



## **PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT**

### **On the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Delivered by Dr the Honourable Christopher Tuffon, MP**

**Minister of Health and Wellness**

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Madam Speaker, the country has made a significant transition to a new phase of the COVID-19 challenge. This phase is defined as community transmission that has resulted in:

1. Higher numbers of persons being infected with the virus (without a direct link as to where they would have contracted the virus);
2. Higher numbers of severe cases that are in need of hospital care; and
3. Most unfortunately higher numbers of persons dying from complications related to being infected by the virus.

Madam Speaker as we are now in the community transmission phase, we have to recalibrate and rebalance our approach to the management of the pandemic.

Community transmission means that the virus is no longer confined to clusters in the population. Targeted lockdowns are therefore no longer useful. In order to be effective, one would have to lockdown the entire island with devastating consequences on all aspects of our social and economic life.

Madam Speaker, I have often said that every death is regrettable and the Government conveys its condolences to the families of persons who have lost family members, friends and loved ones to this pandemic.

The impacts of the pandemic are far-reaching. The Ministry of Health and Wellness has also taken note of the significant impact that this pandemic is having on persons in the form of:

- Increasing cases of mental illnesses;
- Increased levels of anxiety and stress; and

- Burnout being experienced by members of staff within the health system.

Madam Speaker, it cannot be emphasized enough that we have not experienced such a challenge of this magnitude in our recent history. The staff of the Ministry of Health and Wellness and public health workers have a deep appreciation that we must always be open to change as we seek the best outcome for the people and communities who are directly impacted.

As we make these changes, the Ministry of Health and Wellness will be embarking on a programme to bolster our staff wellbeing as they too are significantly affected by this pandemic. In this regard we have seen the need to enhance our programme for staff welfare. The implementation of this programme will be led directly from my office and I will lead the Ministry, the Regions and Parish in its full implementation. The programme will have 5 components. That is:

1. Human Resource Management
2. Staff Engagement and Communication
3. Rest and Relaxation

#### 4. Covid Support

#### 5. Wellness

Each component will be supported through strong collaboration with the private sector to support the implementation of the 1 year intervention. The total cost of implementation is projected to be some J\$37M in this financial year with an additional J\$37M being requested for FY 2021/22.

Staff burnout is a major impediment to the COVID-19 Fight and as a Ministry we have heard the growing cries for increased intervention; and we must respond. As such this programme will lead to:

1. Mandatory rest days for staff who would have worked excessive ours;
2. Mandatory 48 hour results for staff members who have done COVID-19 tests;
3. Preferential rates in hotels and other facilities to support all staff within the system;
4. Family support and counselling for those that are most impacted by the disease; and

5. Increased engagement and support to management within the regions and parishes to better support staff within the facilities and offices.

Madam speaker to prevent the virus from spreading uncontrollably, Governments around the world have relied on a combination of five key measures:

1. Testing and quarantine;
2. Targeted lockdowns of either outbreak hotspots, communities and even cities;
3. Restrictions on movement and gatherings (such as curfews, limits on gatherings and social activities)
4. Border restrictions for incoming travellers (such as border closures, pretesting, screening and testing on arrival)
5. Changes in behaviour that reduce transmission (such as social distancing, the wearing of masks and handwashing).

We have employed most of these measures to varying degrees in Jamaica and with different levels of success.

Part of the new direction for community transmission must be a refocus on the community. Community involvement at this stage of the pandemic is crucial to;

1. reducing the rate of spread;
2. protecting the most vulnerable; and
3. Increasing coping mechanisms as we all go through this together

Our community engagement strategies must focus on enhancing the mental health of the entire population but especially our elderly persons who are increasingly showing the ill effects of social isolation. Accordingly, the Ministry has developed a plan that will see involvement of key community groups, empowering them to join the COVID fight. We will be engaging groups such as:

1. Churches
2. Non Government Organisations
3. Community Based Organisations
4. Social Clubs such as the Kiwanis and Lions Club
5. Youth Clubs and Youth Organisations

We will be calling on the womens auxillary; the mens fellowship; the football clubs, the police youth clubs, a true all hands on deck so as to ensure that we fight the COVID battle with a full army of persons to ensure our success.

