the boarders creates much needed space for critical care.

### **Health Social Services – Sandilands Rehabilitation Center (SRC)**

- In accordance with the COVID protocols, social workers delivered medication to SRC outpatients to prevent increased transmission rates.
- From March to the present, 269 MedCards were issued

*(Summation shown on screen)*

**Our Family Services Division (includes Family Services Unit, Placement Unit, Domestic Violence and Counseling Unit, Trafficking in Persons Unit) have also been busy.**

Fear, worry, and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats, especially at times when we are faced with uncertainty or the unknown. So it is normal and understandable that people are experiencing fear in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department continues to provide counseling services, and legal advocacy for parents and children.

- Court reports continue to be generated, obtaining information and documents via telephone interviews, social media or email
- Counseling is conducted, utilizing the Zoom platform
- Caseworkers continue to attend court in person or virtually.
- Foster Care Allowance continued for 177 foster children at a cost of \$150,000.00

**Community Support Services Division** continued their:

- Virtual home visits and telephone interviews are conducted
- Food coupons are delivered to senior citizens and persons with disabilities

## **COVID-19 Special Grants to Charitable Organizations**

Partnerships are essential to extend the reach of services and the continuation, and effective task of nation building. The Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development, through its Department of Social Services, has disbursed approximately Four hundred and sixty-nine thousand dollars (\$469,000.00) in Special Grants, due to the economic fallout of Covid-19. The special grants were made to various government and non-government organizations, residential facilities for seniors and children, in addition to NGOs that provide food assistance to the most vulnerable in New Providence, Grand Bahama and the Family Islands. (*shown on screen*)

## **The National Food Distribution Task Force**

The National Food Distribution Task Force (NFDTF) was established by the Most Honourable Prime Minister, Hubert Minnis, as one of the immediate responses to addressing the basic needs of food assistance to the citizens and residents of the

Bahamas, due to the widespread impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mrs. Susan Larson was appointed as the Chairman of the Task Force, which encompasses the partnership of the following Non-government Organizations: Bahamas Feeding Network, Bahamas Red Cross, Lend a Hand Bahamas, Hands for Hunger (New Providence), National Food Committee (Grand Bahama), Idea Relief (Abaco), and One Eleuthera Foundation (Eleuthera).

I take this opportunity on behalf of the Government of The Bahamas to extend appreciation to Chairman Larson, the zone leaders of the Task Force, and their support teams for the herculean work they have done. (*shown on screen*)

- The NFDTF timeframe was to operate from the last week in May to the end of August 2020.
- To date, the government has provided funds in the amount of thirteen million, two hundred and twenty-five thousand, three hundred and forty-one dollars (\$13,225,341) – See Attachment

- The NFDTF has distributed food parcels and vouchers to approximately fifty-five thousand, seventy-eight (55,078) households throughout the Bahamas up to 12, September 2020.
- The need for continued food assistance through the Task Force is still of paramount importance and as such, the Government of The Bahamas has committed to the continued partnership to the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2020.

The process of feeding our fellow brothers and sisters remains a major priority for the Government of the Bahamas; therefore, we wish to advise that persons in need of food assistance can apply to the Department of Social Services as well as the various non-government organizations which provide food assistance to the most vulnerable. (It should be noted however, that persons are not intended to receive from BOTH entities.)

**Email address for Food Task Force  
nfd@rapidbahamas.com**

**COVID 19 Assistance – Adjusted Emergency  
Food Assistance Rates**

- We will recall a program put in place for persons in the hospitality industry who were placed on reduced work weeks in March, 2,293 persons were assisted with \$270,600.00 being expended, COVID-19 initiatives continue.

## **Child Protection Unit**

Children are the most vulnerable to external shocks and factors such as this global pandemic. It is those perceived as ‘least powerful’ who feel the brunt of the needed lockdowns and extended curfews. Through diligent and consistent focus:

- Emergency intervention for cases involving child endangerment has not changed
- Virtual home visits and telephone checks are carried out on stabilized cases
- Court visits continue

Additionally within the Child Care Facilities Unit:

- Social workers visits to child care facilities continue, as well as telephone contacts with the Administrators regarding the well-being of residents.

- During the COVID-19 lockdown, three (3) of our female residents absconded.
- The Police are working along with the Department to locate the girls – none of the children were infected
- ADRA (Adventist Disaster Relief Agency) donated a total of 84 tablets to all of our child care facilities

### **National Parenting Program (*shown on screen*)**

The National Parenting program is vital to ensuring strong families and strong resilient communities.

