



Ministry of
Labour and Social Security

SECTORAL DEBATE

2023 | APRIL 26
GORDON HOUSE



Honourable Karl Samuda, OJ, CD, MP
Minister of Labour and Social Security
CREATIVITY | INNOVATION | TEAM WORK



**REINFORCING
A CULTURE**
OF PRODUCTIVITY, INDUSTRIAL
HARMONY AND HUMAN
CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT



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Madam Speaker, and colleague Parliamentarians, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security is committed to the Vision of delivering quality labour and social protection services using modern technology, international best practices and sound advice to satisfy our clients and promote their social and economic empowerment.

The events of the last three years have underscored the critical role that this Ministry plays in providing opportunity, stability and social protection. As the country continues to rebound from the effects of the pandemic, we are redoubling our efforts to respond to the increasing demands for social protection, local and overseas employment opportunities as well as the promotion of industrial harmony.

STRATEGIC FOCUS: PRIORITIES AND OBJECTIVES

Madam Speaker, for the 2023/2024 fiscal year, in keeping with the Government's national strategic priorities, the Ministry has identified 5 Strategic Priorities that will guide our activities over the next twelve months.

Madam Speaker, I have said before that, my Ministry's portfolio is essentially customer-oriented. Service excellence and committed leadership in customer service delivery are our most critical and urgent priority. We must therefore deliver services to our clients with the right attitude, in a more timely and efficient manner if we are to truly meet their needs.

Madam Speaker, we will be taking bold steps to enforce these standards as our new normal over the next twelve months.

We will continue to provide social protection services to

the vulnerable groups within our population, and seek to expand the range of these services, ensuring that we take every possible step to identify the individuals and families who are in need of those services. In so doing, we will work more closely with the elected representatives.

We will expand our efforts to promote the transitioning of our informal labour force to formality, for the protection and benefit of these workers and the economy as a whole.

As we work assiduously with employers and employees to foster industrial harmony within the labour market, we will take the necessary steps to improve employment services, productivity and labour market information.

ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE

Generally, using the Approved Estimates of Expenditure for FY 2022/2023, the Ministry's Budget for Financial Year 2023/2024 has increased from \$14.219b to \$16.977b. This represents an increase of \$2.758 billion or 16.24% over the Financial Year 2022/2023.

An estimated \$2.4 billion was paid in one-off grants to approximately 236,000 beneficiaries during the fiscal year. These included:

- \$1.6 billion in Back-to-School Assistance to 160,000 PATH beneficiary students
- \$523 million to 52,000 NIS pensioners and a further \$189 million to just under 19,000 persons neither registered on PATH nor the National Insurance Scheme, and
- A further \$47.6 million to 4700 children and other Persons with Disabilities



ACHIEVEMENTS LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Madam Speaker, in the area of legislation, the Ministry is working on 3 priority Bills:

- The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA)

Madam Speaker, the protection and promotion of health and safety in the workplace is of paramount importance and as you are aware, an Occupational Safety and Health Bill was before the Parliament and being considered by a Joint Select Committee before the Parliament was dissolved in 2020. There were extensive comments and it was determined that a new Bill incorporating these comments should be prepared.

Madam Speaker, we now have a first draft of a new Bill. Revised drafting instructions were sent to the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel and while we await a second Draft Bill, the Ministry continues to work assiduously with a view to having the Bill finalized and ultimately submitted to Parliament for its deliberations.

When enacted, OSHA will apply to all workplaces and to all workers, including persons whose employment status is classified as independent contractors, and workers in both the formal and informal economies.

- The Employment Agencies Regulation Act, 1957
Jamaica ratified the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, (MLC 2006) in 2014. This Convention establishes the basic rights of seafarers to decent work. In particular, as it relates to the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the Convention establishes standards that are to be adhered to in the recruitment and placement of seafarers in employment. The Ministry

will therefore be amending the Employment Agencies Regulation Act, 1957, to give effect to the standards established by the Convention, thereby ensuring employment protection for our seafarers.

- Amendment to the Minimum Wage Act, National Minimum Wage Order and Employment Agencies Regulation Act

Madam Speaker, Jamaica continues to progressively realize the goal of achieving decent work for all workers, with particular attention paid to the most vulnerable workers in society. Consequently, Jamaica ratified the Domestic Workers Convention (C 189) in 2016. The Convention establishes standards to ensure the effective promotion and protection of the rights of domestic workers.

In keeping with Jamaica's obligation under the Convention, the Ministry is working to amend the Minimum Wage Act, the National Minimum Wage Order and the Employment Agencies Regulation Act to secure compliance with the Convention and to strengthen the protection of domestic workers and other minimum wage earners.

21ST CENTURY DIGITIZATION FOR EFFICIENCY: THE WORK PERMIT SYSTEM

Madam Speaker, the Ministry processes applications for Work Permits and Work Permit Exemptions from Foreign and Commonwealth nationals who are desirous of engaging in employment activities in Jamaica.



Work Permit Applications and Approvals

During the 2022/2023 Fiscal Year, we received 4,855 applications. Of this, 1,843 were from new Work Permit applicants, while 2,246 were renewed Work Permit applications. Of the remaining 766 applications, 599 were for Work Permit Exemptions, while 167 were for Marriage Exemptions. We also processed 187 CSME Skills Certificate applications and 11 Rights of Establishment applications.

The New Work Permit System

Madam Speaker, the processing time for Work Permits and exemptions continues to be a cause for concern for some. The average processing time for applications that meet all the requirements is 6-8 weeks. The process is heavily paper-based and inefficient. The Ministry is therefore replacing its existing Legacy Work Permit System with a new web-based, mobile-friendly Work Permit and Skills Certificate Management System.

Madam Speaker, this new system represents one of the most decisive steps to digitize more of our processes for increased efficiency and ultimately, increased customer satisfaction. The new system will facilitate investment in identified areas of need, since it will be informed by Labour Market Intelligence including training and certification needs, which is desperately needed to close the skills gaps in the local economy. It will be safe, secure, efficient, business-friendly, and client-focused, and it will facilitate the complete reengineering of our Work Permit business process.

The new system comes at a cost of US\$927,000 and is scheduled to be completed in October 2023.

SUSTAINING A HARMONIOUS LABOUR RELATIONS CLIMATE

Industrial Relations

Madam Speaker, during the Financial Year 2022/2023 we experienced a relatively turbulent industrial relations climate. In addition to the usual flow of activity, several critical Public Sector entities, including the National Water Commission, the Jamaica Civil Aviation Authority, PICA, National Housing Trust, teachers represented by the JTA, Jamaica Urban Transit Company, and the Registrar General's Department staged industrial action. Our industrial relations machinery was able to stymie, and in most instances, avert or reduce, the longevity of industrial unrest.

