

**STATEMENT TO BE DELIVERED IN PARLIAMENT BY THE  
HONOURABLE AYANNA WEBSTER-ROY, MINISTER IN THE OFFICE OF  
THE PRIME MINISTER WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR GENDER AND  
CHILD AFFAIRS**

**Report of the Cabinet-Appointed Team to conduct an Independent Investigation  
into the Abuse of Children at Children's Homes, Rehabilitation Centres and  
other Institutions which provide Residential Care for Children**

Madam Speaker, I have been directed by the Cabinet to make a statement on the Report of the Cabinet-Appointed Team to conduct an Independent Investigation into the abuse of children at Children's Homes, Rehabilitation Centres and other Institutions which provide Residential Care for Children. Cabinet in June 2021, approved the conduct of an independent investigation into the abuse of children at Children's Homes, Rehabilitation Centres and other Institutions, which provide residential care for children and the establishment of an eleven (11) person Investigation Team. The Team was headed by Retired Appeal Court Judge, Justice Judith Jones and included representation from civil society organizations. The Investigation Team commenced their work in July 2021 and submitted the report of the investigation on December 13, 2021.

The Team's remit included, inter alia, reviewing reports, other documents and newspaper articles on allegations of abuse of children; identifying and documenting the abuse and developing solutions to prevent and eliminate all forms of abuse; compiling the events leading to absconding in Children's Homes and Child Support Centres; reviewing policies and procedures for appropriate care and identifying gaps where necessary, and making recommendations to ensure that adequate policies and procedures are in place for the treatment of children and the prevention of abuse.

The Investigation Team collected primary and secondary data. Some of the main sources included:

- Site Visits to Children's Homes, Child Support Centres and Rehabilitation Centres. During this investigation, the Team conducted twenty-one (21) site visits to Community Residences and Child Support Centres. Twenty-three (23) residential care institutions were selected using the set criteria, which were further ranked by low, medium or high priority.

- Interviews with the staff at Community Residences, Residents (children), former residents of the facilities, and former and current employees of the Children’s Authority. Overall, forty-Six (46) interviews were conducted by the Investigation Team
- Document Review.

As part of its process, the Investigation Team focussed on areas of safeguarding, as well as sexual and physical abuse. Some of the major findings of the Team with regard to selected areas of focus were as follows:

**Abuse and Absconding at the traditional Government-Funded Children’s Homes, Valsayn Child Support Centre, and the Youth Training and Rehabilitation Centre**

- It was discovered that incident reports are not fully capturing the extent of physical abuse occurring.
- Lack of proper supervision facilitates physical abuse among residents.
- Staff promote a culture that encourages abuse among residents.
- Security officers were found guilty of abusing residents.
- The inclusion of children in need of supervision at Child Support Centres has exposed the staff to child offenders. The staff is not trained to deal with this form of behaviour.
- The guards, especially the external guards, are not trained to deal with children.
- *At the Youth Training and Rehabilitation Centre:*
  - Physical abuse occurs very rarely. There is a plethora of regulations and layers of oversight that makes the use of excessive force difficult to go undetected.
- In addition to major security concerns, the Investigation Team through its interviews has found that the following are some reasons why residents abscond from these facilities:
  - The discipline meted out to the residents is subjective and, in some cases, unorthodox.
  - The lack of structured and educational activities has been complained about by residents who have openly stated that they miss their classes while at these facilities and they want to get an education.

- Complaints made by residents are not being taken seriously by those in authority.
- The residents miss their families and in some instances the stay is longer than first anticipated at the facilities.

**Legislation:**

- Legislation Guiding the Safeguarding, Care, and Protection of Children is confusing and ineffective with respect to enforcement of its provisions and the creation of offences.
- The legislation facilitates a hybrid system of care for children residents in Children’s Homes, children who have the benefit of orders from the Court with respect of whom the Children’s Authority is mandated to provide care and treatment and children who do not thereby creating an unequal system of care.

