

PM Encourages Jamaicans to Take COVID-19 Vaccine

AS THE Government continues to roll out its coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccination programme, Prime Minister the Most Hon. Andrew Holness is again encouraging Jamaicans to take the vaccine when it becomes available to them.

"The vaccine is safe; get vaccinated...it is important for your personal health, it is important for the public good, meaning if we reach this herd immunity level of vaccination, we can go back to normalcy, open our economy, and party and church can keep," he said.

The Prime Minister, who was addressing a virtual Vaccination Town Hall on March 19, pointed out that vaccination is not new to Jamaica, recalling that "we all got vaccinated (as children) and we are all still here today and the better for it".

"The fears of vaccination, I believe especially given the situation with this pandemic, are to a large degree unfounded, because we have our own history to rely on. Indeed, with new births in the island, it is our public health requirement



Prime Minister the Most Hon. Andrew Holness speaking at a virtual Town Hall meeting on vaccines held on March 19. At left is Director of Family Services, Ministry of Health and Wellness, Dr. Melody Ennis.

that they are vaccinated for various diseases and that goes on almost on a daily basis... and we have had no significant or concerning adverse event from vaccination," he said.

He noted further that over the years, the science behind the

development of various vaccines has improved tremendously and the regulatory oversight "both in terms of the medical professional oversight and the governmental oversight has gotten much better."

During his contribution to the 2021/22 Budget Debate in the House of representatives on March 18, Mr. Holness advised that he will receive his vaccine during the phase of the exercise targeting front-line Public Sector workers.

Fitch Affirms Jamaica's Rating at B+, Outlook Remains Stable

FITCH RATINGS Agency, on March 18, affirmed Jamaica's long-term foreign-currency issuer default rating at 'B+' with the outlook remaining stable.

According to a release from the Ministry of Finance and the Public Service, the rating action by Fitch reflected:

- A favourable business climate according to the World Bank Doing Business Survey;
- The expectation that Jamaica will be one of the few Fitch-rated sovereigns to post a primary surplus for the fiscal year;
- A financing plan in which 70 per cent of the Government's funding requirements will be sourced locally; and
- A targeted fiscal surplus for financial year 2021/22 supported by the one-off dividend payment of \$33 billion from the Bank of Jamaica.

Fitch expects the economy to grow by 4.5 per cent in 2021 and 5.2 per cent in 2022, underpinned by a smooth vaccine roll out; the mitigation of a possible third wave of the virus and the gradual return to



Minister of Finance and the Public Service, Dr. the Hon. Nigel Clarke

normalcy in the tourism industry.

Additionally, Fitch projects debt-to-Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to be 110.9% at the end of the financial year 2020/21, an uptick from the 94.8% recorded at end financial year 2019/20.

In his response, Portfolio Minister, Dr. the Hon. Nigel Clarke, said "the decision by international credit rating agency, Fitch, to maintain Jamaica's credit rating at B+ and their affirmation of Jamaica's outlook as "stable", in the middle of the worst economic crisis in our history, is strong evidence of the value and benefit of good policy."

NHT Extends Cash Refund for Public Sector Workers

THE NATIONAL Housing Trust (NHT) is to extend the cash refund granted to public sector workers to April 2022.

This was announced by Prime Minister the Most Hon. Andrew Holness during his contribution to the 2021/22 Budget Debate in the House of Representatives on March 18.

Since 2016, some 26,300 public sector mortgagors have been receiving their contribution refund in cash, annually. This cash refund is unlike what obtains for regular mortgagors whose contribution refund is paid directly to their NHT mortgage accounts.

"When this provision was initially established, it was based on the economic situ-



Prime Minister the Most Hon. Andrew Holness

ation, which resulted in a wage freeze under the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between public sector workers and the Government," Mr. Holness said.

"In my 2018/19 budget presentation, I spoke of extending the cash refund granted by the NHT to eligible public sector workers and indicated that the period of extension would end this year, 2021," he said.

He noted, however, that with the impact of COVID-19, such an extension is needed once again.

Also, as part of the COVID-19 effort, the NHT will allow persons who have been unemployed for a period of 12 months or more, to access their contribution refund one year in advance.

"Therefore, if the contributor's refund is due for the year 2013 and that contributor has

lost his/her job due to the pandemic, the contributor could access their refund for 2013, but they could also access, their refund for 2014. The proposed implementation date for this initiative is July 2021. The initiative will expire in July 2022," Mr. Holness said.

Persons 75 Years and Older Can Get Appointments for COVID-19 Vaccines as of Today

MINISTER OF Health and Wellness, Dr. the Hon. Christopher Tufton, says as of March 22, persons 75 years and older will be able to set appointments to receive COVID-19 vaccines by calling the 888-ONE-LOVE telephone number.

Dr. Tufton was speaking at the signing of a Vaccine Implementation contract with itelbpo smart solutions on March 18 at the offices of the Ministry of Health and Wellness in New Kingston.

"We start with the 75 years and over, so if you're 75 years old and over... come Monday [today], you call this number (888-663-5683) and you will get on the other end, a response," Dr. Tufton said.

Persons or their caregivers may also book directly online via the Ministry's website at <https://www.moh.gov.jm>; call or visit their parish Health Department or local



Minister of Health and Wellness, Dr. the Hon. Christopher Tufton (left), signs a contract with Founder and Chief Executive Officer, itelbpo smart solutions, Yoni Epstein, on March 18, at the offices of the Ministry of Health and Wellness in New Kingston.

health centre; or call or visit their private doctor.

Regarding the contract, itelbpo will be responsible for providing outsourced call-in assistance services for those who require help with registration for vaccination appointments across the island.

This adds to an agreement that was signed recently with UNICEF regarding the software platform that will allow persons to register online and to provide two-way information for clarity to be brought to the appointment and follow-up processes.

Vaccines for Current and Former Cabinet Ministers and Parliamentarians



Minister of Industry, Investment and Commerce, Hon. Audley Shaw, is given his COVID-19 vaccine by Public Health Nurse at the Kingston and St. Andrew Health Department, Stacy Rennalls, on March 16 at the Office of the Prime Minister.

MSMEs to Benefit from Capacity-Building Interventions

MICRO, SMALL and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) operating in the food industry are among stakeholders to benefit from capacity-building interventions, including improved market access, under the National Certification Body of Jamaica (NCBJ) Food Safety Management System Expansion Project.

Funded by the European Union (EU), the initiative, which was officially launched

during a virtual ceremony on March 17, seeks to improve the local eco-system in support of agro-business growth and to improve the capacity of MSMEs to export.

It will address the immediate capacity-building needs of the NCBJ and, by extension, benefit food businesses/food chain operators locally and those in the export market.

The project targets MSMEs across the agricul-

ture and agro-business value chain, food manufacturers and food safety practitioners, including auditors, and technical experts, among others.

In addition, under the project, the NCBJ will now offer International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 22000 Food Safety Management System certification.

This system outlines food safety requirements for any organisation in the food chain.

Minister of Industry, Investment and Commerce, Hon. Audley Shaw, who addressed the ceremony, welcomed the project, noting that it will serve to "foster the creation of an enabling institutional environment to support the agricultural and agro-business export sectors, in line with our National Export Strategy and the National Food Safety Implementation Plan Policy".

The NCBJ will now offer International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 22000 Food Safety Management System certification.

Mr. Shaw said the project will also serve to reduce the cost of doing business and increase market penetration as MSMEs utilise their certified safety management systems to open

doors regionally and navigate regional trade barriers with improved standing in CARICOM.

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