Madam Speaker, we have observed that these challenges were not confined to our beautiful island: but several countries globally, had similar challenges with their public service entities. Given the unprecedented demand for the Ministry's industrial relations and related services, we have responded by revisiting the existing structures in order to ensure that we are more responsive and efficient in providing support to both workers and employers. This move also supports the planned expansion of the General Compliance Inspectorate to ensure adherence to the Decent Work agenda in Jamaica.

Over the past year, issues affecting the Industrial Security Sector came into sharp focus. **Madam Speaker**, we are pleased to report that there is now a greater level of stability and structure in the sector. Approximately 85% of Industrial Security Guards now have formal employment contracts that guarantee all the rights of a worker. We are cognizant that there remains disquiet in some companies, and therefore, **Madam Speaker**, I



am committing that the Ministry's Industrial Relations team will follow through to ensure that every worker's complaint is adequately addressed.

This sector makes a significant contribution to national security and therefore we must ensure security of tenure for these workers; the Industrial Security Guards. I expect the Joint Industrial Council - being a bipartite body - will be embraced by the JCTU and the Jamaica Association of Private Security Companies.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry continued its public sensitization on labour relations through our radio programme and quarterly islandwide roadshows. We have taken information on labour laws directly to the people, including micro and small business operators, and to workers in remote communities.

During Workers Week 2022 the Ministry recognized the contributions of 30 stalwarts that have given yeoman service in the field of Labour Relations and I am proud to say, **Madam Speaker**, that we completed the Workers Monument in downtown Kingston by mounting on it, the bust of activist, Ms. Aggie Bernard. This year, our Workers' Week celebration will include recognition of the 85th Anniversary of the establishment of the Labour Department.

We envision that, like the past year, this year will also be an active one in the Industrial Relations arena. Accordingly, we have put necessary measures in place to limit – as much as possible – any disquiet in the labour landscape; **Madam Speaker**, this Ministry will do everything in its power to maintain industrial harmony during the new fiscal year.

Occupational Safety and Health Rehabilitation Programme

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to report that throughout the tumultuous period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry's Occupational Safety and Health team has worked diligently to preserve the safety and health of workers in all sectors. We have consistently surpassed our targets for inspections, accident investigations and outreach in a bid to reduce the occurrence of serious and fatal industrial accidents.

Madam Speaker, while we applaud the increase in construction projects island-wide, there have been some significant shortcomings on the part of contractors and developers in maintaining safe systems of work to prevent occurrences of accidents and injuries.

In response, **Madam Speaker**, the Ministry implemented a vigorous strategy for promoting increased awareness and compliance with safety and health regulations across industries with particular emphasis on high-risk factories and construction projects. This strategy resulted in a 33% increase in the monitoring and inspection rate for construction projects in the 2021/2022 Fiscal Year.

For the just concluded Financial Year 22/23, this revised strategy, coupled with an increase in the staff complement, resulted in a further increase of 17% in the number of inspections in the construction industry.

Over the past year, the Ministry received reports of one hundred and ninety-two (192) accidents, compared to 221 in the previous year. Of this figure, one hundred-and-forty-one (141) accidents occurred in factories, as against 174 last year. Accidents at construction projects decreased by one (1) from 43 to forty-two (42).



However, reported accidents on the docks more than doubled, moving from 4 in 2021/2022 to nine (9) in the 2022/2023 period: this is a cause for concern.

Madam Speaker, the number of reported fatalities was reduced from the previous year's figure of seven (7) to three (3); one (1) occurred at a factory, one (1) at a construction project and the other at a dock.

Madam Speaker, I must emphasize that although there has been a reduction in the fatality rate across industries, we at this Ministry are certainly not satisfied with the numbers. We maintain that "One fatal accident is one too many". I am therefore imploring all employers, developers, contractors and workers to play their part to properly manage hazards and the associated risks within the workplace.

Madam Speaker, this Ministry continues to work with unrelenting determination to create an enabling environment that promotes and protects the safety and health of workers.

SOCIAL PROTECTION STRATEGIES

Programme of Advancement through Health and Education (PATH)

Madam Speaker, the Government remains committed to providing Social Protection to Jamaican families through the Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education (PATH). In the 2022/2023 Financial Year, the Ministry provided income support of \$9.5 billion to 130,000 families. Of this amount, approximately \$2 billion was spent on Back-to-School grants for PATH students.

We increased the value of cash grants under the Programme by an average of 18.6% and as a result, some \$ 8.3 billion has been allocated in the 2023/2024 budget for benefit payments to families. We are not stopping there: a further \$458 million has been provided to assist children from PATH households to access post-secondary and Bachelor's Degree programmes in order to advance their education, improve their employability and by extension, break the inter-generational cycle of poverty.

Madam Speaker, I want to speak directly to the parents and guardians of children who are receiving assistance through PATH. Use all of the money you receive from PATH to support your children. Take them to the health centres for their check-ups and send them to school every day so that they can be healthy and educated. Help your children to advance in life and secure brighter futures.

Madam Speaker, Members of this Honourable House, we are mindful of the concerns that have been expressed as it relates to delays in conducting verification visits to families to complete their enrolment on the PATH Programme. The Ministry has been constrained by the limited number of social workers and the challenge of retaining workers, arising from remuneration issues. With the Compensation Review now completed, the Ministry is now in a better position to offer more attractive salary packages, especially to our social workers. We are taking steps to urgently fill the vacant social worker positions and dispatch them to the field to conduct the PATH and other investigations.



The Rehabilitation Programme

Madam Speaker, the Government of Jamaica is committed to addressing the Social Protection needs of the most vulnerable Jamaicans: those among us who earn so little that they are unable to take care of their financial obligations that come with certain shocks, such as funeral expenses, natural or man-made disasters, citizens who cannot find work, those who cannot work due to sickness, disability, old age, or because they are tasked with the care of children and sick or older relatives; families that have lost a breadwinner and those who have lost the means of making their own livelihoods through a variety of circumstances.

Although the pandemic has subsided, the financial needs of many Jamaicans continue to escalate beyond their capacity to cope. Through the Rehabilitation Programme, the Ministry provides a range of grants to address some of the urgent financial needs that are related to these circumstances, such as:

- i. Grants that provide support for small or micro income-generating projects
- ii. Compassionate Grants to assist with urgent medical and funeral expenses
- iii. Emergency assistance to victims of disaster with the provision of cash grants and in-kind support such as food, toiletries and bedding, and
- iv. Education and Social Intervention Grants to help cover school related expenses.

For the first eleven months of the 2022/2023 Fiscal year, the Rehabilitation Programme spent approximately \$253 million in grants, assisting 5,648 families.

