

EXCERPT OF VERBATIM NOTES OF THE SEVENTEENTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, HELD IN THE ARNOLD THOMASOS ROOM (EAST), LEVEL 6, (IN CAMERA) AND THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM (MEZZANINE FLOOR) (IN PUBLIC), OFFICE OF THE PARLIAMENT, TOWER D, THE PORT OF SPAIN INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, #1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 01, 2017 AT 9.30 A.M.

PRESENT

Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Brig. Gen. Ancil Antoine	Member
Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein	Member
Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith	Member
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Miss Khadijah Ameen	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Johnson Greenidge	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Ashaki Alexis	Research Assistant

10.23 a.m.: *Meeting suspended.*

10.31 a.m.: *Meeting resumed.*

**OFFICIALS OF THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND FAMILY SERVICES**

Mrs. Jacinta Bailey-Sobers	Permanent Secretary
Ms. Natasha Barrow	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Mr. Asif Ali	Deputy Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Ms. Carla McKie	Auditor II
Mr. Vijay Gangapersad	Chief Technical Officer (Ag.)
Ms. Taramatie Samaroo	Director, Human Resources (Ag.)
Mrs. Cheryl Layne-Pereira	Director, Social Welfare Division (Ag.)

Mr. Chairman: Good morning and welcome to this, the Seventeenth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. A special good morning to all officials from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services who are with us today. Good morning to all of our viewers and listeners on the various media by which the Parliament transmits its deliberation to the public. This is the Committee's, our Committee's first public hearing pursuant to its enquiry into the management of the Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, also known as the Trinidad and Tobago Food Card Programme.

This particular subject falls under the remit of our Committee as part of our work on improving overall public administration in Trinidad and Tobago. The members of the public are asked to invite their comments on the Parliament's social media platforms. Sometimes members of the public are very much aware of what is happening. They may possess insights and information and if, of course,

members of the public have any solutions that they would like to offer the Committee, please feel free to do. They are always considered in order that we could have everything open and transparent as possible.

At this point I would like to ask members of the—oh, and the panel this morning representing the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to introduce themselves, then I would ask members of the Committee to offer brief introductions of themselves before we open for the enquiry in total. Thank you very much.

[Officials of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services introduce themselves]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you committee members. May I ask members of the Joint Select Committee to briefly introduce themselves.

[Members of the Committee introduce themselves]

Mr. Chairman: And good morning again, I am Dhanayshar Mahabir, Chairman of the Committee. Sen. Dhanayshar Mahabir. May I remind of the enquiry objectives. The enquiry objectives are really five:

1. The first is to assess the effectiveness of the programme since its inception. Effectiveness in relation to poverty reduction in Trinidad and Tobago;
2. To examine the efficiency of the management systems in place for ensuring efficiency of the programme;
3. To examine the effectiveness of the organizational structure, again, to determine how efficient the programme is. Efficient, by efficient we mean whether the programme is really doing what it is supposed to do, and whether individuals who are targeted actually are in receipt of the intended, or of the proposed benefits;

4. To examine the financial status of the programme, and the procedures and policies in place to ensure transparency, accountability and to ensure that there is value for money in the management of the programme; and
5. To assess the systems in place to monitor and evaluate the success and the impact of the Food Card Programme, also known as the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme.

At this point I will ask the Permanent Secretaries—I have always been intrigued by the fact that this is one Ministry with two Permanent Secretaries. This is a large Ministry and it is not surprising that it is one of the larger Ministries requiring so many different arms of administration, because the subsidies and transfers component of the national budget is by far and away the largest component of expenditure of the State, and expenditure on the social aspects of the subsidies also constitute a very large part of the transfers of the Government. We really would want to find out a lot more into the effectiveness of these transfers.

Basically, we want to know that he or she who is entitled to the transfer is actually receiving it. Is there efficiency? What could we do, if anything, to ensure that the population who are targeted in Trinidad and Tobago are actually the beneficiaries in a major way of the programme, or are there slippages? So, may I ask the permanent secretaries to offer brief introductions before we begin the formal part of the enquiry?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Thank you very much, Chair. Esteem members of the Committee, Chair, Vice-Chair, viewers, listeners, I wish to thank the Committee for affording the Ministry the opportunity to deliver an opening statement for today's session on the Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, more commonly referred to as the TCCTP or the Food Card Programme. One of the

focus of this session this morning is the food support programme, I will focus on the strategic direction of the Ministry for fiscal 2018, and in so doing I will contextualize the purpose of all our programmes of the Ministry.

My PS colleague, PS Barrow in her brief statement will speak specifically to the Food Card Programme. Now within recent years the Ministry has undergone significant changes in organizational structure and mandate. Notwithstanding, the Ministry continues to be the lead Ministry charged with the responsibility of providing social protection to the most vulnerable of our nation and combating the scourge of poverty. The Ministry is cognizant of the consequences of the prevailing economic conditions on those in society considered to be less fortunate. Or in other words, those who are least able to withstand or far less escape the many social challenges they are likely to encounter.

In this regard, the Ministry recently prepared, in collaboration with the health economics unit of the UWI, a national social mitigation plan 2017 to 2022 to cushion the impact of the current downturn on the vulnerable in our society. The implementation of this plan will be the priority of the Ministry for fiscal 2018 and beyond. Given its mandate, services are designed and implemented through several delivery points throughout the country, and the Committee I am sure is aware of this. Though the services are decentralized, it is fragmented with no real coordination between service units. It has long been recognized that the manner in which the social protection system is designed and implemented results in a significant burden on families, especially those families who experience interrelated psychosocial issues, and they have to navigate the social protection maze, seeking support. For them this could be a daunting task, and on the part of service delivery units, certainly poor customer service will result in a waste of scarce resources. So, the Ministry is of the view that service delivery can best be

realized through an integrated social service delivery approach. One that would not only enhance its efficiency by providing value for money, and this enquiry is about that from an administrative standpoint, but one which will also bring about an enhanced customer service.

In this regard, the Ministry has embarked on a restructuring exercise to bring its operations in line with the integrated model of delivery. The Ministry will complement this initiative with several other projects which will support the integrated approach and improve service delivery. It is expected that this restructuring exercise will bring about consistency in the manner in which services are delivered across the country, and improve efficiency and effectiveness to the benefit of all. In the light of this scenario, Chairman, and the winds of change prevailing in the organization, the Ministry welcomes this invitation to share information on the food support programme.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Permanent Secretary, and may I ask the second Permanent Secretary, PS Barrow to offer her brief opening remarks.

Ms. Barrow: Thank you, Chair, and good morning all. In addressing the nutrition and food security for the vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago, it should be known that the Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes have been receiving widespread prominence as an effective approach in the fight against poverty and in fostering social inclusion. Key to this concept is the linking of immediate cash relief to long-term sustainable self-reliance. These programmes are very popular in Latin America and have been used as a best practice internationally.

