

Remarks by the Minister of Youth and Culture
the Honourable Lisa Hanna, MP
at News Conference on Challenges in Children's Homes
Ministry of Youth and Culture Conference Room
8 April 2014

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming:

Today, I wish to update the nation on challenges being faced by the Residential Sector of the Child Protection System, specifically, and also to give a report on some of the larger problems that are affecting our nation's children. At the end of this statement, I will take questions.

Let me begin by providing a brief overview of the system.

There are 58 residential facilities in Jamaica that offer care and protection to children who are in need. The vast majority of these facilities are privately-operated. Only eight are run by the Government. However, all of the Residential Child Care Facilities are regulated by the Government and all of them get budgetary support from the Ministry of Youth and Culture, acting through the Child Development Agency.

The Government of Jamaica spends J\$1.7 billion a year to fund the Child Development Agency — which has responsibility for Children's Homes and Places of Safety on the island. We spend more than J\$436 million to operate the eight Government-run children's homes and places of safety. At the same time the Government spends another J\$721 million per year to take care of the 1,823 children across the privately operated children's homes and places of safety. In addition to this, the CDA also provides financial assistance to wards of the state in family environments including children in foster care, on Supervision Orders and in the family reintegration programme.

This is a hefty bill for a tiny country, with a small economy — and unthinkable in a country that was built on our special kind of familial tradition. When I was growing up the neighbours were 'aunty this' and 'uncle that'. We were all family. Now we have a situation where the family has broken down to such an extent where we are seeing too many parents abandoning their children, otherwise abusing them or carting them off to Police Stations, the Child Development Agency and the Courts for so-called "uncontrollable behaviour".

When children are abandoned and abused, it is our responsibility to take care of them. It is our duty to give them not only shelter and protection from their abuser, but also to provide them with the therapeutic intervention to address the physical and psychological harm they have suffered.

The level, types and instances of abuse that we have been seeing in recent times is very troubling. The Office of the Children's Registry, which collects reports of abuse, has indicated the following:

- i. There were 6,206 reports of child abuse between January and June 2013, representing a 37.9 per cent increase over the previous year.
- ii. Of the reports received over the period 4,929 represent children who were being reported for the first time. Of this amount, 58.4% were girls, 40.6% were boys, while the gender for the remaining 1.0% was not specified.
- iii. Neglect, at 2,982 remained the most common infringement and represents a 31 per cent increase over the previous year, and accounted for 48 per cent of all reports.
- iv. Children in need of care and protection (which includes parents in economic difficulty) stood at 2,300 or an increase of over 30 per cent.
- v. Reports of sexual abuse which number 1,968 reflected an increase of 40 per cent.
- vi. There were 1,711 reports of physical abuse — an increase of 42 per cent over the previous year.
- vii. The reports of emotional abuse total 887, a 31 per cent increase.
- viii. Reports of Child labour total 192 — doubling the number of reports received over the previous year.
- ix. Reports of behavioural problems which stood at 1881 for the period, represented a 53 per cent increase.

We believe the situation is getting worse. The OCR's preliminary check for 2014 found that total inflow of reported cases of child abuse for the first three months of this year is in excess of 3,100 reports. At the same time last year, the total number of reports was 2,800 reports.

The situation with our children is a national crisis. The Ministry of Youth and Culture, and all its Agencies charged with providing services to the nation's children, are deeply troubled by the acts of depravity which continue to be committed against our children in their homes and communities, and the severe psychological trauma they are suffering, as a direct result of the violation of their rights.

Lack of proper parenting and parental neglect are grave concerns, and matters we must collectively address as a matter of urgency, if we are to effectively deal with the crisis facing our children.

Against this background of the high levels of child abuse and neglect and a wave of anti-social behaviour by children in State care, we believe that the time is now for us to have a serious heart-to-heart conversation about the nation's children; the issues they are facing; the pressure being placed on the residential child care sector, and how each of us as member of this society can participate in the healing and restoration of these children.