In addition, **Madam Speaker**, under the Special Economic Relief Programme (SERP) we delivered grant payments totaling \$169m to just under seventeen

thousand (16,903) persons who were not registered under the Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education (PATH). These persons were identified at the Constituency level as facing severe economic hardship.

Major Plans for 2023/2024

Madam Speaker, for the upcoming year, we have identified a number of strategic priorities to strengthen our delivery of services. A critical first step will be to strengthen, or should I say improve, the level of collaboration with the peoples' representatives - my Parliamentary colleagues. We will therefore be undertaking a review of the policies governing the Rehabilitation Programme to make it more flexible and responsive.

Additionally, in the coming weeks each MP will receive the name and contact details for a social worker that has been assigned to their area. **Madam Speaker**, the intention to ensure that we work more closely to identify and assist the most needy in our society.

We continue to collaborate with our international partner agency, the World Food Programme (WFP), to strengthen our Disaster Risk Management capabilities in the presence of multiple environmental threats such as hurricanes, flooding and pandemics. In tandem with this, we will overhaul our logistic Inventory Management System at our Central Foods (Warehouse) to facilitate more rapid distribution of Emergency Relief Supplies, and finally we will establish a digitized payment platform for the delivery of cash grants under the Rehabilitation Programme.

Madam Speaker, we are on a mission to increase the socio-economic resilience of the most vulnerable in Jamaica.



The Social Pension Programme

- **Madam Speaker**, the Ministry launched the Social Pension Programme for elderly persons 75 years and older in July 2021. We are happy to report that as of March 2023, 12,000 elderly persons who had no pension support are now benefitting under the programme.
- We are aware that some eligible seniors have been experiencing difficulty registering on the programme, owing to the lack of documentation. **Madam Speaker**, through a collaboration with the Registrar General's Department, the Ministry will be assisting 2,000 elderly persons to obtain their birth certificates.
- **Madam Speaker**, permit me to speak directly to my elderly brothers and sisters who need assistance: if you are 75 years or older and you are not receiving a pension or an allowance from the Government, please accept my personal invitation to apply for assistance under the Social Pension Programme. The budgetary provision is in place. Don't shy away from registering. Get in touch with your MLSS parish office and we will provide the necessary support.

ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET INTERVENTIONS

Madam Speaker, this Ministry remains committed to the vision of providing employment opportunities for the Jamaican people, and to ensuring that the Jamaican workforce can effectively compete in any job market.

Our Active Labour Market programmes are therefore designed to deliver interventions that promote the social and economic empowerment of job seekers.

Social Intervention Programme

- **Madam Speaker**, the Social Intervention Programme (SIP) maintains its objective of empowering the country's youth by providing them with sustainable employment opportunities, facilitating on-the-job Training and nurturing a culture of self-reliance through education and entrepreneurship support.
- For the Financial Year 2022-2023, 530 youths were placed in short-term employment with various private sector companies, for periods of 6 months each, allowing them to gain valuable work experience and earn an income. 33% of these young people come from households supported by PATH.
- **Madam Speaker**, these young people are the future and the Ministry is deeply indebted to the numerous organizations that participated and collaborated with us to lift our young people from a state of welfare, from the lures of crime, and into being productive citizens.
- In addition to the employment component, the Social Intervention Programme includes an Entrepreneurial and Education assistance component that emphasizes community service among participants.
- **Madam Speaker**, for the period April 2022 to March 2023, 345 youths were assisted to achieve their education goals, through Education Assistance Grants totalling \$44.4 million. 72% of this funding



provided tertiary education support, with the remainder going to other post-secondary education and skills training.

- Additionally, **Madam Speaker**, the Skills Training initiative under this programme currently provides assistance to 627 persons from PATH households to pursue Skills Certification through a partnership with HEART/NSTA Trust and pays them a stipend to cover transportation and other training-related costs for the duration of the training period: This, **Madam Speaker**, is moving our people from welfare to well-being.

- The programme provided Entrepreneurial Grants totalling \$69.4 million to 457 persons from PATH households enabling them to start or expand micro-business ventures, and thereby gain a sense of independence.

- **Madam Speaker**, for the new financial year, we will implement a number of outreach programmes targeting employers for the placement of more youths in employment. Through this programme, while the Government provides funding to help our young people to pursue economic and educational opportunities, we will continue to encourage the spirit of volunteerism by emphasizing their need to give back when they have benefited.

Electronic Labour Exchange/Labour Market Information System

Madam Speaker, the number of job seekers placed in employment through the Electronic Labour Exchange (ELE) increased by 28% for the 2022/2023 Fiscal Year with 973 placements, compared to 758 for the corresponding period in 2021/ 2022. This brings to 7,700

the number of persons who have gained employment through the Labour Market Information System (LMIS) since its deployment in 2013.

Madam Speaker, the skills shortage which many employers experienced immediately following the pandemic quickly became an imperative for the Ministry, and the ELE carefully crafted a number of strategies to identify and recruit candidates to assist employers to fill their skills gaps.

During the past year, the ELE expanded its operations into the execution of a number of customized job fairs. Employers in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), hospitality, security and fast-food industries were the main users of this service. These efforts resulted in a 64% increase in the number of job fairs held, moving from 17 in 2021/22 to 28 in 2022/23.

The team increased its networking at the community level, with training institutions and MDAs as well as increased the use of social media, to target specific groups, such as tertiary graduates and persons with skill-sets in high demand. Through these efforts, we have been able to provide job-matching to a number of previously under-served groups such as Persons with Disabilities and Domestic Workers.

We also provided Employability Skills Training and subsequent Job Placements for scores of at-risk youth, many of them from PATH households, or residents of the Zones of Special Operations (ZOSOs). This is significant, **Madam Speaker**: at-risk youth is a demographic group that often faces significant barriers to employment.



Port Maria Arcade cheque handover that happened in March 2022

Madam Speaker, the outlook for the upcoming fiscal year is very bright. The Ministry will be investing in continuous improvement of the LMIS to further advance its capabilities and better serve the public. One specific area of focus will be the upgrading of the LMIS website to enable faster processing and improved navigability for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs).

The upgrade will enable linkages with databases maintained by other departments in the Ministry as well as external partners, such as the HEART/NSTA Trust. Other areas of focus, **Madam Speaker**, will include incorporation of social media networks, provision of video conferencing to facilitate job interviews and the virtual conduct of Employability Skills Training.

Overseas Employment

Madam Speaker, during the 2022 Calendar Year the Ministry placed 16,406 workers in employment overseas. Approximately 62% of workers were placed in jobs in Canada, while 38% were placed in the United States.

9,466 workers were employed under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme (SAWP) while 627 were employed under the low-skill programmes in Canada in 2022.