Trinidad and Tobago's adoption of a food support programme while it has born many labels, has undoubtedly bolstered the social safety net of our country. The Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, TCCTP, is the only national food support programme in the country, and seeks to reduce the incidence of

poverty by promoting nutrition and food security to vulnerable households. Currently over 30,000 households access the TT card on a monthly basis, thereby contributing to food security and poverty alleviation among recipients and the respective dependants.

Additionally, the programme provides an urgent response to not only the critical conditions of poverty, social and economic hardship due to disease and spiralling effects of the global economic recession, but also to other social and environmental disasters that deem citizens vulnerable. The war against poverty can best be won if our people are empowered to fight against the many variables that confine them to that state. While Government grants and other forms of transfers are noble and definitive signals in the State's commitment to vulnerable persons, these can only serve to re-enforce the dependency syndrome if it is implemented as a solitary measure, and is therefore not an effective sustained approach to poverty reduction. The TCCTP was designed to address food insecurity via a cash transfer, while at the same time facilitating rehabilitative and developmental activities by ensuring that recipients are also afforded the skills training, referrals and assistance needed to find employment as a prerequisite or condition of receiving that cash transfer.

The objective of the programme is also to provide recipients with training specific in areas namely, such a budgetary planning, family planning, career guidance and life skills. Through the design of the former Rise-Up, the developmental component of the food support programme was a regionally and internationally accepted model. However, the implementation of the conditional component of the programme has been minimal. The programme has since been rebranded to its former name, Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme, Uplifting People otherwise known as Step-Up. And in fiscal 2018

will become a critical part of not only the food support programme, but the entire suite of programmes offered by the Ministry, and in this way the Ministry will begin the journey of transferring individuals from welfare dependency syndrome to one of self-sufficiency and resilience. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. We agreed that MP Newallo-Hosein would start, but I will override her, and I will pose some preliminary questions, because I really do not know too much about the Food Card Programme. So, for the benefit of me and the audience, I would imagine other members of the Committee, could you give a brief background into the card which existed in the past? Because I know you are in the process of reviewing the programme. What is the value of it, I do not know. Is it that it is given only to families with young children? I do not know. Is it that when someone gets one of these purchase cards that they can buy anything? Or is it simply to ensure that the minimum calorie intake of an individual is satisfied? Do you limit the range of goods which could be purchased? So, basic background information simply I need before we start the enquiry. Could the PS provide that insight?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, again. PS Barrow provided some information in terms of the nature of the programme. Currently we have three denominations; the \$410 card, the \$550 card and the \$700 card. These are the permanent cards. The programme constitutes permanent food cards and temporary food cards. The \$410 cards are for families with one to three persons; four to five persons, \$550; and six and over will get the \$700 card. The temporary food cards have the same denominations, and they are given for a different purpose.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, single persons do not qualify? A single individual who is poor—

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: He qualifies?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: And what is the value?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: That will be one, \$410.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, so that \$410 is for a single person?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Very well. Okay.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: One to three persons.

Mr. Chairman: One to three, very well.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Generally, persons will come in and apply for the card and there is a process that they would follow, which includes a means test and a visit to their home to determine the eligibility criteria and whether they meet that criteria for the card. The programme also involves, as was indicated, the developmental aspect. Over the years not everyone on the card actually participated in the developmental aspect.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, we will get that. But the second follow up to that is, are individuals in receipt of other types of assistance from the State such as old age pension—the old age pension grant also eligible for these cards?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: They can qualify.

Mr. Chairman: Oh, they can.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Yes, they can qualify. You also mentioned what could be purchased with the card, and there is a list of items which could be purchased. Generally, it is food items. Of course, alcohol, cigarettes and so on will be disallowed, and the grocers will know the items that could be purchased.

Mr. Chairman: You said generally food but does the grocer have a flexibility to

say that this item that you purchase is not covered, or is it anything goes except alcohol and cigarettes?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: At the beginning of the programme there was a list that was provided to the grocers in terms of what could be purchased, but as the programme morphed I think most people could purchase beyond foodstuff, I think they could even purchase some items of necessities that they would have to use on a monthly basis, once it was not cigarettes and alcohol.

Mr. Chairman: Right. Okay, so it is pretty large based upon the choice of the individual or family at that time with respect to the needs that he or she would like to satisfy.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: One final question with respect to persons who are in receipt of the disability benefits from the State, are they automatically considered for one of these cards to supplement the disability grant, or must they also go through the same formal application process?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: It is not automatic. According to the policy they must apply.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, very well. Thank you very much. That satisfies the preliminary queries that I had. I will now invite MP Newallo-Hosein to pose her first question.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Chair. Before I go into my questions I want to ask a very important question, it is this: Do you still have the food card, the card itself, or is it a direct deposit system?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We still have the food card. Just a little under 27,000 people with the food card and some persons receiving their benefit from cheques. And it is not direct deposit, they actually collect the cheques.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Okay, so when they collect the cheques, with the actual

cheques being collected, how does the Ministry determine if the recipients are in fact purchasing these basket of goods that is representative of a nutritionally balanced diet, because that is how you determine whether you are impacting upon poverty?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: In 2016, we had a situation where there were approximately 5,000 or more persons who had qualified to receive the grants since 2014 but had not received any benefits, so the decision was taken to provide their benefit through a cheque with the understanding that this was going to be a short-term arrangement. And we understood that we would not be able to monitor these persons, but there was a sense that because these persons qualified and perhaps the families were disadvantaged by not receiving a benefit that they were eligible for, the decision was taken and we understood that we were going to move towards a new card system that would enable them to now transfer to the card from the cheque, which we are going to be implementing by the end of this year into the beginning of the second quarter of fiscal 2018.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: PS, I do not want to be disrespectful or anything, but I remember distinctly that the Minister in Parliament made a very clear statement that the cards were obsolete, they were causing problems, and they were in fact rejected by the banks and therefore the Ministry had to revert to a direct deposit system. So, I do not understand what is—there is a discrepancy in what is being said today and what was said in Parliament, and therefore it comes back again, how do you in fact measure whether the poverty reduction is in fact being impacted upon in Trinidad and Tobago, because, obviously the population wants value for money? And you just indicated that some persons are getting cheques, and therefore with a cheque you cash your money, nobody—when you go to a grocery no one is able to determine whether that cash that you are walking with

comes from State resources, and therefore they could purchase cigarettes and alcohol, and not in fact get the nutrition that is required. So, how do you measure it? What monitoring and evaluation systems are in place to measure?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: There are a number of questions there, but the first statement I would make concerns the Minister's statement, I am not aware that a statement was made concerning the fact that the cards were now done away with. I know the cards became obsolete. There were some problems with the cards, but the banks stopped producing new cards. However, the old cards continued to be used, and the statement was made that we were moving away from the obsolete system to a new system, as far as I am aware. So that we still have the cards in operation, and it is just 4,000 persons or so that are on the cheque. We started off with just about 2,000 and we moved to 4,000 as at the end of September. So it is a minimal number of persons with the cheque, and with the understanding, as I indicated, that we are moving to a new card system. But Mr. Gangapersad who is the Chief Technical Officer, he is also able to give some further insight on this matter, because he had an integral part to do with the shift to the cheque system.