- Despite COVID-19, parenting classes continue; however, they are conducted virtually, 838 parents have participated
- Assignments are sent to parents via email
- Anger Management sessions are held separately, with individual in-person interaction. 153 persons have participated
- To date, 24 sessions have been held, with virtual graduation and presentation of certificates

### **Trafficking In Persons' (TIPs) Unit**



Trafficking in Persons, a form of modern day slavery is a violent act, one that the Government of The Bahamas along with the people of The Bahamas have said and proven **zero tolerance for**.

- Since the pandemic, 7 trafficking victims were assisted by the Department of Social Services
- This number has been reduced to 2, with face-to-face interaction and safety protocols being practiced.
- The other victims returned to their countries of origin, but the Department's TIPs representative continues to provide supportive care by regular communication via emails and social media.
- Reports of unaccompanied minors were brought to the Department's attention by the US Coast Guard on 2 separate occasions. Social workers travelled to Inagua from 17<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2020, and to Ragged Island on 27<sup>th</sup> July, 2020. Thankfully, interviews with the children revealed that they were not human trafficking victims

### **Grand Bahama and the Northern Bahamas**

On our sister island, Grand Bahama, a spirited, vibrant community, who has managed and continues

to own their lives and space, has fared the worst of storms. I can report that there was a steady increase in requests for assistance due to the Covid-19 virus and its impact on the economy of Grand Bahama.

During the period of March – August 2020, there was an increased demand for rental assistance and a steady increase for financial assistance for utilities as a result of persons being furloughed, or in some instances, terminated due to the economic fallout of the pandemic.

However, during the months of July and August 2020, there was a decline in requests for Emergency Food Assistance, as many of the Department's clients utilized the 'Feed Grand Bahama' online initiative offered by The Bahamas Government in response to the pandemic.

- 4,850 persons benefitted from Emergency Food Assistance at a cost of \$437,713.00
- 'ADRA'(Adventist Disaster Relief Agency) donated food parcels and baby items to the Grand Bahama community.

## **Family Island Division**

The Bahamas is not Nassau - centric, the Family Island Division of the Department of Social Services is actively involved in the delivery of all programs provided by the Department. The most vigorous is always our Community Support Services Division programs that assist the indigent in the various communities. Persons who were previously able to EXTEND benevolence were now themselves in need of benevolence.

In islands where the tourism industry was more vibrant, needless to say, they were more negatively impacted; Thus the creation of the digital application and the increase in some of the benefits, as it was expected that the timelines for the need of the services would be shorter.

Between the period of April and August 2020, the following assistance was provided to five-thousand, two-hundred and eighty-six (5,286) persons totaling eight-hundred, forty-three thousand, six-hundred and

thirty-nine dollars and forty-four cents  
(\$843,639.44)

*(Table to be shown on screen)*

- In keeping with assistance provided in New Providence, sixteen (16) non-governmental organizations in fourteen (14) Family Island districts received a total of thirty-one thousand (\$31,000.00) dollars to assist with feeding programs that were similar to those initiated in New Providence by The Bahamas Feeding Network.

## **Partnership**

The Lenny Kravitz/Let Love Rule Foundation partnered with the Department of Social Services and donated one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000.00) in gift cards redeemable at Solomon's Food Stores. The cards were distributed throughout the communities of New Providence at sixty thousand dollars (\$60,000.00), Grand at Bahama fifteen thousand (\$15,000.00) and Eleuthera at twenty five thousand dollars (\$25,000.00).

Distribution focused on the most vulnerable among us inclusive of persons with disability, the elderly, and single mothers. An additional \$100,000.00 was just recently received and will be distributed accordingly.

### **Urban Renewal**

Urban Renewal has been a key stakeholder, a mobile force in the time of pandemic, ensuring that the elderly aren't forgotten, that the homeless, who have been exploited through social media and ignored, receive rations, receive care. Thank you, to this highly dedicated team working in various urban communities. Due to restrictions and protocols put in place in the workforce as a result of COVID-19, Urban Renewal has had to adapt by adopting alternate and innovative means in facilitating the public. (***shown on screen***)

1. Grocery Bag Distribution: In April and May, six hundred (600) grocery bags were distributed to senior citizens and other residents in need in New Providence, and three hundred (300) were distributed in Grand Bahama. Grocery Vouchers were also supplied for those in need on the Urban Renewal Family Island locations of Abaco. Crooked Island, Long Island, Andros, Cat Island, Exuma and Eleuthera.
2. A Taste of Love Breakfast Distribution: On June 10<sup>th</sup>, over two-thousand (2,000) persons (200 per centre) were provided with a hot, cooked breakfast from the ten (10) Urban Renewal Centres in New Providence.
3. They held a Father's Day TV Presentation and Private Honors Ceremony: As Urban Renewal

was unable to hold its annual Father's Day Luncheon due to COViD-19 restrictions.