6,192 Jamaicans were placed in seasonal employment in the United States, with 4,805 in agriculture and 1,387 in the hospitality sector.



Madam Speaker, as more countries turn to the global supply of labour as a means of satisfying their labour shortages, it is critical that Jamaica positions itself to remain competitive in providing qualified workers, capable of fulfilling the needs of the labour market.

The Ministry's Overseas Employment team has redoubled its efforts to identify a supply of workers who are committed to upholding the legacy of hard work, high productivity and reliability for which the Jamaican worker has come to be known over the years.

Against the backdrop of these principles, **Madam Speaker**, the Ministry has introduced a number of new initiatives to expand the Overseas Employment Programme and promote its growth. First, we have taken steps to engage additional overseas recruitment agents, to market the Jamaican worker to new employers and seek opportunities in new areas.

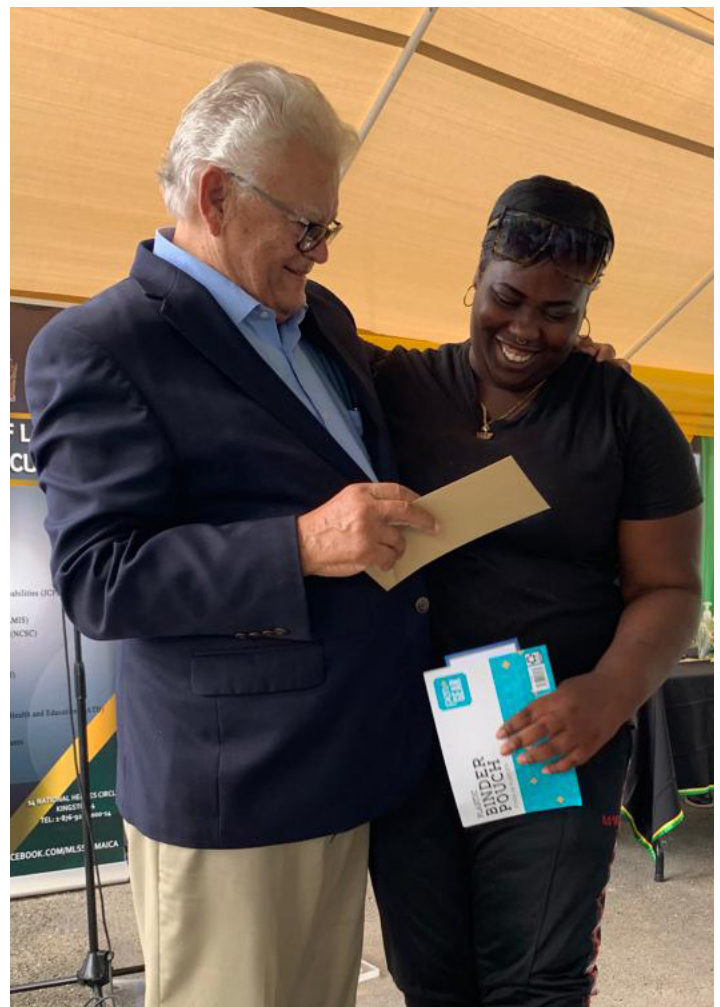
In this regard, **Madam Speaker**, the Ministry recently engaged two new recruitment agents in the United States. Through these new partnerships we are expecting to see the processing of additional agricultural and hospitality workers in the short to medium term.

Madam Speaker, late last year the programme came in for intense criticism both in Jamaica and Canada amidst allegations of human rights abuses and exploitation of workers. Much of the negative publicity surrounded reports of inhumane treatment and substandard working and living conditions being experienced by workers.

I came under heavy criticism for defending what I had observed when I visited prior, and so to ensure that what I had seen wasn't just the good parts that persons

wanted a Minister to see, I appointed an independent seven-member fact-finding team, consisting of worker representatives, employer representatives and social researchers, who travelled to Canada to conduct research into the working and living conditions of Jamaican Farm Workers.

I am happy to report that I have now received the report which will be tabled in this Honourable House.



Port Maria Arcade cheque handover that happened in March 2022



The Employment Agencies Unit: Protecting Job Seekers

- **Madam Speaker**, the Ministry's Employment Agencies Unit is tasked with the responsibility of monitoring the activities of private employment agencies, making recommendations regarding the issuing of licences, and taking action to ensure that Agencies operate in conformity with the Employment Agencies Regulation Act.

- For the Fiscal year 2022/2023, the Ministry issued 70 Employment Agency Licences and conducted 150 inspections.

- **Madam Speaker**, job scamming activities have always been a focus of the Ministry's attention, but we have found a major upsurge in the frequency of these activities in recent months. The shortage of labour in certain sectors and the demand for workers overseas have resulted in many vulnerable job seekers falling prey to employment scams.

- In response, **Madam Speaker**, the Ministry is re-doubling its efforts to address this challenge using a multi-pronged approach. We have intensified our communication and media activities to sensitize the public about job scamming. We have renewed our Don't Get Scammed campaign with the use of electronic billboards in the major town centres and in TAJ offices across the island. The list of licensed employment agencies is being frequently updated on our website and we have issued multiple media releases warning job seekers of illicit activities.

- **Madam Speaker**, the Ministry has adopted a zero-tolerance approach to job scamming and so, we have increased our scrutiny of job-related advertisements. During the past year, we identified 23 loca-

tions housing illegal activities: 12 of these locations were identified between January and March 2023 alone, a clear indication that this type of dishonest activity is on the up-tick.

- The second strategy has therefore seen a closer collaboration with the Police to shut down illegal operations and take the operators before the court.

- **Madam Speaker**, the strategies are already bearing fruit. Since last April a number of Operators have been arrested and charged. Some of these cases are currently before the Courts, and so I will make no further comment, except to warn Operators to regularize their operations or face the consequences.

- I am appealing to Job Seekers: if you see an opportunity for overseas employment please check with the Ministry before you give away your hard-earned money. Most opportunities that look too good to be true are really too good to be true: trust your instincts, and when in doubt check with the Ministry of Labour and Social Security.

- I want to point out in particular, **Madam Speaker**, that there is no employment agency in Jamaica that is licensed to recruit workers for the overseas Farm Work Programme – the Ministry of Labour and Social Security is the only entity authorized in law to conduct this activity.

THE JAMAICA PRODUCTIVITY CENTRE: SUPPORTING A CULTURE OF LABOUR PRODUCTIVITY

Madam Speaker, as we emerge stronger in the post-pandemic era and prepare for the changes in the labour market presented by cultural shifts, demographic changes, the 5th Industrial Revolution and the new



Deep Science and Tech Wave, it is imperative that we challenge misunderstandings about the concept of productivity. To think about productivity, we must extend beyond the mere comparison of economic inputs against outputs and consider the other factors that impact the productive effort.