While we look for increased support from our partners we will continue to build our cadre of persons within the health system:

1. We have already employed the additional 121 doctors needed;
2. We are in the process of engaging all newly graduate nurses for employment within the public system;
3. We have started the process of employing additional nurses from the Cuban Brigade;
4. Of the approved 1,400 additional Community health aides, we have engaged approximately 700 and will be concluding the employment of the balance of these personnel by December 2020
5. 421 additional Public Health Inspectors will be added to the cadre of persons who will monitor and supervise the protocols in facilities and work places; and

6. Approximately 1,200 additional Patient Care Assistants will be engaged to support the care of patients in facilities

Madam Speaker taking personal responsibility at this stage is critical. Personal responsibility means several things. Firstly it means adhering to the measures that have been announced, but it also means looking out for the persons who are most at risk. It means ensuring that our parents and grandparents are guarded against infection and building their coping mechanisms to deal with the increasing levels of stress.

Madam speaker, personal responsibility means that we hold others accountable for actions that impact on our own safety. If you see a place that is not adhering to the gathering protocols, do not enter that establishment and instead - report them. If you are taking a bus or taxi that is not adhering to the rules, don't enter and report them. As a country we must now more than ever understand that personal responsibility also means being our brothers keeper.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Health and Wellness has announced that we are expanding our testing to include the use of antigen tests following WHO/PAHO approval. Antigen testing will be for persons who are symptomatic and will be done at suitable sites and approved laboratories. The implementation of the antigen testing will be piloted at major hospitals, health centres and at the National Public Health Lab. While the PCR test remains the gold standard, the antigen test achieves a high degree of reliability at a fraction of the cost with results being available within 30 minutes.

We will also be assessing and approving private laboratories to conduct COVID-19 testing. It is extremely important, however, that the Ministry has full visibility of all the test results. All private labs conducting testing will therefore be mandated to report the results to the Ministry.

Regarding our border restrictions under our Controlled Entry Programme, Madam Speaker, we have to streamline the process and increase efficiency so as to facilitate timely processing of much larger numbers of applicants under the Programme.

Cabinet is now contemplating the pretesting requirement for visitors, that is persons who are not residents of Jamaica, will be maintained. However, consistent with the local acceptance of antigen testing, the pretesting requirement may be modified to permit both PCR and antigen tests. Mr. Speaker, this should make it easier for visitors – both tourists and our Jamaican diaspora – to meet the pretesting requirement as antigen tests are much more readily available and are faster and cheaper than PCR tests.

Madam Speaker, we are now several months into the pandemic and the scientific evidence globally is overwhelming and clear. It is clear that social distancing works; it is clear that the wearing of masks is effective in reducing spread; it is clear that washing and sanitizing your hands kills the virus.

Given that we are now in the community transmission phase, you have to assume that everyone you come into contact with could be carrying the virus. This means each citizen must take responsibility for their own protection by employing

these measures. We need each citizen to understand that they have the ability, through their behaviour, to influence their own risk and that of those they come in contact with. We will be ramping up our public education campaign to increase public awareness.

Madam Speaker, in addition to social distancing, wearing a mask and sanitising, I urge all Jamaicans to pursue healthy lifestyles and boost their immune systems by eating healthy, exercising regularly and maintaining a healthy weight. Evidence has shown that persons with strengthened immune systems are better able to fight the virus even if infected.

Madam Speaker, we will also be ramping up enforcement. The Prime Minister has asked that the Ministry of National Security and the Ministry of Justice to collaborate to develop a ticketing system for enforcement of these measures by the police. We recognize that Covid fatigue is setting in and there is increased resistance and discontent towards the measures among some persons. Now is not the time for persons to let down their guard. Rather we must individually and collectively redouble our commitment to comply with

the measures. Even while we will look at enforcement mechanisms and other technologies that can assist in controlling the spread; voluntary compliance is deemed to be far more effective and less onerous.

Madam Speaker, I want the Jamaican people to understand that until a safe and effective vaccine is developed and widely available, the only sustainable way for us to protect both our lives and livelihoods is to learn to go about our normal everyday activities but to do so in a safe and responsible manner. The more people comply with the measures, the faster we will control the spread and be able to loosen the restrictions and get our economy to full productive capacity.

I thank you.