



Communication to the House of Assembly

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Member of Parliament (Bamboo Town)
Minister of Health**

COVID-19 UPDATE

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Mr. Speaker

I rise in this Honourable Place as a servant of Yahweh Elohim and by extension the people of Bamboo Town giving thanks for this opportunity to provide my Ministry's update on the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Mr. Speaker

In December 2019, an unnamed virus associated with pneumonia cases was reported in Wuhan, China. Since then, 2020 has been rife with rapid global change; and here in The Bahamas, the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed on 15th March 2020.

Human Resources for Health

Mr. Speaker

Since that time, we have seen frontline workers rise to the challenge in defence of our country's health and economy. I thank the men and women who go out every day to ensure that the majority of us remain healthy so that

our economy will have the people and skills necessary to rebuild. Their exposures include excessive risk, inclusive of prolonged stress with emotional and mental detriment, the risk of infection, and ultimately, the risk of death.

Since we last met here, we have suffered the loss of Nurse Bernadette Rolle, Registered Nurse, who was an employee of the Sandilands Rehabilitation Centre (SRC). As we mourn the loss of a brave warrior from the frontline in our fight against the pandemic COVID-19, the nation is grateful for her service.

Nurse Rolle was dedicated to her family, to her patients, and to the institution of nursing and SRC. As I have done in the past, on behalf of my Ministry and on my own behalf, I extend sincere condolences particularly to her two children, her wider family, her patients that she dearly loved, and to her nursing colleagues at SRC who are her extended family. May Nurse Rolle's soul rest in peace and rise in glory.

Nurse Rolle's death amplifies the reality that healthcare workers are continually being removed from the work environment for quarantine and isolation for extended periods due to becoming a COVID- 19 case or a contact of a case.

Mr. Speaker,

On behalf of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, the Ministry of Health and that of my own family, I would like to offer sincere condolences to the families of all Bahamians who have passed away as a result of COVID -19.

Mr. Speaker losing a loved one is never easy, and it is even more difficult during the period we find ourselves in. Having had loved ones pass away within my own family, I too am familiar with the enormous pain and grief that accompany the realization that a much loved family member has passed on.

As we continue in this war against this deadly virus, may we as a country and a community resolve within ourselves and hold within our hearts the memory of those whom we have lost in this battle.

I again join the countless number of citizens and residents in extending our deepest sympathy to the loved ones left behind, practically the spouses, children and grandchildren, many of whom will need our love, care, thoughts and our prayers in the days, months and years ahead.

May their souls rest in peace and rise in glory.

Mr. Speaker

Our healthcare personnel are our most valuable resource in combating COVID-19. Surges in infection particularly expose us to shortfalls of healthcare providers due to illness. At last count, there were 194 health care workers, inclusive of physicians, nurses and allied health

staff, unable to deliver care significantly impacting delivery of care to COVID and non-COVID patients.

Mr. Speaker,

Our strategy to offset the shortfall thus far has been to identify and engage healthcare providers both within and outside of hospital settings whose workloads have been reduced due to the cancellation of elective procedures, outpatient visits, and the reduction of non-COVID-19 hospitalisations. We have also assessed the staff capacity to support the care of critically ill patients, particularly during surges. Trainees, nurses, physicians, technicians, retirees and other support staff have all been co-opted to fill gaps across the healthcare workforce. Additionally, we have taken the decision to reengage the twenty-nine (29) physician senior house officers (SHO's), who will immediately be added to the medical services capacity. The facility at Breezes is also geared toward alleviating some of these stressors.

Mr. Speaker

We have seen an unprecedented cooperation among healthcare workers. With the Public Hospitals Authority Doctors Hospital and Department of Public Health acute care delivery institutions, staff are working together in a focused, professional and seamless fashion for the best outcome for patients and the good of our Bahamas. I applaud their response to the call to service. May God continue to bless and protect them all.

COVID-19 Surveillance

Mr. Speaker

With the second wave surge in COVID-19, we have witnessed a more vicious and tenacious spread of this virus within and across nearly all our inhabited islands. As of yesterday 8th September 2020, we have now recorded a cumulative total 2,657 confirmed cases.

One thousand four hundred and eighty-eight (1488) cases (56%) remain active, one thousand and eighty-eight (1088) 41% recovered with sixty-nine (69) cases hospitalized. We have lost sixty-three (63) lives to COVID-19, with a case fatality ratio of 2.4%. Worldwide, the case fatality ratio ranges are widely variable from less than 0.1% to over 25%.