In keeping with its mandate to promote firm-level productivity best practices and enhance the level of knowledge on operational efficiency, the Jamaica Productivity Centre (JPC), has been partnering with both public and private sector entities to assess and recommend productivity improvement strategies.

In my own Ministry, the Centre has been working with our Procurement and Accounts teams to improve the efficiency and timeliness of our procurement and payment processes, to create what will soon be the gold standard for the Public Service.

Through a partnership with the Jamaica Manufacturers and Exporters Association (JMEA), the JPC conducted productivity assessments on a selection of local manufacturers, distributors and exporters to introduce decision-makers to systems that will allow them to track, monitor and improve production efficiency. These interventions impacted the construction industry and enterprises involved in the production and distribution of food, beverages, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, sporting goods, stationery supplies and technology.

In the past year, **Madam Speaker**, the Centre facilitated the transfer of knowledge through a series of forums and customized workshops covering innovation, productivity and performance management to over 1,000 participants in 11 Ministries, Departments and Agencies including JAMPRO, the Ministry of Transport & Mining, and HEART/NTSA Trust and the Hugh Shearer Labour Studies Institute.

In September 2022, the Centre partnered with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) to host an EQuIP Policy training session, focused on the relationship between labour productivity, trade diversification and industrial development. Twenty-five professionals from the public and private sectors benefited from this training.

Madam Speaker, the Jamaica Productivity Centre continues to drive critical productivity research. The Centre undertook a study to examine the factors that impact productivity at the national level, highlighting the statistical linkages between productivity and socio-economic factors. A report on Industrial Actions and their Impact on Economic Productivity will be available in May 2023.

Madam Speaker, during the FY 2022/2023, the JPC, achieved its first ISO 9001:2015 certification. The technical staff at the Jamaica Productivity Centre have also fulfilled the requirements to receive ISO 9001:2015 Lead Auditor certification which equips them to support the application of ISO standards in the organizations they support.

- **Madam Speaker**, the reach of productivity-based capacity building by the Centre will be expanded through the implementation of a Productivity Train-the-Trainer programme during the fourth quarter of this fiscal year. The programme will see the development of an accredited productivity-centred curriculum, designed to promote best practices on workplace productivity tracking, monitoring and improvement.
- Work on a National Productivity Perception Survey will begin in 2023/24. The findings of this survey will enable the Centre to develop targeted programmes and policies, to support the inculcation of a cultural mind-set that prioritizes productivity in every dimension of the economy.



PROTECTING THE MOST VULNERABLE

Madam Speaker, we are single-minded in the pursuit of our mission of protecting the vulnerable.

National Council for Senior Citizens

- **Madam Speaker**, there is no more vulnerable group among our citizens in Jamaica, than the growing number of elderly persons. Jamaica's population is ageing and Senior Citizens now comprise over 13% of the population. The Government, through the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, continues to focus its efforts on creating a responsive social protection framework that promotes and supports the rights of older persons, while empowering them to lead active and productive lives.
- The Revised National Policy for Senior Citizens was launched in September 2022 and a national public education campaign on the policy is to be launched shortly.
- The revised National Policy for Senior Citizens envisions seniors living and actively participating in a society that guarantees their rights, promotes their responsibilities, recognizes their capabilities and contributions and facilitates their enjoyment of a secure, healthy and fulfilled life. To achieve this, **Madam Speaker**, the Ministry will shortly begin work towards legislation for the protection of senior citizens against all forms of abuse and exploitation.
- **Madam Speaker**, we all heard the disturbing news of a group of senior citizens who were left on the streets after a nursing home in St. Catherine was evicted. The situation was unfortunate, but it calls for us to examine the type of environment in which we desire to have our citizens grow older. The Ministry is fully committed to creating an enabling and supportive environment and asserts that national goals for development must include priorities for senior citizens. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security is focused on leaving no one behind.

Early Stimulation Programme

Madam Speaker, the Early Stimulation Programme (ESP) continues to provide early intervention services to improve the quality of life and inclusion of some of our society's most vulnerable members: young children with developmental disabilities. The programme caters to children up to six years old, with Cerebral Palsy, Down's Syndrome, Intellectual Impairment, Autism and other physical or mental impairments.

The programme provides therapeutic services through its Developmental Clinics, Community-Based Rehabilitation Sessions, and Mobile Intervention Unit. In addition, the programme provides an Early Childhood Learning Centre for children, aged 3-6 years.

The Early Stimulation Programme currently serves just under 3,500 children from its centres in Kingston, Portland and St. James. These centres serve as access points for children from neighbouring parishes. Through the Mobile Unit, 280 outreach therapeutic sessions were held across rural communities in 2022/23.

In May 2022, the Ministry established a Sensation Station at the ESP's Hanover Street location to provide additional stimulation and therapy for children with sensory deficits, such as Motor Dysfunction, Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

The Stimulation-Plus Child Development Centre in Kingston has seen a one hundred per cent (100%) increase in the enrollment of children with special needs over the previous year. The enrollment figure now stands at one hundred and sixty-eight (168) students, compared to 84 in 2021/2022. Over sixty children between the ages of 6 and 7 were able to transition into the regular school system or special education schools.

Madam Speaker, last year, the ESP provided training in coping strategies for 300 parents and caregivers of children with developmental challenges. Sometimes we focus so much on the children that we forget the parents, who oftentimes need our support. For the 2023/24



financial year, another 320 parents/caregivers will be targeted to receive this intervention.

Madam Speaker, for this financial year, the Ministry is seeking to expand the Early Intervention Services of the Early Stimulation Programme into the parishes of St. Ann, St. Mary, Trelawny and Clarendon through the use of the Mobile Unit, and will continue to partner with private sector entities to expand these vital intervention services.

Abilities Foundation

Madam Speaker, The Abilities Foundation is the only institution of its kind in the English speaking Caribbean specifically geared to providing vocational training for persons with disabilities. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security is committed to ensuring that this institution receives consistent support to enable the organization to fulfill its mission of empowering Persons with Disabilities through training.

The Foundation has partnered with the HEART/NSTA Trust to embark on an ambitious intervention to have persons with disabilities Job Certified. In this regard, thirty-one (31) trainees are registered in the Job Certification Qualification Path. Ten have completed their assessments and are now job-certified as laundry attendants. We await the successful outcomes of the remaining 21 trainees who are expected to be certified as data processors.

Twenty (20) young Persons with Disabilities were trained in Carpentry between July 2022 and December 2022, under a grant valued at \$2.2 million from Rise Life Management Services and the European Union. The trainees will be assessed for Job Certification in Carpentry and will be transitioned into employment in the construction sector.