Mr. Chairman: Right. I have a follow-up and I find it a bit surprising that a card can become obsolete. Because we are dealing with technology, and the ATM cards that we use simply have a strip on them and the computer scientist does what he has to do and all you have to do is activate that strip or update it. So, I would like from your Chief Technical Officer to explain how a technological card becomes obsolete, and why simply reprogramming could not activate some of the old cards? Because, you see, the question posed by MP Newallo-Hosein to my mind is a very valid one, in that if it is a targeted programme and it is not really spent in exchange for goods, to see what the goods are, and people have cash, then the cash can be used for a range of things which are not intended for the

programme, which is to really improve your calorie intake as a poor person. So, I wait to hear what your technical officer has to say about the obsolescence of the card then I would ask Mr. Esmond Forde to come in. Technical Officer how can a card become—because my ATM card is about 12 years old and it is the same thing issued by the bank, and it is not obsolete at all?

Mr. Gangapersad: Thanks PS. Chair, just to explain that this system was procured by the Ministry in 2006. It is not an open system, it is a closed-loop system that was built for the Ministry, so only our cards can be used on that machine. So the technology that we have out there is a 2006 technology and has not been updated since that time.

Around March of 2016 the bank did indicate to the Ministry that it was an exposure both to the bank and the Ministry if they continue to operate on that system as it is, and advised that we move to a new system. And as you know, what we were doing at that point in time was transitioning to the biometric system. So the bank was facilitating the process at that point in time. What happened, as PS indicated, is that we had over 4,000 persons waiting, and the applications, some of these applications were dated back to 2013. We also had some persons who were placed on the biometric system, and since the biometric system was put on a hold, the bank indicated that they were not going to put these people back onto the old debit card system because of the exposure to the bank as well as the Ministry.

So a decision had to be made, these persons had been coming to the Ministry often, calling the Ministry, reporting through the media, the MPs, all over the place, indicating that they had been approved and were not receiving any support. So the decision was taken out of an abundance of caution to these persons, and recognizing that they have a responsibility if they are in need of food, that they will meet their food need when we give them the cheque, a decision was taken to pay

by cheque. So, the system itself is a system that was built for the Ministry, and hence the reason why—and it was never updated.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much Mr. Gangapersad. It is getting as Alice say, curiouser and curiouser, and the reason is this: I am now hearing from you that the cards themselves are not obsolete, but the system to process the cards is. And I imagine the banks are a bit reluctant to update the system because, as you know, you are a computer expert, every three years the technology has to change. So you are saying the technology they had was 10 years old, is it that they are reluctant to spend the funds to upgrade their technology to handle the cards, and that is what is causing the problems for the 4,000 people who are now in receipt of cheques? Is the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services prepared to provide some kind of contractual arrangement with the banks so that they will update the technology and ensure that everyone has the card? Because it is surprising to me that in a targeted programme people actually have cash.

Mr. Gangapersad: Just for clarity, I am the Chief Technical Officer, I have no IT background. But just to say, this is the way in which the Ministry is going right now. We have since been working with the bank to upgrade the system, and as PS indicated, a new debit card system would be introduced sometime in December or the beginning of January. It was in the context the biometric system was approved since 2005. Successive attempts to get this has been posing a challenge, and asking the bank to upgrade a system knowing that the biometric system was soon to be introduced was making—that was an issue at the point in time. So, as time went by we were always—in fact in 2007 a tender was put out for a biometric card. We did select a provider, and then the banking infrastructure, from what we were told, could not manage smart card transaction. So we continued to try after that, and then in 2010 again we went out again. So, it was

always in the context of a new system being introduced that we never went after upgrading that debit card system.

11.00 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: I have so many more questions now, but I will ask MP Forde to come in and then I will ask Sen. Sinanan to come in as well. So after MP Forde, Sen. Sinanan you will pose your questions.

Mr. Forde: Before I ask my particular question, I just want to follow up on a statement that was made. What sort of dollars and cents are we talking about with regard to this biometric system upgrade, it being obsolete and now going forward? What sort of figures are we talking about? The cost of the whole biometric system to upgrade or for a new one?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We have two—I think you are mentioning two things there, the biometric which was a system that we were actually bringing on stream in 2015 and the new system from January which will be facilitated through First Citizens Bank. And as far as I recall, that system would be costing us about \$1 million a year. The biometric was much more. I think Mr. Gangapersad has that specific figure in terms of how much we spent for the biometric.

Mr. Forde: Okay. You can provide it now?

Mr. Gangapersad: Yeah, sure.

Mr. Forde: Okay.

Mr. Gangapersad: Thanks again PS. The capital expenditure on the biometric system was, \$30,975,000; that is the biometric system. The capital expenditure on the financial platform development was \$3.8 million. The recurrent expenditure for the biometric platform was \$2.8 million annually, and the financial platform which included an SMS text messaging module and bank charges was \$29million annually.

Mr. Forde: And the social aspect of this particular programme, what is the total cost of it? When we look at these figures that you are now providing, was it beneficial along those lines that—did it make sense in going at that system or making a change of what you are probably now looking at for 2018? Because you called some figures there, \$30 million; 3.8; 2.8; \$29 million. Yes, it is a social programme and you may say that we may not want to look at the figures, but again in terms of it being beneficial to the economy, was it a worthwhile investment for those sort of figures?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: I would say a cost-benefit analysis would be required to do that and we did not do a cost-benefit analysis. What we did was to put a hold on the system, not the registration however—the use of the biometric card—because at that point in 2016 we were actually paying about \$2.8 million every month to provide \$1.7 million worth of cards to 3,000 and a little bit, I think 3,100 beneficiaries. So that was not making economic sense and we put a hold on that particular aspect of the system, the biometric system.

Mr. Forde: So going forward, as the Permanent Secretary you are satisfied with the new programme or the new system that we are going to put in place in 2018 as being more feasible?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: I am satisfied because it is costing just about \$1 million per year for the bank charges and also because we will be continuing the biometric registration because that system still belongs to the Ministry. So the investment would not have been lost.

Mr. Forde: Okay. And now I want to come to my question now, because that was just a follow-up. In terms of the criteria to qualify for a food card, as an MP and in an area where a lot of individuals come enquiring about food cards, you said that the criteria works out, one to three persons for household, right? And then you

have four to six and then six and over, right, based on the 410, the 550 and also the 700. In terms of the criteria, you have to go to NIB to get a statement, you have to go to the various places in order to get a breakdown, if you are receiving any benefit as the case may be.