Children are living in abusive environments which have hardened them to the point where they have become, themselves, abusers of others. We see this reality everyday in Residential Child Care Facilities where our child care professionals are now stretched thin trying to prevent ward-on-ward abuse. The system is experiencing challenges as a result of the unsettling deterioration in the behaviour of our children. The institutional support that is needed to effectively meet the needs of the children is wilting under the pressure, which, if not addressed, may result in further worsening of the situation.

The behavioural problems of the children have resulted in increased pressures on the homes and the situation has gotten so bad that caregivers who have spent their entire lives in the system are now telling us that they can no longer cope.

In February 2014, the Sisters of Mercy, who have given over 135 year of service to our children, operators of Alpha Boys Home (South Camp Road, Kingston) and the St. John Bosco Boys Home (Mandeville, Manchester), met with me and with the Child Development Agency, on several occasions indicating its unwillingness to continue to operate these institutions in the current form, and have given notice of a change of use. The notice outlined that, effective June 2014, the Alpha Boys Home which operates as a Children's Home, will be closing its residential care operations, and that alternative placement need to be found.

The Sisters of Mercy network, with a combined institutional memory / history of over a century in the Jamaican landscape, has taken the decision to embark on a change of use of both institutions to full-time day school (Alpha Boys Home), while maintaining residential services at St. John Bosco, but with the learning facilities being opened to other children and youth.

The Sisters of Mercy cited the grave anti-social behaviour of children in the care system, the sexual predatory nature of the boys on one another, children who are witnesses of serious crimes or are victims of heinous acts, and who are non-responsive to traditional interventions for which their institutions have been equipped to provide.

The Sisters of Mercy have also indicated the incapability of human capital to respond to the many and changing faces of the issues being manifested. The challenge is further compounded by the high cost of care for each child, as a result of the more extensive interventions required which is beyond the capacity of their resources, thus limiting its ability to meet basic operating demand.

In a follow-up meeting with representatives of the Sisters of Mercy to determine how best to move forward while retaining the network of locations, it was shared that decisions were taken at the highest level of operations and any effort by the Government of Jamaica to incentivize the operations at this time would not change the position.

Discussions with senior management personnel of the Child Development Agency have revealed that other privately operated institutions have stated similar concerns.

The Child Development Agency records have also shown that in the 2013 calendar period, a team of four (4) Clinical Psychologists who are engaged to the Agency to carry out assessment and treatment of children in State care and those living under the supervision of the Child Protection System, saw 1,303 new cases, and maintained a caseload of over 1,600 children who were diagnosed with varied psychological and mental health illnesses, for which treatment is being provided.

The Child Development Agency preparing an action plan to manage the movement of children from those institutions under the Sisters of Mercy network to be closed.

The Ministry of Youth and Culture and the Child Development Agency will hold further discussions with the Sisters of Mercy to work out an agreement on how the new services to be offered by their institutions can be maximised, and used to benefit children who are in the care of the State.

The Child Development Agency will be moving ahead with the execution of plans to find alternative locations for children who will be dislocated as a result of the Sisters of Mercy closing its doors. This is to ensure that children are fully prepared for re-location.

The Ministry of Youth and Culture through the Inter-Ministerial Committee and other State and Non-State Actors, will collaborate in identifying the presenting issues, and develop an appropriate response designed to meet the evolving needs of children.

The Ministry of Youth and Culture will be taking to the Cabinet a comprehensive National Plan of Action for an Integrated Response to Children and Violence shortly, which will outline existing initiatives and seek approval for new initiatives to be employed to address the extreme challenges facing the sector.

While no financial outlay is required immediately, it is clear that both financial and technical support will be required, as we seek to mobilise and make operational a number of initiatives to effectively arrest the on-setting issues affecting children while creating a transformative environment.

Efforts will be made to engage the Non Government Organisations, Community Based Organisations, Faith Based Organisations, Media and Entertainment Fraternities, International Development Partner communities and other civic society groups, to assist driving some of these initiatives, through the provision of financial and technical support.