Madam Speaker, in 2022 the Foundation embarked on a project to equip 25 women with skills in hydroponic

farming practices. The project was successfully completed in February 2023 through a grant of J\$3.1 million from the High Commission of Canada. Eight (8) of these women were granted further technical support to establish their own hydroponic gardens.

The Foundation is finalizing discussions with external educational stakeholders to diversify and expand its course offerings. Training courses in web design and computer graphics are actively being pursued to begin in September 2023.

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to announce that we will be embarking on an innovative project that will see the implementation of a “green infrastructure” demonstration site at the Abilities Foundation. Over the next twelve months, the campus will be transformed into a “living lab” for the exploration, design and implementation of a series of Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) to address the perpetual flooding issues on the campus, and to study the impact of green infrastructure on urban flooding.

This experiment will therefore form the basis for the development of a technical scaling strategy for Nature-Based Solutions across Kingston. The project will involve rain harvesting, and the construction of river gardens, bioswales, and roof gardens on the campus of the Abilities Foundation.

I want to point out, **Madam Speaker**, that this will be one of the first examples of small-scale Nature-Based Solutions in Jamaica: Living Labs exist primarily in developed countries.

Not only will the project provide an aesthetic and educational asset for students and staff of the Foundation, but it will catalyze the creation of an inclusive “green collar” workforce through the development of a Nature-based Solutions curriculum for technical and vocational students.



Madam Speaker, I want to pause here to recognize and acknowledge the contribution of Island City Lab who partnered with us to secure funding for the project, and say ‘thank you’ to our sponsor, Arup Global Challenge, who provided the budget of US\$181,000 to undertake the project.

Madam Speaker, we are proud of the work of the Abilities Foundation, and its impact. The Ministry remains resolute in its commitment to ensuring that the lives of Persons with Disabilities are positively impacted, and that they receive every opportunity to build skills that enables their independence and ability to contribute to the development of the country.

Jamaica Council for Persons with Disabilities

Madam Speaker, our National Anthem resonates with the prayer, “Teach us true respect for all, Stir response to duty’s call...” This petition aptly calls us, as a nation, to attention: attention to respecting all, and responding completely to our duty of ensuring that Jamaica becomes a more inclusive society where all citizens, including Persons with Disabilities, are able to exercise the same fundamental rights and freedoms as anyone.

The Disabilities Act became effective in February 2022; it is now our “duty” to ensure that its provisions are enforced to protect these rights. As such, the Jamaica Council for Persons with Disabilities (JCPD) which was originally established as a department within the Ministry of Labour and Social Security in 1973, has now been established as a Body Corporate.

In this, its 50th year of operation, the JCPD has now been provided with greater authority to ensure that ‘we strengthen’ and facilitate the empowerment of Persons with Disabilities so that they too, in more deliberate ways, can actively participate in and be included in all aspects of the society in which they live.

Organizational Development

The development of the new Council is on in earnest as the organizational structure is being built through the recruitment of staff, and the development of systems and accountability structures to ensure the establishment of a robust entity serving Persons with Disabilities.

Since the recruitment of a legal Officer, between January and March 2023, 15 reports of discrimination have been received and are being investigated. So far, 3 of the cases have been successfully resolved, and investigations into the other 12 are ongoing.

Registration & Provision of Grants

Madam Speaker, the demand for the services of the JCPD is astounding. Between April 2022 and the end of February 2023, 1,020 new applications for registration were received, adding to the 15,234 registrants already in the database.

Despite this steady growth, a further 30,375 applicants are yet to complete the registration process through the presentation of medical reports to verify their disabilities. This verification enables registered clients to access various benefits, such as grants for economic empowerment and the provision of assistive aids.

Madam Speaker, for the 2022/2023 year, we provided 297 grants totaling \$18.1 million, to provide:

- 65 assistive aids valued at \$10 million
- 33 Economic Empowerment Grants totalling approximately \$2.9 million and
- 199 Rehabilitation grants totalling \$5.2 million.

Madam Speaker, the Council boasts a rich legacy of leveraging partnerships to help break discriminatory barriers and ensure that Jamaica becomes more accessible for Persons with Disabilities. Through a partnership with Scotiabank, we provided a Job Readiness workshop to 50 young Persons with Disabilities, to assist in preparing them for the world of work. The partnership



continues through awareness-raising sessions in both public and private sector entities, to ensure that inclusion becomes a whole-of-society endeavour.

Through work with the Bureau of Standards, the JCPD has adopted an Accessibility Checklist from our partners in the USA. This critical tool is being utilized to conduct accessibility audits of buildings and provide guidance to property owners on the standards that are to be in place to enable access by Persons with Disabilities in society.

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to report, that we have just confirmed the support of UNICEF through a grant to the JCPD in the amount of \$22.5m, for capacity building and to strengthen the functionality of its Management Information System.

Following a series of discussions with the JUTC on the need for improved access to transportation for Persons with Disabilities, the JUTC has now confirmed that 50 buses which are scheduled for deployment in this fiscal year will be fully accessible to Persons with Disabilities.

We have been meeting with the Municipal Councils in each parish to discuss how the JCPD can partner with them to ensure that all building permits granted demonstrate the appropriate design to ensure accessibility.

Madam Speaker, we are passionate about upholding and strengthening the rights of Persons with Disabilities. In that regard, the Disabilities Rights Tribunal will be established this year. The tribunal will provide an avenue for redress for persons who believe that their rights have been breached. As a people, we all have a responsibility to create a society that is fair and where all of its citizens are empowered to contribute to its development.

In the same vein, I am encouraging Persons with Disabilities: know your rights, keep advocating for them,

take responsibility and push against the barriers that would want to keep you out. You have the right, as citizens, to make your mark and today, I implore you to stand and be counted. The JCPD stands ready to be the voice of advocacy and to support you as you seek to build productive lives for yourselves, and your families.

The National Insurance Scheme

Madam Speaker, as I continue to speak on protecting our most vulnerable, let us turn our attention to the National Insurance Scheme.

Actuarial Review

Madam Speaker, on Thursday, March 16, Prime Minister, the Most Hon. Andrew Holness, reported in this Honourable House that the reform measures implemented by the National Insurance Scheme in 2019 to address its financial viability have been yielding positive results. The Actuarial Report of the NIS for 2019 showed significant improvement over the three-year period, 2016 – 2019.

The actuaries reported that the measures implemented have extended the life of the NIS by some 15 years. The actuaries have attributed this to better-than-expected investment performance, significant increases in contributions and a much larger number of contributors than in 2016.

At this juncture, **Madam Speaker**, it would be remiss of me if I did not acknowledge the tremendous effort of the officers of both the National Insurance Scheme and the National Insurance Fund, who together, have been working assiduously to turn the once negative net balance into a positive one.