**Public Financing for Child Protection:**

- The number of children in need of licensed Children’s Homes, Community Residences, and Hostels is greater than the current capacity.
- All existing facilities are understaffed and under-resourced for the number of children in their care or cannot operate at capacity.

**Child Protection System:**

- The Children’s Authority is not adequately or efficiently fulfilling its statutory mandate.
- The most critical risk facing the Authority is that it is not structured and staffed to deliver the mandate outlined in the legislation.

Madam Speaker, many recommendations were put forth by the Investigation Team. Some of the key recommendations made by the Team under the main headings include:

**Legislation Guiding the Safeguarding, Care, and Protection of Children**

- There is a need to consolidate all the amendments to the Act.
- The ongoing development of a National Child Protection Strategy must be prioritised, with clear and measurable standards for all persons interacting with children in Trinidad and Tobago.

### **Enforcing of Licensing and Monitoring Requirements for Children’s Homes**

- An independent publicly funded Children’s Commissioner should be established.

### **More effective State Coordination and Collaboration**

- An inter-agency task force should also be established under the Office of the Prime Minister to coordinate the national system and integrate operations across State agencies and Ministries for the effective and timely delivery of care and protection of children in Trinidad and Tobago. The task force to include representatives from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education.

### **Operations of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad & Tobago**

- The Board to conduct its organisational redesign with urgency given that effective organisational design is fundamental for the delivery of The Authority's mandate, and directly impacts upon all other risks to the organisation and children in the care of the State

### **Recommendations to help curb the gross Abuse of children**

- In relation to the Caregiver Ratio, the Children’s Authority is to ensure that a standard caregiver to child ratio, dependent on the child's risk, age and needs, is maintained at Community Residences and Child Support Centres.
- The Children’s Authority should have an internal security force trained to treat with children in residential care. This security function should also extend to private children's homes. While this will be a cost to the Authority and GORTT, the returns will be in children's safety, protection, and care.
- In relation to Critical Incidences, standardized criteria for classifying and reporting critical incidents should be established and enforced.

The Parliament is asked to note that the Report by the Investigation Team was considered by the Cabinet in March 2022, and the Cabinet agreed to:

- a) the submission of the Report to the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs for a review of the legislative recommendations.

- b) the establishment of a Task Force to review the findings and recommendations of the said Report and to develop an action plan for implementation, divided into short, medium and long-term categories with appropriate timeframes. The Task Force has a timeframe of six (6) weeks' time from the date of commencement of meetings to submit to Cabinet the completed workplan.
- c) the following composition of the Task Force:
- The Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs) one (1) officer each from the Child Affairs Division and the Policy, Research and Planning Division
  - The Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs
  - The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
  - The Ministry of Youth Development and National Service
  - The Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (the Manager and two (2) representatives)
  - The Tobago House of Assembly
  - Two (2) members of the Investigation Team

The Task Force will be chaired by a senior official of the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs).

Madam Speaker, the Government remains committed to the establishment of a robust child protection system in keeping with its national and international development objectives, and to the resourcing of Agencies with responsibility for effecting the system. Consequently, several initiatives are being undertaken under the implementation plan for the National Child Policy to ensure that our nation's children are protected and through various initiatives under the remit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago and the Ministries of Social Development and Family Services, National Security and Youth Development and National Services for transitional services.

The estimated expenditure for the implementation of the recommendations from the National Child Policy and for the initiatives under the Development Programme for fiscal 2022 related to the recommendations in the Report for the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, Gender and Child Affairs and the Ministries previously mentioned is **ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-SIX MILLION, EIGHTY-ONE**

**THOUSAND, SEVEN HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN DOLLARS (\$126,081,715.00).**

A significant investment indeed and a true reflection of Government's acceptance of its obligation to the well-being of our nation's children, especially the vulnerable.

I thank you, Madam Speaker.