4. As a replacement for the Annual UR is currently providing hot lunches for the children of 10 UR communities in New Providence. The lunches are primarily picked up by the parents of the children. The lunch programme began on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> September 2020 and will end on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2020. Grand Bahama UR is also hosting a sister lunch programme for the children attached to its communities. A quota of feeding at least 1600 children a day is expected to be met in New Providence and Grand Bahama. (1000 in Nassau, 500 in Grand Bahama, 100 in Bimini)

**The Department of Gender and Family Affairs**

The Department of Gender and Family Affairs noted that the Emergency Orders Curfew COVID 19 Recovery experiences presented various challenges to the productivity of life and well-being in The Bahamas and in countries across the world.

In response to queries, complaints and requests for assistance regarding challenges of increase violence, family feuds, depression, anxiety, loneliness, fear and generally a need for help, the Department of Gender and Family Affairs in conjunction with the University of The Bahamas, conducted an online survey to ascertain the safety well-being of families during the COVID curfews and lockdown experiences. The results suggest a slight increase in Family Violence in the home pre-COVID and during COVID lockdown. The Department of Gender and Family Affairs continue to work with NGO partners to monitor the occurrence of violence.



In conjunction with government and civil society partners and affiliates, the Department hosted various virtual trainings, seminars, workshops and town hall meetings to address some COVID challenges.

Themes and topics included:

1. Psychological Well Being and Support
2. Impact of COVID 19 on Men, Women and Families in The Bahamas
3. The Role and Response of Non-Governmental Organizations during COVID19
4. NGO guidelines to apply for grants, and international funding
5. How to strengthen businesses during COVID 19
6. The Role of the Church during COVID 19

7. Social Assistance Support for Families during COVID 19
8. Dealing with the Stigma of Contracting COVID19
9. The Role of Men in the family

A multi-stakeholder inter-sectoral Council provides training, advice and guidance for families. The Council is represented by:

1. Department of Gender and Family Affairs
2. Department of Social Services and Urban Renewal
3. Ministry of Health
4. Ministry of Education
5. National Women's Advisory Council
6. Royal Bahamas Police Force
7. The Training Authority
8. Civil Society Bahamas and

## 9. The University of The Bahamas

### *REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS*

The Department of Gender and Family Affairs also participated in several regional and international United Nations High Level Round Table Meetings reaffirming The Bahamas' commitment on its international responsibilities, including understanding the nuances of COVID-19 throughout the Caribbean and world, and the sharing of best practices. These meetings included:

1. UN Women and IDB – Gender Equality Experts held on 21 July 2020, Minister Frankie Campbell served as a Panelist

2. UN Women and ParlAmericas – Eastern Caribbean Parliamentary COVID 19 High Level Round Table Meeting. Hosted by The Bahamas Parliament on 29 July 2020. Participants included: Hon. Speaker – Mr. Halson Moultrie, Hon. President – Senator Dr. Mildred Hall Watson, Hon. Senator Ranard Henfield, and myself as key presenter for The Bahamas. Also in attendance were members of Government and Opposition from Honourable House of Assembly and Senate.

3. Commonwealth High Level Meeting for Ministers of Women Affairs where The Bahamas made an intervention on Economic Empowerment for Women.

4. Latin America and Caribbean (ECLAC) – COVID19 Recovery Efforts

5. CARICOM Consultative Meeting for 2020-2030 Strategic Plan – Eight DGFA Technical Officers participated and provided interventions of recommendation to the CARICOM Secretariat.

We continue to address our international reporting obligations.

## **The National Commission for Persons with Disabilities**

Utilizing the digital trend that COVID19 environment has sped up many of The Ministry's affiliate departments have upgraded technological infrastructure to meet clients wherever they are. The National Commission for Persons with Disability has used this time to transform the avenues in which

it assists persons with disabilities. Two major technological shifts that NCPD continues to work towards are The Disability App and The Digital Identification Card for Persons with Disabilities. The disability register is steadily progressing.