Madam Speaker, that preparation of the 2022 Actuarial Report is now underway and will be completed during this calendar year.



Increase in Benefits

Madam Speaker, for some time now, NIS Pensioners have been asking, “When will we be getting an increase in our pension benefits?” I am happy to report, **Madam Speaker**, that the time is now, April 2023, and so I will be expanding on the Prime Minister’s announcement on the increases in benefits.

The Old Age or Retirement, the Invalidity and the Widows and Widowers Pensions will be increased from \$3,400 to \$4,200 per week; a 23% increase for those receiving full-rate pensions.

Pensioners who are receiving the three-quarter rate will see an increase from \$2,550 per week to \$3,500 per week; a 37% increase, and persons receiving the half-rate pension will see an increase from \$1,700 per week to \$3,000 per week, a whopping 76% increase.

Madam Speaker, this is a step towards pitching the NIS Pensioners above the poverty line, as we do our part to nurture the seeds of prosperity.

That being said, it is important that we all understand that in order to qualify for a benefit from the NIS, persons 18 years and older need to register and begin making their NIS contributions once they have started earning an income. Don’t contribute to the NIS on an ad hoc basis, once in a while, or once every blue moon. Instead, contribute consistently, so that you put yourself in a position to benefit at the highest level possible, when your time comes.

Madam Speaker, in cases where persons do not qualify to receive pension payments due to insufficient contributions, they may qualify to be paid a one-off grant. **Madam Speaker**, the Old Age or Retirement Grant, Invalidity Grant, Widows and Widowers Grants have all been increased from \$50,000 to \$60,000.

The Survivor Benefits for children have also been increased. The Special Child and Orphan Pensions have been increased by 22%, moving from \$4,900 per week

to \$6,000 per week. In cases where deceased parents do not have enough contributions to qualify their children to receive pension benefits, there is also the Special Child Grant and the Orphan Grant. These one-off payments have also been increased by 36% moving from \$55,000 to \$75,000. This administration is nurturing seeds for peace, opportunity and prosperity.

Madam Speaker, the NIS provides a suite of Employment Injury Benefits, ranging from cash payments for short periods of illness to payments for life, as well as an Employment Injury Death Benefit. The rate paid for these benefits will move from \$3,200 per week to \$4,200 per week, an increase of 31%.

The Funeral Grant, **Madam Speaker**, will be increased by 67%, moving from \$90,000 to \$150,000.

I am still not finished with the benefits as yet, **Madam Speaker**. In addition to pensions and grant benefits, the NIS provides a range of other social security benefits that impact contributors from the womb to beyond the tomb. One such benefit is the provision of a Comprehensive Health Insurance Plan for pensioners. All benefits under the NI Gold Insurance Plan have now been increased.

Madam Speaker, the NIS provides a Maternity Allowance to domestic workers who are registered with the NIS and who have been contributing, before becoming pregnant. Each time the National Minimum Wage is increased, the Maternity Allowance automatically increases. And so **Madam Speaker**, the Maternity Allowance for domestic workers will increase from \$9,000 per week to \$13,000 per week effective June 1, 2023.

Madam Speaker, as the financial viability of the NIS improves, the value of the benefits paid has also improved. I am encouraging all workers in Jamaica, whether you are in brick-and-mortar establishments, whether you are working from home or working online doing platform or gig work, you too must register and begin contributing to the NIS. The NIS is for all workers.



Unemployment Insurance

Madam Speaker, COVID-19 has brought to the fore the need for the provision of Unemployment Insurance for the workers of Jamaica. The Government has received strong support from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank and together we are working to see how best Unemployment Insurance can be provided within the Jamaican context.

As the Minister of Labour and Social Security, I am looking forward to the day, in the not-too-distant future, when the announcement will be made by this administration, that workers in Jamaica will have access to another benefit that considers the importance of income security; Unemployment Insurance: nurturing seeds for peace, opportunity and prosperity.

THE NATIONAL INVESTMENT FUND

NIF'S Achievements 2022/2023

Now **Madam Speaker**, the National Insurance Fund (NIF) is designated by the National Insurance Act as the vehicle into which all NIS contributions and interest, investment income, fines, fees and penalties should be paid. The NIF's core activity is the investment of NIS contributions in order to facilitate the payment of benefits to eligible persons registered under the NIS.

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to report that the Net Asset Value of the Fund (unaudited) stood at approximately \$165 billion at the close of Financial Year 2022/2023. This represents a notable achievement of over 16% year-over-year growth.

Madam Speaker, over the past year the Fund has been experiencing improved contribution inflows resulting from a series of reform measures aimed at improving the long-term viability of the NIS. These reform measures commenced in April 2019 with a half of a percentage point increase in the NIS contribution rate from 5% to 5.5%, and a further movement from 5.5% to 6%

effective April 1, 2020.

Similarly, **Madam Speaker**, the reform measures included increases in the Insurable Wage Ceiling moving from \$1.5 million to \$3 million effective April 1, 2021, and a further increase from \$3 million to \$5 million effective April 1, 2022.

Madam Speaker, we are now seeing the positive results from these parametric funding reforms, in that, consistent monthly surpluses are being realized from the NIS (Scheme) operations. These surpluses, coupled with steady monthly investment income from the NIF's investment portfolio, have resulted in a healthy pool of funds available for deployment to long-term assets capable of delivering higher risk-adjusted returns and thereby increasing the medium to long-term viability of the NIS.

As the post-pandemic recovery continues, total investment income (excluding unrealized gains) as at February 2023, remained consistent and robust at \$7.74 billion and total investment income is projected to be \$8.52 billion at the close of Financial Year 2022/2023.

Priority Programmes 2023/2024

For this year, the National Insurance Fund intends to focus on several high-priority areas that will include:

i. Reform of the National Insurance Fund: The NIF is anticipating that the recommendations of the NIF Investment Management Review Commission will result in the promulgation of a new and more robust organizational structure and Investment Policy. Already discussions are ongoing between the MLSS and MOFPS and other relevant stakeholders to formulate and implement the most efficient and effective means of promulgating the new structure. This new structure and Investment Policy are expected to achieve three goals:

- First, we expect to maximize rates of return whilst minimizing risk exposure
- Secondly, it will generate strong cash flows to meet



current obligations and facilitate reinvestment, whilst extending the long-term viability of the Fund, and

- Thirdly, these adjustments are expected to provide a hedge against inflation

ii: The second priority will be the re-alignment of the Real Estate Portfolio.

Madam Speaker, as part of an ongoing review of its overall investment strategy, the NIF expects to rationalize and divest low-yielding and non-performing property assets within its portfolio. This is an ongoing programme which started over two (2) years ago, and will continue into Financial Year 2023/2024

iii: The third priority area, is Development.