Now, there is a ceiling figure, in terms of, if your income is of a certain value, but then you also sometimes—again, this is based on information some people mentioned to us, in that some people say that the household, if there are other working persons in the household, they may not qualify. As an MP or as an individual, a particular household, individuals over 18 years, as we know in our society that income is mine, as the case may be. The other individual, I may have a brother in my house or a sister-in-law, whatever, that income is theirs. But you are—I am unemployed and you are saying, subject to the household income I may not qualify. It may sound unfair, but what is the logistic, what is the justification for using that approach as one of qualifying criteria?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: I know Mr. Gangapersad may have some more information as he has been in the Ministry and involved with these programmes a little more, but I know this is a family benefit and therefore if there is a card in the family then you would not be able to get one as an individual if that family already has a card

Mr. Chairman: But PS, the question is this, there are members of the family who are poor. One family member earns his income, but what MP is saying, that income belongs to him or her and may not necessarily share with other members of the family. Are the other three people saying the family is going to be penalized simply because one other member of the family who lives in the household is a little bit better off and not be qualified for the food card? I think that is the question, you know.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: I understand, but what I am saying, when the actual

programme commenced it was family oriented. So that, as we go along we may have to look at the policy again but we also have to consider the extent of expenditure on this programme, so that we do not, you know, encourage three and four cards in one household. Because the intent was one card, one to three persons, four to five, six and over.

Mr. Chairman: Right, but PS—

Mr. Forde: That needs to be made clear.

Mr. Chairman: But my concern was that, a household which really should get a card but is denied the card because one member seems to be working for a reasonably good salary and he does not share, she does not share—you are assuming that all people living under one roof are sharing and they are distributing their income. But it may not be. So I really think that we need to evaluate whether that high-income earner is actually sharing or is—but really, you could briefly respond before I ask Sen. Sinanan to come in.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Mr. Gangapersad will give his input.

Mr. Gangapersad: Yes, and I think that one of the key words here is “household”, because in a house there could be several households and I think that what the programme has done is to define what is considered a household. And usually it is those persons who might be sharing some sort of living arrangement, it might be cooking arrangement, washing arrangement, but that family is identified as that unit. So for instance, in one house you may have several households who can come forward and apply and will each on their own merit be assessed—so you could have more than one card in a house, but it belongs to separate households.

Mr. Chairman: Excellent, thank you very much Mr. Gangapersad, and I will have—

Mr. Forde: Hold a second, hold a second.

Mr. Chairman: But Senator, a follow-up—

Mr. Forde: You have evidence on that Mr. Gangapersad?

Miss Ameen: If I may just add. I think what we are also looking at is not where multiple families in one building getting the card, but where applicants are denied because they live under a roof where there may be other people and some of these other people may be children who have jobs just starting off minimum wage. But when they total the family income or the income under the roof that applicant is rejected when there really is a genuine need. So it is twofold.

Mr. Chairman: We will put that on hold. It is an important issue, the definition of the household because, as Mr. Gangapersad said, there are individuals living under one roof but they constitute separate households. So we need to see what— if you could send to the Committee in writing the policy with respect to the definition of the household, I think it would benefit us. But Sen. Sinanan has not yet posed and he absolutely needs to ask his question.

Mr. Sinanan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Please activate your microphone.

Mr. Sinanan: What is the total package—before I go to the substantive question—what is the total package in terms of quantum of money that this programme costs the Government? You have, what—27,000 or 31,000 applicants?

Mr. Chairman: Could you repeat your question Sen. Sinanan because we did not get it on the microphone.

Mr. Sinanan: The total cost of this programme to the Government?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: As at the end of September 2017, we had about 27,000 persons on the programme. Fiscal 2016 we had an expenditure of \$260million; that is fiscal 2016. Since the programme started we have estimated—this is since 2006 to the end of fiscal 2016—we have estimated that it is about \$1.981 billion

for simply the food support. This is not including administrative costs and so on.

Mr. Sinanan: So we are talking about close to \$2 billion. Bearing in mind the challenges we have now with foreign exchange, is there any consideration that these grants will be used to purchase local food? We keep talking about alcohol and cigarettes, but alcohol and cigarettes is just, I guess one known. Should we not be looking at using some of the staples that is produced locally rather than the Government giving a grant of close to \$2 billion and a lot of these grants are being used for foreign stuff that may not be in keeping with the health patterns, because you have no control as to what people buy outside—the alcohol and the cigarettes. And should we not be considering now that we try to promote local products with that money, with the challenges that we have with foreign exchange and to actually boost the manufacturing and production of locally produced foods? Would that be a consideration now?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We have not given consideration to that, but as we review the programme we could look into that approach just to say though that when we give grants, when we give support to persons who are vulnerable we also recognize that they have rights too and we would not want to, you know, put conditionalities that are on these grants that will be a bit, you know, difficult for them to deal with.

Mr. Sinanan: But the magical word there is “a grant” and it is a government grant. I am just considering—if the time has not come now that—it is like in the construction sector. In the Ministry of Works and Transport we would do a lot of contracts now for tendering and a critical clause we have there is the local content and in some cases we are not allowing the importation of imported aggregate again. Because if the Government is spending money, the Government is giving a contract and we are short on foreign exchange in the country, why are we importing aggregate? So, that is a clause in the contracts now. So I am just

looking, if you are talking \$2 billion, that is a lot of money and if you calculate that into the amount of US dollars, maybe the time has come to consider that when the Government is doing a grant like that that we give some priority to locally produced food.

Mr. Chairman: Just as a follow-up PS, you of course are guided by Government policy, right? So if the relevant Minister says we would like to have more local content to be consumed out of this grant and this card, are you then not obliged to find a mechanism? And a recommendation would be, all the participating merchants must then purchase a certain amount from the local farmers, local food producers, have a local content in their supermarket, because the card has to be—you cannot use a card in Chaguanas Market, you cannot use it on the street, you have to use it at an established house of business. So that it may very well be a policy—if it is Government policy, and I sense it is, that you may want to send a directive to your merchants, participating merchants, that they must purchase from the local agricultural sector and at least have local foods available so that the card can then be used to purchase that on a transaction basis. Is that the kind of thing that engages the attention of the planners in the Ministry?

Mr. Sinanan: Chair, I just want to add, if you look at the School Nutrition Programme, they have moved to that concept, where the meals that they provide, they have moved away from the importation of the fruits, and so, that they put and they put locally produced fruits. So I just want to put it on the table that you all could consider something like that because we are strapped for foreign exchange, and if the Government is putting out \$1.8 billion the Government should have a say as to the country benefiting somewhere along the line from that money. Thank you.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: So, Chair, we have heard and I am saying we are reviewing,

so we would look at how we could bring in that element—

Mr. Chairman: Excellent.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers:—but just to say that that \$2 billion is over 10 years.

