



**Parliamentary Statement**  
**COVID-19 Mental Health Response Programme**  
**Delivered by Dr. the Hon. Christopher Tufton, MP**  
**Minister of Health & Wellness**  
**Tuesday, October 6, 2020 at 2:00 p.m.**

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Madame Speaker, we have seen over recent weeks the detrimental impact that COVID-19 can have on our mental health and overall sense of well-being.

In the general population, we hear of the elevated levels of fear, anxiety and loneliness from children and parents who access the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Clinics. They admit to feeling overwhelmed and not being able to manage the demands of online schooling. We also hear of the stressors associated with the financial challenges that have accompanied the pandemic, such as among tourism workers in the West.

Our health care workers, too, are coming under significant strain and with potentially negative implications for their mental health. At the UHWI, for example, the COVID-19 team is working seven days straight for 12 hours minimum. Our Registered and Specialist Nurses are doing, on average, 16 extra hours per week. Those in residential COVID-19 facilities live in for up to 14 days without rotation.

Madame Speaker, the Ministry of Health and Wellness has heard and is intent on making the necessary interventions to arrest the problem, understanding what is at stake in the effort to ensure the best possible health outcomes for all as we face down COVID-19.

It should be noted that since the start of the pandemic, the Ministry has been alert to the mental health challenges that can arise from having people in quarantine or isolated from family and friends, to say nothing of the



economic challenges that can come with a pandemic of this scale and the stress faced by health care workers responding to the demands of the various public health interventions.

We know that isolation and loneliness during any pandemic presents specific mental health risks for teenagers and the elderly and the Ministry has been monitoring these vulnerable groups, as part of our overall COVID-19 response.

Madame Speaker, there is no doubt that the pandemic is affecting the mental health of many people. Data out of the United States show that some 53% of adults report that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the pandemic.

We are already aware, through the Mental Health and Homelessness Task Force Report that I commissioned in 2017 that one in four Jamaicans may develop a mental illness at some point during their lifetime.

As the number of COVID-19 cases and related deaths increase, the Ministry is anticipating that the prevalence of mental illness will also increase. The Ministry notes with specific interest the increased impact of the mental health challenge on our elderly population who are having greater levels of anxiety due in part to the fact that the death rate among their population is 10 times that of the young.

This is coupled with the fact that their usual visits, social engagements, the connections of church, the connections of social gatherings and other mental health coping mechanisms have been removed. This poses significant challenge to their ability to manage their mental health outcomes.

All of these challenges require immediate and comprehensive interventions to prevent the dual scourge of COVID-19 and mental illness. As such,



Madame Speaker, I am announcing today the **COVID-19 Mental Health Response Programme**.

The aim of the programme is to mitigate the progression of mental health issues that have or are otherwise anticipated to emerge, resulting from COVID-19. The intention is to provide community-based support, creating ease of access to mental health services through community engagement and mass media education to promote mental health and prevent mental illness.

The philosophy is the fact ‘all hands on deck’; and therefore the strategy integrates all socio-economic groups within the society using all media to reach, engage and support the most vulnerable.

The first component of the programme will focus on increasing the skill set of our health care workers and community volunteers to include Psychological First Aid so that they are better equipped to respond to mental health issues within communities. We are to be supported in this effort by key partners, including the Jamaica Red Cross and the Pan-American Health Organisation.

The programme will also feature targeted community interventions, notably a volunteer service that provides vulnerable community members with assistance with day-to-day tasks, including the purchase of groceries and the filling of prescriptions.

Madame Speaker, the Ministry of Health and Wellness will also organise neighbourly check-ins and provide special transport services for the elderly as they go out to get the essentials of life.

These and other initiatives will be supported by a media and community engagement campaign, which will seek to create greater public awareness of the issue of mental health within the context of COVID-19.



I wish, Madame Speaker, to assure the public that the Ministry of Health and Wellness is prioritising COVID-19-related mental health issues and will endeavour to make the required resources available to support the programme.

The programme will be supported by a \$20-million budget that will be utilised in the administration and coordination of all elements of the intervention.

Of course, we cannot do it alone. I am, therefore, urging community stakeholders and private sector partners to come alongside the Ministry to ensure the success of this most important effort.

Madame Speaker, I also urge members of the public who may be experiencing anxiety or other mental health challenges to access our mental health support services. To do so, they can call the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Helpline at 888-NEW-LIFE (639-5433). We have counsellors available to serve you.

In closing, Madame Speaker, I want to affirm the commitment of the Ministry of Health and Wellness and the entire public health team to create greater resilience among our people as we face down this pandemic as a united Jamaican family.

Thank you.

**Dr. the Hon. Christopher Tufton, MP**  
**Minister of Health & Wellness**