By island, New Providence account for 1,725 cases or 65% of all cases. Grand Bahama's 589 cases account for 22%; and, of the twelve (12) remaining islands reporting COVID-19 cases, Abaco is highest with 95 cases (4%) of the nation's total.

Mr. Speaker

Females currently account for 48% of all cases and males, 52%. An overall look at all cases show that the majority of cases, 41% fall in the 20 – 39 age group with the 40-59 age group close behind accounting for 36%.

Mr Speaker

My Ministry continues to execute a comprehensive COVID-19 response strategy to meet the significant demands being placed on the healthcare system and to ensure the well-being of all Bahamians and residents. Case identification testing and treatment, along with aggressive contact tracing, isolation and quarantine as appropriate remains a key element. Encouraging adherence to prevention measures like frequent hand sanitizing, wearing of mask and physical distancing is another essential element in our strategy for the avoidance of more restrictive measures aimed at slowing the spread of the virus. These measures collectively mitigate individual and collective consequences to our health social and economic well-being.

Mr. Speaker,

We have bolstered our surveillance strategy to minimize spread and manage the risk of COVID-19,

thereby enabling economic and social activity to resume to the extent possible. Surveillance is also necessary to monitor the longer-term trends of COVID-19 transmission and the changes in the virus. With the onset of this second wave, the precipitous increase in cases with an average of fifteen to twenty contacts per case, our capacities within the Disease Surveillance Unit became quickly exhausted. As a remedy, volunteers were solicited and trained in contact tracing principles with good success. We can now report that sixty-two (62) volunteers now work alongside the seventy-one (71) surveillance and other reassigned health care workers.

Mr. Speaker

Our testing strategy has also expanded with testing priorities clearly articulated to maximise use of scarce resources. All avenues for procurement of additional kits and reagents are being explored recognising the existing global challenge.

Thanks to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the National Reference Laboratory (NRL) can run two sets of 96 samples per day if the samples are prepared with the requisite support. Staff at the NRL, with the help of newly hired staff, have worked arduously to eliminate the previously reported backlogs with sample turnaround time now back to 24 – 48 hours. Data validation is ongoing to ensure that we are well-aware of where we are in this wave.

Currently, there are two (2) GeneXpert machines and one (1) Panther Fusion System being used at the Princess Margaret Hospital to provide diagnostic RT-PCR testing for the COVID-19 virus in the acute care setting. We are also benefitting from private sector laboratory capacities which have now come on stream.

Acute Care

Mr. Speaker

In the early stages of this outbreak, the PMH was designated as the facility for assessment and testing of persons under investigation for COVID, with repurposing of the old General Practice Clinic area for this to occur. Once testing positive, patients requiring admission would be moved to the Doctors Hospital West facility for ongoing care.

With the increasing numbers of persons requiring assessment and care, capacity for care delivery at PMH has become stretched. Our strategy therefore has also included the decompression of our acute care centres and bolstering of their capacity to deliver the services for which they are commissioned. In this regard, we aim to increase acute care bed capacity, increase our lab testing capacity, and fast-track repairs and upgrades to public health facilities,

particularly in New Providence and Grand Bahama. For the COVID-19 response,

- the bed capacity in the Legacy Unit of the Princess Margaret Hospital has been expanded from 4 to 8;
- the capacity at the South Beach Urgent Care and Referral Centre has been designated and repurposed to assess and treat persons with symptoms suggestive of COVID as well as admit mild and moderate cases. This facility can now accommodate 16 beds;
- there are 16 beds at the Cancer Association of The Bahamas (CAB) building in Freeport, Grand Bahama and 7 beds in the Grand Bahama Health Services system; and
- 22 beds at Doctors Hospital West and additional 5 beds at Doctors Hospital East are being used to care for patients with COVID-19;

Mr. Speaker

Just over a week ago, the Prime Minister and I toured the East Wing of Breezes now repurposed to accommodate sixty-one patient care rooms for medical/surgical minimal risk patients. Sixteen patients can be accommodated on the first floor with capacity for additional rooms on the second and third floors. Staff accommodations are on the fourth floor. Each floor has a lounge for nurses and a lounge for physicians. This facility becomes critical to ensuring that PMH hospital beds remain available for the most critically ill.

In summary, the total bed capacity added to the healthcare system since March of this year to augment our acute care capacity is just shy of 100 active beds.