Mr. Chairman: All right, thank you very much MP, and now MP Antoine has to pose his question.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: I am following up. You said the status of the Rise-Up Programme has been rebranded as the Step-Up Programme and that programme would be implemented. I wonder what is the timetable for the implementation of that Step-Up Programme because you say presently there is no one enrolled in that programme because it has been rebranded. So, what is the status of that programme and what is the timetable for its implementation?

Ms. Barrow: Good morning, again. We are currently looking at revising the entire programme and we want to implement it within this fiscal 2018. So it would be part of the integrated model that we are undertaking as part of our restructuring exercise. So it would be implemented within this fiscal.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: So you are not able to give me any timetable, within the three months, within the next six months, so and so is going to happen as the case may be?

Ms. Barrow: Most likely within the next three months.

Mr. Sinanan: Excuse me.

Mr. Chairman: Yes Sir, and Sen. Sinanan is excused. Thank you very much for participating, Senator. And Sen. Ameen you can pose your question followed by— MP Jennings-Smith you will come in after Sen. Ameen and then we will have Newallo-Hosein again, MP.

[Sen. Sinanan leaves the Committee room]

Miss Ameen: Chair, just as an extension of Sen. Sinanan's suggestion to ensure

that money is spent locally by purchasing locally manufactured or grown food. The main programme is meeting the nutritional needs of the families. Have there been—I know that the—well, I know of the Rise-Up component and I know you would be changing it to the Step-Up now. But that part that deals with empowerment and education and health—was health education a part of that and is that going to be part of this main programme with the changes that are being implemented? And to me, the key is to empower and educate the recipient to meet the nutritional needs of the family.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: The answer is yes, the health component would continue to be part of the Step-Up where we have about eight conditionalities that the family would have to meet. We also have the CFNI, which is the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute, involved in the programme and part of the sessions that will be held for the family will include sessions that deal with family planning; there would be sessions for persons in the family who may be pregnant and so on; and, of course, a sense of what nutrition would be important for each person in the family. So there will be the health component and all the other components that are currently—the eight components that are part of the Step-Up.

The only two areas that may be new may be the issue of values, attitudes and behaviours which the Ministry has been given the responsibility for, and how we can actually bring that into the Step-Up and also the issue of the psychosocial that treats with the welfare mentality of some persons such that no matter what you do and take them through a programme like this they still want to remain on the grant. So we want to also look at how we can bring an element that treats with the, what we call the “welfare syndrome”, the dependency syndrome.

Miss Ameen: Chair, if you would allow me, I just want to say at this juncture that, you know, the social aspect of the well-being of our citizens is something that is

often impacted every time there is a change in political administration. And I think the fact that this programme is being changed you really have—the programme is really being improved upon and I agree with continuous assessment and improvement. And this is not an indictment on the Permanent Secretary or this programme specifically, but the fact is that good programmes exist and consecutive Governments must continue to improve on them. And stopping a programme and then starting another one and then the term of a Government comes to an end, it is often to the detriment of our most vulnerable citizens.

Mr. Chairman: What is your question to the Committee? It was your question to the panellists on that?

Miss Ameen: I just want to implore or ask—to ensure that the continuity of the existing recipients, because the programme is not going on that this time while the changes are being made, if I got you correctly. I want to ask if the existing recipients are in fact continuing on the Rise-Up Programme until the Step-Up Programme kicks in or if you simply have nothing going on until the Step-Up Programme begins and therefore how the recipients are being affected now with this change?

Ms. Barrow: What I can say is that the programme has not been going on for some time and there is no one on the actual programme at the moment. What I can say is that all the existing persons who are currently in receipt of the food card, we still have to plan as to how they are to go on this programme, the Step-Up. All right? So it is something that we are trying to do within this fiscal to at least start and have a structured measurement so that we can go through and make sure that persons are benefiting from this new, well, not new but improved, and I agree it is an improved system and it does cover a lot of the different areas. As PS Bailey-Sobers mentioned before, which include all the different—health, as well as

education, the social. It is something that we want to make sure is happening and that was the issue that was from before that it was not happening while we were giving out the food cards, and as PS Sobers said, we do not want to continue one of just being welfare and persons being just dependent on the State.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Chair, if I could just—

Mr. Chairman: A brief follow-up from MP Antoine, you will answer but a brief follow-up from MP Antoine and then MP Jennings-Smith has not posed a question for the morning so she will have the floor after MP Antoine comes in. Yes, you can respond.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Thank you. I just wanted to add to that response that our records show, based on a report that was done on the Rise-Up at the point in time in January of 2015 that up to 2014 persons were actually part participating in the Rise-Up, just up to 2014. So after that they really have not been participating in the programme.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: Yes, PS. I am having a difficulty with the definition of family. Just yesterday I had a young man come to see me. He is 23 years old. He lived with his mother on O'Meara Road in D'Abadie. They were evicted by the landlord because the landlord increased the rent because the landlord is of the opinion that more than one family was residing in the house. He, his girlfriend and a child were living in one bedroom of the home that the mother was renting. Now they are both being evicted. They came to see me actually for HDC. But what is the Ministry's definition of "family", because under that household you had a mother, but then you had a son who had his own family within that—

Mr. Chairman: You must have a definition of family.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: What is the definition of a family?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We have social workers here, both Mr. Gangapersad and Mrs. Layne-Pereira and they are on the ground so they will be able to say, I think, the definition of family as opposed to household, because that is where the distinction—

Mr. Gangapersad: Well, I know that in some of the programmes in the Ministry, especially as it relates to public assistance, a household is considered to be those persons who are sharing the same living, and basically it is same cooking arrangement, the same laundry arrangement. If my memory serves me correct and I know that the Chair had asked that we send the definition for the TCCTP it was a similar-type kind of definition.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Could you then—I would like to see how these definitions conform with international norms if possible, because we are looking at eradicating poverty and we know what the minimum calorie intake and so on. So the definition of a household, the definition of a family, these are things that I think, especially in the Trinidad and Tobago context which is unique. But MP Jennings-Smith has not yet posed a question and MP you can pose more than one question because it is your turn now.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: Good morning all. I listened where PS you outlined plans to restructure your delivery service and a sore point keeps coming up is when persons have to access temporary food card, can you tell us what changes, if any, you intend to implement with regard to facilitating a faster period for persons like, for example, persons whose homes were burnt, persons who suffered flood, persons who would have had an emergency, like family break-up, and they are in difficulty in terms of their living arrangements? Can you tell me what has changed with respect to the temporary food card—if you are looking at making any changes to facilitate that faster access to that temporary food card? I want to ask in relation

to that: Was any consideration given to the decentralization for approval for these food cards, because at this point in time I know we are just from the budget but a lot of people keep going to the centre and asking when they would get that food card and the answer is usually, well they have to wait on headquarters to send down the cheques. So could you outline to us if that is correct or not and what really happens?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: I think your first question had to do with the temporary food cards and Mrs. Layne-Pereira would give a response, but as far as I am aware you could get your temporary food card once you have been assessed immediately, unless there is an issue of none being available, because we had some issues with the 410 card which is usually what is given for temporary measures. Mrs. Layne-Pereira would respond.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: Well PS, that is exactly what happened to some of the persons who ended up in my office. They said that there were no temporary food cards. So in cases such as these, what happens?