### **(1) Mobile App Development**

The National Commission for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) has so far secured two quotes for the development of a Mobile App - Information Communications Technology (ICT) have increasingly become important and necessary in a digital age and access to ICT's is one of the greatest equalizers for persons with disabilities. ICT's can become life-changing tools for persons with disabilities, enabling them to more fully participate in various aspects of society. The National Commission for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD)

proposes the development of a Mobile App for persons with disabilities and their families (PwDaF). The primary purpose of the App is to serve as a portal whereby persons with disabilities and their families can have access to accurate, timely and reliable information with regard to disability-related services and support. The App's features will provide:

- One touch access to all Emergency Services (including text services for deaf and hard of hearing (DHoH))
- Name and contact information of all Government departments, agencies and services frequently used by Persons with Disabilities and their families
- Name and contact information of non-profit organizations (NPOs)

- Name and contact information of disability-related organizations (disability NGOs)
- NCPD Person with Disability official registration form

## **(2) Digital Identification Card for Persons with Disabilities**

This is being proposed in conjunction with the National Insurance Board on the possibility of NIB cards including the word "Disability" on the cards of persons with disabilities, similar to what currently obtains for "Seniors". The Commission would like the possible option of persons with disabilities having a word or symbol for "disability" imprinted on their NIB card. Alternately, there exists the consideration of the Commission issuing a stand-alone card. An additional option is a digital ID



Card, which is proposed to be a part of or linked to the Mobile App in (1) above, though not in the initial phase of the App. The app hopes to provide:

1. Push notification for national alerts, emergency and disaster news
2. Access to Video Relay Service (VRS) a video telecommunication service that allows deaf, hard-of-hearing, individuals to communicate over video devices and with hearing people in real-time, using a sign language interpreter.
3. Access to visual assistance service, a video telecommunication service that allows blind and visually impaired individuals to receive visual assistance through a live video call (eg. Be My Eyes).

Additionally, NCPD, During the Pandemic, worked on updating The Registry of Persons with

Disabilities. This list is also required for disasters to know where each person with disability is located in case evacuation is required. This list is also mandated by The United Nations.

## **The Information Technology Communications Unit**

Continuing the digital trend that the Government of The Bahamas initiated in 2017, The Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development formally launched its digitalization and modernization process with a Deputy Director at the helm in April 2020.

Under the digitalization and transformation strategy of The Ministry, there were 3 main goals:

- 1.Speeding up the launch of the Departments MIS was key to meeting the challenges of COVID19. ProMIS(E) is an upgraded, streamlined and more comprehensive database that provides processing, monitoring, tracking of cases and disbursement of assistance all in one place.
- 2.The creation of a technical unit called the ITC Unit to process applications, card services and queries. ITC Unit provided support to the Department of Social Services through the processing of online applications from COVID-19 Special initiatives, which evolved into COVID-19 impact assistance.
- 3.The integration of digital wallets as part of an efficiency measure in line with Central Bank regulations. With the realization that our clients needed to access their social assistance quickly

and more efficiently, the Ministry, through the ITC Unit held 3 stages of beta-testing employing the digital trend of digital wallet providers to disburse food coupons and rental assistance.

4. Through the ITC Unit, and in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the Department of Transformation and Digitalization, The Ministry of Social Services will upgrade all of its Community Service Centres and Urban Renewal spaces, by providing hotspots and accessible Wifi. Expanding our Wifi Access, allows students in Urban Communities to be able to attend virtual classes in their areas if internet connections are not available in their homes.  
***(shown on screen)***

Moving toward online digital processes allows for less face-to-face transactions, lessening of lines and wider accessibility.

It was imperative that in the COVID-19 environment that we assist, where possible, persons with shelter. Imagine trying to make sure you're washing your hands while you're living in your car.

This Ministry's digital transformation will also improve efficiency and efficacy of service while also providing the Government of The Bahamas with accurate, real-time data with which to make projections and decisions. Digitalization will also fulfill the Ministry's goal to be even more transparent and accountable to the Bahamian people.

The Ministry's digitization and modernization process via the ITC Unit will allow officials to

manage client information from the time they access the online application to the time when they become sufficiently independent that they no longer need social assistance. There will be ongoing training because based on the philosophy of total quality management and so it is important to get all of internal partners (i.e. staff) on board to appreciate the importance, the value of the social assistance system, what it means to them, what it means to the client, and to buy into the philosophy of moving from a 100% paper society to a 100 % paperless society within the Ministry of Social Services and throughout the Government of The Bahamas.

COVID-19 has affected all of us. COVID-19, that invisible enemy is like a storm, and The Ministry of Social Services has tried to ensure, that no matter where you maybe during this storm, this pandemic,

that you and your families have the protection of our safety net, social assistance and a measure of food security. Additionally, we have maintained our day to day work to avoid a singular focus on COVID-19. Together, arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder, masks on, sanitizing, 6 feet apart, socially distanced, yet closer than ever before.

I thank you.