Addressing the Issues Affecting the Children

- i. CDA Psychologists continue to provide counselling for children who have behavioural and other emotional challenges.
- ii. Referrals are provided to the Ministry of Health's child guidance clinics and private psychiatrists, where necessary.
- iii. The Smiles Mobile unit which was commissioned last year to provide mental health services to the children in State care, is now operational and has been carrying out needs assessment, to begin treatment shortly.
- iv. The programmatic offerings in the RCCFs are currently being reviewed
- v. The medium to long-term plan is to establish a Therapeutic Centre to provide residential treatment and care for children who have experienced emotional trauma.
- vi. The Agency partners with NGO's; civil society and faith-based groups to provide intervention to children in RCCFS.
- vii. Encouraging mentorship programmes
- viii. Plans for more intensive training for staff at Residential Child Care Facilities

Child Diversion Mechanisms

The Child Care and Protection Act says that the family is the best setting for children to be raised. The Ministry, through the CDA has been pursuing a range of measures to ensure that children are placed in residential care only as a last resort.

Establishment of Children and Family Support Units (CFSU) in two of its regional offices (South East and the Western Region) to provide early intervention to vulnerable children and their families. The CFSU has been providing family counselling; parenting training; parenting career and skills development, and providing links with Agencies who provide social intervention. Between October 2009 (when the SE CFSU was established) and March 2014, the Unit in the South East Region saw 2988 clients, with 2919 diverted from State care.

Multi-Agency partnership – The Government has put in place a Multi-Agency programme under which a CDA Investigator is based at CISOCA. This is geared at reducing secondary trauma to child abuse victims who in previous years were forced to relive the experience by having to be debriefed separately by a number of agencies. Under this programme, agencies such as CDA, the Victim Support Unit; CISOCA, OCR and others conduct one session. CDA as part of its intervention carries out investigation as it relates to the welfare of the child, and finds alternative placements for the children. From April 2012 to March 2013, the Unit saw some 1430 children, with 94 per cent of the number diverted away from residential care.

Living in Family Environment (LIFE) Programmes – The Government, through the CDA has been pursuing alternative placement for children in State care, through Living in Family Environment (LIFE) Programmes such as foster care; Supervision orders and Family Reintegration.

There are currently 6000 children in State care. Some 57 per cent of that number are in Living in Family Environment Programmes.

Parenting

The Agency has been holding parenting workshops across the island to assist parents to fulfil their responsibilities more effectively. In 2012/2013, CDA held over 121 parenting workshops, impacting 1485 parents.

Holding parents accountable through a strengthened CCPA; the law is currently under review and recommendations have been made to allow the Court to apply a range of sanctions for parental neglect, including parenting classes, counselling, mediation and other stronger measures.

Partnership to Support Vulnerable Families

The Ministry has been partnering with other Government bodies, private sector; civil society groups; NGOs and Faith-Based Organisation to provide services to vulnerable families. Through the CFSU, CDA connects clients to the Ministry of Labour and Social Securities' PATH programme.

The Agency also partners with Food for the Poor to assist clients undergoing economic difficulty.

The Agency partners with faith-based organisations and NGOs to provide spiritual, educational and other programmatic support to children in residential child care facilities.

The Role of Society

The Ministry is urging members of the society to view themselves as a key part of the healing of our children in State care. View them as your children, and show them the protective care you would show your own. These children are hurting, and helping them to overcome the hurt is not a quick fix, as psychologists will tell you recovery from abuse takes years.

Those who break the law must be held accountable for their behaviour, but we continue to urge society to show these children empathy; understanding, grace and love to promote their healing and restoration, and refrain from exploiting their pain.

Further we urge citizens to:

Adopt a zero tolerance approach to abuse of our children by reporting all forms of abuse.

Help to provide emotional support to those children who are in the facilities and State care in general. Help in removing the Stigma and re-victimisation of the children in care.

Get involved in mentorship programmes through your churches, clubs and individually.

Addressing the serious challenges affecting our children, calls for a collective commitment by all in society. Government alone cannot do it. It is our hope that parents, relatives and the community will step up to the plate and take responsibility for the care and protection of our children.