Mrs. Layne-Pereira: Good morning. In cases where there are no temporary food cards in the office, we normally advise the client that they can come back. They give them a specific time, because the temporary food cards are also lodged at our head office. So the supervisors can come up, collect some and carry back to the offices. Temporary food cards are issued to persons in need, like natural disasters on a same-day basis. As with the recent flood we have issued temporary food cards.

Mr. Chairman: Could you indicate how many of these cards were issued on account of the recent flooding on a temporary basis and on a daily basis?

Mrs. Layne-Pereira: The figures are still coming in because we still have assessment forms out there. I do know that in some areas as much as five

temporary food cards were given out because we are second responders. And the first responders who went out issued a lot of hampers. So the clients actually indicated that they got foodstuff.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: Coming from where my constituency, I can say that when we have the flooding we really get quick response, but I am really referring to the persons to go on a one-on-one basis with nobody else knowing that they went. They usually find themselves back at their MP's office complaining that they have to go on multiple occasions. And I want to particularly ask if any consideration is given to training of persons who have to deal with persons going to offices? I would not mention which offices, but certainly—the compassion and the responses to people going to those places—because going to those centres a person has to be really in need and we see persons going many days for the same response and they tell me they feel humiliated, they feel that they are not a person and I want to know, did you give any consideration to training of persons who work at those centres?

Mr. Chairman: Yes MP, and as a follow-up, how many of those persons, your staff, have themselves been subject to life skills training with respect to customer service and dealing with the public and ensuring that you have a sympathetic demeanour to people in need. Very valuable

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: PS Barrow would speak to the customer service, but I just wanted to indicate that most of the 410 cards because at the beginning that was the card that would be given out for disasters were depleted and we have since taken a policy decision to use the 550 to assist with disasters that would come up because the bank is also not, as you recall, the bank is not producing any more of those cards. So we have taken the decision to use the 550, the next denomination. So that should bring some relief.

11.30 a.m.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: I want to follow up with the suggestion by the hon. Minister of Works and Transport. I see here that your programme partnered with approximately 277 large and small-scale merchants and 172 groceries and I am also looking at persons receiving cheques and what they do with those cheques. Did you ever consider—or is it possible that these cheques—because I know you do it for furniture and furnishings when we have flooding. Is it possible that those cheques could be made in favour of the grocery stores? And taking up from where Mr. Sinanan left off with respect to encouraging persons to buy local, could some arrangement be made in that regard to facilitate that approach to dealing with persons getting relief at this point in time, through cheque payment?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: PS Barrow would speak.

Ms. Barrow: Just to answer with regards to the previous query with regards to the training. All the members of staff at the Ministry have undergone client-care training which was an initiative that the Ministry undertook from April this year, and all members of staff in all the different district offices have all undergone client-care training. It is not a one-off training but one that we are trying to continue as we go through the year, as we try to improve how our staff greet with our clients and how they—and I do think that sometimes it happens that persons might become desensitized sometimes to the needs of our clients over the years, but it is something that we need to keep reminding them of, and that is the initiative that we have undertaken.

Mr. Chairman: Who provides the training? Is it in-house?

Ms. Barrow: It is internal.

Mr. Chairman: Pardon me?

Ms. Barrow: We did it internally—

Mr. Chairman: Oh, internal. Okay. There may be a problem with internal training, you know, in that the wrong things may be repeated continuously. Have you considered maybe having your training programmes itself being evaluated?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Just to say that while the training was actually provided by persons from inside the Ministry, it was approved externally—the content. And we had some external persons involved, but they would have been from Public Service Academy.

Mr. Chairman: I kind of like training from the private sector especially when they are trying to earn profits. The training I have seen from people in the private sector—in the food sector—is one which makes me want to return. There is one company in particular I want to return. So I do not know if you would consider having some private sector involvement there, so that—to infuse the public sector with the private sector drive for profit. Your baseline is customer satisfaction, but that is something, as PSs you will consider.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: I want to ask, and I want to stress again, because, you know, we want to promote agriculture and we want to promote persons to get into agriculture, and a lot of persons are now engaging with grocery stores to have their products sold, and I really feel that this point could be given some consideration. I do not know if it is possible.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Which point, Mrs. Jennings?

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: I spoke about your relationship with the grocery stores. I see you have 237 large and small-scale merchants and 172 groceries that you will have a relationship with, and I was querying the fact that you all are giving cheques to persons who are accessing support and I am looking at some of the concerns of this Committee where they are thinking that, maybe, what persons would really buy with the cheques. Would they buy foodstuff? And also the point

where we want to promote local products and the point that Mr. Sinanan raised, and I want to ask if you could look at making any kind of arrangement to facilitate this suggestion.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We need to take it on board, Chair, to look at it as we review the programme.

Mr. Chairman: Basically, all your merchants simply partnering with local suppliers, that you will approve so that they can have at least local content in their place of business. I think that seems to be the recommendation. MP Newallo-Hosein wants to come in and then we are coming around this way. We will come back to MP Forde and then you.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Chair. Coming back to the biometric card, PS, I understand that the biometric card allows the recipient to access a range of social benefits which include social assistance grants, disability grants, food cards and general assistance. Does this new card that you hope to implement in 2018 provide for the same?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: No, it would be a debit card without those features.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: All right. Listen. One sec. The biometric card also allows for—to prevent the abuse of State funds, fraud and duplication of grants to any one person. Does this new card provide for that?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: There are measures which we will put in place to address that, not necessarily the card, but there are other supporting measures that we would put in place to address those issues, including a new IT system.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: The biometric card allows for your fingerprint. In other words, it is unique to an individual, which means that you will eliminate fraud, you will eliminate duplication, you will eliminate a number of administrative costs and you are looking at—this is costing so much of moneys compared to \$1 million.

And I am asking: are you getting the same value with that \$1 million card compared to the biometric card?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: And I am saying we would not have the biometric card, but we would still be using the biometric system for registration and Mr. Gangapersad would add to that.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: But beyond that, I am asking a further question. With the system management that comes with the biometric card whereby a person who would have moved for whatever reason; they may have had an injury and they have to go and live by their daughter, once their file moves—the case management—once they move from one location to another, their file must go and oftentimes their file is lost, and if the file is lost their benefit would stop, which the biometric card would have facilitated that transition. Does this card do this in 2018?