Additionally, the Department of Social Services continues to relocate 30 boarders to appropriate facilities so that the Princess Margaret Hospital will have those beds free for urgent and acute care purposes. Though we have

significantly increased our bed capacity, we continue to explore avenues for increasing our in country nursing capacity to fully maximize our expanded acute care bed capacity.

Mr. Speaker

Inadequacies in health system infrastructure primarily and adversely affect vulnerable population groups by limiting their access to quality care. Consequently, ten million dollars (\$10M) worth of renovations are underway at Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH). This includes -

- the Emergency Department Urgent Care Project Phase A which features a new entrance, enhanced security, isolation rooms, a wound care centre, and the Orthopaedic Departments;
- Agape Family Medical Clinic Expansion;
- Conversion of the Old Operating Theatre Suites into a 19 Bed Inpatient Suite;

- Male Surgical I (15 Beds); and
- Bathrooms in the old ICU, Legacy Unit and Outpatient Department.

Upon completion this month, it is expected that much-needed inpatient beds will be restored to address the overcrowded Princess Margaret Hospital. Additionally, Mr. Speaker, enabling works and renovations to the Emergency Department are ongoing and the public will witness phases of this renovation being completed by years end.

Renovations for the relocation of the orthopaedic and wound care departments are also ongoing. The phase II Metal Roof Replacements program should come on-stream in October 2020.

Mr. Speaker

As our healthcare system responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, restoration efforts required in our northern

islands remain a priority for the Government. Just over twenty-one million dollars (\$21.126M) is being invested for the phased redevelopment of the Rand Memorial Hospital in Grand Bahama. Work is steadily progressing with the demolition, new construction, addition and renovation to the facility. Works cover

- the main entrance, foyer, pharmacy, admissions and paediatrics, which are 80% completed;
- the Medical, Surgical, Step-Down, and Intensive Care Units; which are 65% completed;
- the East Wing, Public Corridor, the Healing Gardens and Chapel; which are 45% completed; and
- the Main Operating Theatre Suites, Post Anesthesia Unit and Central Sterile Supplies Department, which are 95% completed.

Mr. Speaker

Build Health International and Direct Relief have kindly donated the Container Operating Theatre Suites, Post Anaesthesia Unit (PACU), and Central Sterile Supplies Department (CSSD). This project started on 5th March 2020 and is expected to be completed by the end of this month with absolutely no cost to the Government.

As well, **Mr. Speaker**

Just over \$2M are being invested into three projects to bolster the Rand Memorial Hospital COVID-19 Programme. They include:

- the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Unit;
- the Infectious Disease Unit Cancer Association project;
- and
- the completion of the Kitchen Cafeteria.

We expect that these works will be completed and ready for occupancy his month.

By the end of October 2020, renovations to Paediatrics, Pharmacy, Admissions, the Lobby, Doctor's Offices, On-Call and Nurses' Suite, the Morgue and the surrounding corridors and other works for each space are scheduled to be completed.

It is also expected that the much-needed ICU and Step-down Units; the hospital HVAC duct upgrade and expansions; and the repair of eight (8) air handling units of the existing main operating theatre will make progress by the middle of this month, September 2020. **Mr. Speaker**, the Prime Minister toured the Rand Memorial Hospital renovation and reconstruction on Monday and the works are progressing as anticipated.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker

This past Monday while in Grand Bahama the Prime Minister announced relaxation of certain restrictions to facilitate a measured and phased re-opening of the

economy based on health metrics. While I use the word “relaxation”, this is no time to relax or to take our guards down. We will be successful as we collectively and individually commit to doing our part to protect ourselves and those most vulnerable in our society, many on whose shoulders we stand having made significant contributions to our individual and collective well-being in this county.

Mr. Speaker

As we gradually and safely enter the “new normal”, everyone will continue to hear the messages:

- wear your mask properly when in public;
- be aware of your physical distance when around others;
- wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizers when soap and water are unavailable;
- cover your coughs and sneezes with your elbow; and
- frequently clean and disinfect surfaces.

If you travel, do so only if absolutely necessary and

- avoid known hotspots;
- be prepared to pay for the cost of testing; and
- adhere to the quarantine requirement of 14 days when you enter the country or return home from international travel.

Mr. Speaker

May God bless our Bahamas. I commend us to his Divine Favour as I entreat the public to be disciplined, and to safeguard each other. God bless you and may God continue to bless the Commonwealth of the Bahamas

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.