Madam Speaker, as part of redevelopment work for NIS Offices across the island, the Kingston and St. Andrew Parish Office is to be renovated at a cost of \$283 million. This initiative was initially slated for Financial Year 2022/2023 but was delayed due to an unforeseen change in circumstances related to our ability to secure adequate and convenient parking facilities for the improved facilities. This matter has been addressed and the improvement project is expected to begin this year.

iv: In addition **Madam Speaker**, the NIF will be spending approximately \$ 30 million during the year to improve selected investment properties within its portfolio to bring them in compliance with the Disabilities Act and related building codes.

v: Plans are afoot to commence the development of lands owned by the Fund in May Pen, Clarendon, into NIS Offices and a Government Services Centre. Approximately \$108 million is earmarked for pre-construction preliminaries and professional services.

vi: The Fund continues active engagement with other state agencies with respect to developments in Downtown Kingston and Morant Bay, St. Thomas. There are also plans to develop parcels of land owned by the Fund in Portland, St. James and St. Andrew for investment purposes.

CONCLUSION

JAMAICA AND COMPENSATION INEQUALITY

Madam Speaker, before I conclude today, I want to talk about two matters that have been very near and dear to my heart over the years. In fact, **Madam Speaker** what I am about to talk about are two of the major reasons why I got involved in politics.

I want to speak first about labour and the inequality of compensation that has existed in Jamaica over the decades, even predating Independence.

In 1938 **Madam Speaker**, there were the labour riots that broke out across the country, in fact we recollect the infamous Frome Riot which produced persons such as Sir Alexander Bustamante and Sir William Grant who went on to become icons of the Labour Movement. **Madam Speaker**, what was this about? It was simply about compensation and the exploitation of labour, that existed at that time. Thousands were arrested and prosecuted, many injured and some reported 49 deaths.

Madam Speaker, if we take an honest look, and ask “What have we done about it over the decades?”, whilst we can say we have made strides because of the Labour Movement, and to some extent by the Minimum Wage Act, the truth is that, **Madam Speaker**, there is a segment of the Jamaican population that continues to this day, to be exploited, and are victims of compensation inequality.

Madam Speaker, we would have announced the increase in the Minimum Wage, and some individuals were surprised by the level of the increase. **Madam Speaker**, it has been a push of my Ministry, to work towards a livable wage. A wage that allows persons to work and live with dignity. We have increased the Minimum Wage monumentally since the inception of this administration, moving it by over a hundred percent, culminating with this year’s increase; the largest in the history of the Minimum Wage.



Madam Speaker, permit me to thank the National Minimum Wage Advisory Commission chaired by Dr. Ronald Robinson, and his Commissioners, St. Patrice Ennis and Dr. Dayton Robinson.

Why did we do this, **Madam Speaker**? We did it because it was the right thing to do. For too long the economy has not been working for a segment of the society and the push for a livable wage is the culmination of those riots in 1938. Many women played a part in those labour protests for a decent wage and today it is a majority of women who will be benefiting from this increase that takes effect on June 1, 2023.

The push is to converge and amalgamate both sets of Minimum Wages: another step and building block toward achieving a livable wage. One livable wage for the most vulnerable amongst us. Righting the wrong, **Madam Speaker**, righting the wrong.

Madam Speaker, whilst I do not claim to be the savior coming down from heaven to right all wrongs, I **Madam Speaker**, would like to think that I would have played my part as Minister of Labour in fighting this wrong that has been perpetuated on the Jamaican people, especially our women.

On the matter of the second issue, **Madam Speaker**, nearly two years ago, we introduced the Social Pension Programme for elderly persons, who have no pension or social assistance. As I indicated earlier, the Rehabilitation Programme provides relief in emergencies and other one-off instances, and we provide more than 150,000 families with Cash Transfers through PATH, conditioned on co-responsibilities designed to support Human Capital Development. When the number of beneficiaries receiving assistance through these various interventions is combined, **Madam Speaker**, we are providing financial support to approximately 180,000.00 families each year.

Madam Speaker, while these interventions are no doubt making positive contributions to the lives of our beneficiaries, I want us to pause to consider the real impact of our existing strategies on the members of our society who are living below the poverty line; the Jamaicans from every walk of life for whom our services make the difference not only for their survival, but in their quality of life.

Madam Speaker, Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to the realization ... of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality”.

According to the ILO, comprehensive social protection or social security systems provide protection from lack of work-related income, caused by sickness, disability, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, old age or death of a family member, and general poverty and social exclusion; they also provide family support and guarantee income security, among other provisions.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights further states that access to social protection is to be provided through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State: so **Madam Speaker**, I am not naively suggesting that overnight, Jamaica, a small island state, is to provide social security benefits to all at the level of some of our more developed neighbours.

However, **Madam Speaker**, I believe that the time has come for us to look critically at our systems, and ask, “To what extent are the existing structures adequately addressing the growing needs?” It is imperative that we identify the scope of the unfilled gap, especially, as we emerge from the global pandemic.

We must face the inescapable possibility that the unprecedented levels of crime might be directly related to the levels of poverty in those geographical areas where



crime is at its highest, and we must ask ourselves, what more can we do post-COVID, for the poor? What can we do, for families that have lost their breadwinners or those who have lost their livelihoods because of crime, violence or disaster?

I believe, **Madam Speaker**, that the time has come, for us, as a nation, to see the provision of adequate social security as an investment in our “human infrastructure” equal to, if not more critical than the need for investment in our physical infrastructure, and to prioritize it as if our lives depended on it, because they do.

We must seriously examine the possibility of expanding our social protection systems to provide a basic level of income security, a “minimum social protection floor” over a set time span, that can ensure a minimum, decent standard of living, as a means of enabling more of our people to make the investments required to develop their capabilities, and thereby access productive opportunities by which they can escape poverty.

Increased coverage of the poor coupled with improvements in targeting for social assistance programmes must therefore be high on the agenda. But even while we aspire, this ideal must be coupled with efficient delivery of services to transition families from welfare to positions of self-sufficiency and ultimately, prosperity.

In closing, **Madam Speaker**, I want to acknowledge the dedicated team at the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, and the inspired leadership of my Permanent Secretary and Senior Directors, and other staff, all of whom have contributed to our successes over the past year. I am grateful for your diligence and extraordinary commitment in the face of severe constraints. I look forward to greater accomplishments in the new year, as together, we continue to serve the people of Jamaica with excellence.

I thank you all.



Child Labour Video Monologue Competition Award Ceremony that happened in February 2023



Port Maria Arcade cheque handover that happened in March 2022



Port Maria Arcade cheque handover that happened in March 2022