Mr. Gangapersad: Thanks PS, Chair. I just want to add that the basis for any payment was our central beneficiary registry which, in the past, was mainly paper-based, paper-driven and data being inputted in that registry, basic payment data. Since the Ministry invested in the biometric system which, as PS indicated is ours, the Ministry—it belongs to the Ministry—the basis for any payments to be made would be from the biometric system. So even if we have to issue a cheque, it comes from the biometric system that these are persons who are enrolled in the biometric system and we will continue. For instance, the senior citizens pension, they have to do a life certificate every year. Once we have all our senior citizens pensioners inputted in the database, it means that we have persons there who would be validly paid because we have it in the registry. And it will still be using your biometric data instead of a number which is usually assigned—either the ID card number, which can be compromised, or a file number which can be

compromised.

As it relates to the movement of persons, the movement of persons and the movement of the file is in law. Both the Public Assistance Act and the Senior Citizens Pension Act require that if a person moves from one address to another one which is outside of the regional office that they belong to, their file must be transferred. The system of payment, whether it is biometric or if it is a debit card, would not prevent the file from moving. I understand the point that you are making that sometimes files get lost, but it is not because of the payment platform or the central beneficiary registry. And I think that some due diligence has to be put in place to ensure that that does not happen. But as it relates to the current payment system, or the biometric, it would not really prevent a file from being lost.

Mr. Chairman: Just a brief follow-up. You mentioned something about life certificates for the old age pensioners, and at this forum at another meeting it was indicated that of December 31st, this year, 2017, life certificates were going to be eliminated and it was going to be replaced by death certificates. Please indicate the status of that. Because from your explanation and discussion it appears as though it is a fait accompli that life certificates will continue till infinity. I just need to get the feedback of both permanent secretaries on a commitment given to this Committee on another forum.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Chair, I am happy to say that we have been moving along progressively. We have an MOU signed with the Registrar General and we are now to just implement in terms of, you know, actually having it operationalized. There is just one small element that still has to be done with immigration to allow us to do it. So we are still working with 1st of January—2nd of January, 2018.

Mr. Chairman: That is very heartening to hear because when I heard your Chief Technology Officer indicate about life certificates I got a little nervous, indicating

that, okay, the undertaking that was given at the beginning of the year is now being reversed without advising the Committee. And I understand fully the immigration issues that are going to arise. But before I go back to MP Newallo-Hosein, we got a query from a member of the public who said that since July of 2017 of this year, food card recipients were asked to sign for banking transactions and failure to do so would cause them to lose the grant and hence he or she, the caller, is concerned that there should be no cheques issued at all. Is this factually correct or incorrect, that they were asked to sign up for banking services or online transactions, something to that effect, and if they did not, the card was going to be terminated? Could you verify that that was so or not so?

Ms. Barrow: That had to do with the direct deposit and it was not necessarily transaction information that we were asking for but more verification of an account with a bank, and we clarified that with our clients.

Mr. Chairman: And is that for the food card or just old age pensioners?

Ms. Barrow: No, that was for the direct deposit.

Mr. Chairman: Direct deposit for other grants—

Ms. Barrow: Other grants.

Mr. Chairman:—disability, old age pensions.

Ms. Barrow: Senior citizens, everybody else.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, very well. Thank you very much. You can continue with any follow-up you have and then we come to—

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: No, no. It is her second round. And your second round is coming, MP.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you very much, Chair. PS, you indicated that for the Rise Up, in 2014 was the last time anyone had applied, which I can verify is, in

fact, incorrect because a number of persons in 2015 were awaiting approvals and interviews. My question is—because I know that aspect is, perhaps, incorrect and it may have been provided for you incorrectly. You indicated that for the Step Up Programme, no one is on the programme currently. But has anyone applied for the Step Up?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: I am not aware that people applied for this programme. The understanding is that once you have been approved for a food card you are supposed to go through a process of being trained, of being assisted and referred so that you could be brought to a place where your family can graduate off of the programme. So it is not an application process for the clients, it is actually a programme that has to be administered by the officers of the TCCTP Programme, so that all the persons on the food card are carried through. The households are carried through that programme to a place where they could be graduated.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Which brings me to this question. How many persons are administratively dealing with the Step Up Programme and the TCCTP currently?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: PS Barrow and the HR team would treat with that matter.

Ms. Barrow: The Food Card Programme is now part of the Social Welfare Division and it is not separated out from the rest of the functions of the Social Welfare Division. So all the different staff—the staff that would normally administer grants are currently processing the food card also. With regards to the Step Up, that programme is one that we are now looking at to implement so we do not have anyone assigned to that particular programme as yet. We are still working out the logistics of it.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: So Rise Up was de-branded and you have a new brand re-branded, Step Up, and there is no one there in the system to run it. And for the TCCTP Programme, you indicated that the persons there, the whole department

was, in fact—their contracts were not renewed. So how many persons are, in fact, managing this programme in the Social Welfare Department?

Ms. Barrow: All the field officers within the social welfare districts administer the food programme.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: How many?

Ms. Barrow: In each district? We could provide you with that information.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Please provide it in writing. Thank you very much, MP Newallo-Hosein. And now MP Esmond Forde.

Mr. Forde: I know my colleague is probably speaking from the point of view of being part of the Ministry prior. Right? Now you said that contract workers, once you moved away from Rise Up, that the contract workers were not renewed. But in a document that you all provided to us here, which is “Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration”, the inquiry document, we received it on October 27, you all spoke about retrenchment on page 3.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We did not.

Mr. Forde: Oh no. The question was retrenchment. Right. Because if you are on contract you cannot be retrenched. Basically your contract will be renewed. So I just wanted to get that aspect clarified.

And my second point that I want to refer to is on page 4. In 2014, in terms of permanent food cards and temporary food cards, there was a total of 65,000-plus. In 2017, it has now probably come down to 28,000. You are following me, Madam PS, on that document?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Forde: When we go to page 5, at the top of page 5 at Roman Numeral X, only 480 persons appealed, or queried from that list. Why such a small amount? If it is that the persons were in active use of a food card, you know—65,000

persons—and, you know, it has been since reduced to less than half and only 480 persons query it, what could be some of the reasons why a vast number of persons would not have queried, you know, the failure of not getting back their food cards? I am seeing a smile on PS Barrow face, boy. I hope I could get a good answer.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: As you said, Member, we had a significant reduction from 2014 to the end of fiscal 2017. However, in fiscal 2016, that is when we would have undertaken our review exercise where we would have requested persons who were on the card, to come in to register if they were not biometrically registered. We sent adds out in terms of deadlines when persons should come in to register, following which they will be removed from the system. After we came to the end of the deadline, there were a number of persons, some 13,000 or more, who did not come in to register and were therefore removed. Some of them, as you indicated, came in and re-applied and were given a food card because they were eligible—they were deemed to be still eligible. I cannot speak for those who did not come in. There were some persons—

Mr. Forde: But you can speculate.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We can speculate but I know, based on some of the calls, some of the persons had actually died, others, we just could not locate them. So those were some of the valid reasons why some people did not come in, but we could not speak for the other thousands who, you know, we just did not—

Mr. Forde: No, but you see, but Madam PS, we are talking about a vast number of persons, right?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Forde: And in terms of my maths, the specifics, we are talking about over 20,000 persons; 480 came in, which is, let us say, under 500, so we still have 19,500 persons. So am I to—if I want to speculate, were they persons that were

not rightly entitled to TT food cards in the first place?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Could be, but I just want to say that the number also included the continuous deactivations that would be done by the Ministry based on persons no longer being eligible and the reviews that would be done by the officers every month or so. So 13,000 may have come off because of the review exercise but also persons were coming off and being deactivated because they were no longer eligible.

Mr. Forde: And in terms of dollars and cents, from 65,000, do we have a dollar value of what that would have been in 2014, versus the 2017, 28,000? Could we have a dollar value to those figures?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We could get the dollar value but what we knew is that after the review exercise we were able to save \$110 million every month—

Mr. Forde: Every month?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: On a monthly basis.

Mr. Forde: So on a yearly that will be how much?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: On a yearly basis, sorry. It was \$110 million per year, sorry, after we were able to take those persons off.

Mr. Forde: Okay, all right. All right, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: A follow-up?

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: After you, Sen. Ameen wants to come in. No, no, if it is a follow-up, MP Jennings-Smith—

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: I will give way.

Miss Ameen: Thank you, Chairman, thank you MP. Two questions I have: one, in the recent flooding—we had serious flooding in the last few weeks and the aftermath of Bret, how many persons, or was this programme targeted specifically

to reach those who would have needed temporary assistance with food? That is one. And secondly, Mr. Chairman, a number of persons have not had their contracts renewed from a number of these units within the Ministry of—well, what was the Ministry of People—and I know that you indicated they are now all in the Social Welfare Division. We have had the Poverty Reduction Unit and Poverty Alleviation, and a number of other units, where persons who were employed on contract did not have their contract renewed. We have a number of regional offices as well, where it appears that, you know, you just have skeleton staff, but we have not had a comprehensive statement from the Ministry. I know a Member earlier indicated that this is not retrenchment per se, but the fact is that it represents people effectively losing their jobs. How is this impacting on the Ministry being able to deliver, particularly to regions—because I am very concerned with that decentralization and the ability of the Ministry to reach to every community—with the regional offices and in general in these units in carrying out their duties?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Again, I think DPS Ali and the team would be able to speak to the staff that we have on board in all the boards. I think it is operating from 11 boards now, where we provide all the services. We still provide the services and we do have a number of persons still dealing with the SEED Programme and at every point where persons were not retained, a statement was made concerning the continuation of the services for the public, or whether it was said by the hon. Minister in Parliament, because she was requested to answer questions and so on. So we have made a number of statements concerning those persons who were not retained in the Ministry and the various divisions that were no longer operating. But their service or their function was still being undertaken within the Ministry. So, Mr. DPS Ali, PS Barrow would speak to the staff that we have on board still, providing these services.

Miss Ameen: If DPS Barrow could include in her answer, perhaps the number of people who have been—well, the number of contracts that were—not renewed—but the number of people who effectively lost their jobs, perhaps over the last year or two.

Ms. Barrow: What I can say is that with regards to the food programme, there were 91 contract positions—*[Interruption]* With regard to the food card programme there were 91 contract positions that contracts came to an end that were not retained. However, what we did do was to re-engage some of the persons and placed them within the Social Welfare Division. But as I said, I can give you all the actual figures in writing.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, you can send it. But you said basically 91 individuals did not get their contracts renewed from the food card programme, and that some of them were absorbed?

Ms. Barrow: The food card, 91 positions contracts came to an end.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, right.

Ms. Barrow: There were some persons who were retained. I would not want to say that—there were some persons who we did keep back.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, right. If we can find out the numbers who were retained and whether they were retained because they were—

Ms. Barrow: By district?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, because of their qualifications, their experience, their expertise: the basis of retention and the basis for non-renewal. That certainly would, I think, provide some additional insight. But I will ask MP Jennings-Smith—and there is a question I have to pose to Mr. Gangapersad but I will wait for afterwards.

Miss Ameen: The flooding issue.

Mr. Chairman: What was the question on flooding, Senator?

Miss Ameen: My question on flooding. I asked two questions. In the recent flooding and in the aftermath of Bret, did you specifically target those communities which were affected by the flooding to reach out to people who may need the temporary food cards?

Mrs. Layne-Pereira: Yes. With regards to the recent flooding, each area that was affected we deployed staff and they went out house-to-house and they enquired as to anyone whether they needed food cards or whatever articles they may have lost. As I indicated before, we are still in the process of getting all the DANA forms in so that we can address the other aspect, the household articles.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: Well I am happy to hear that because persons who were affected in the Matelot area, they are still to be compensated. And I am coming back to my former point, eh, because I see when we ask of your Ministry to provide us with some main technical administrative flaws, one of the answers you gave us is that “a customer service mechanism for responding to queries from the public is non-existent.” And I remember when the Chairman asked you a while ago what kind of training you give to your workers at these centres, you said you give them internal training. And, you know, when we are dealing with persons who are accessing these programmes, they are poor, they are vulnerable and they do not have a voice. They do not have a voice. And I was about to ask you if a person is out there and one year, two years have passed—because they talk about the tardiness in persons visiting; they talk about the attitude problem—who do they turn to? Because certainly you are saying here you do not have a customer service mechanism. So who would seek compensation on behalf of those persons, or even—“ah doh” want to use the word, “compensation”—who would seek to get a response from the officials of the Ministry on behalf of those persons outside there,

and the very many complaints that they give and they have and they seem to be voiceless. Because when they go to the offices they are sometimes turned back. And I want to specifically outline the Sangre Grande area. It is really one of the worst scenarios you could experience when you go there to access assistance.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Just to indicate, this question came out of the report of the Auditor General in terms of some of the issues that were brought up concerning the programme and at that point in time there was no customer service mechanism. However, following that, there was some attempt to put in a customer service response and we are still working on that. It is not working fool-proof and it is not perfect, but we are still working to have it operate as it should. So we do have hotlines also for older persons and we also have a hotline for the Ministry. We are working with that also. But the customer response is something that we are focusing on for fiscal 2018 because we understand that it is a real pain point for our clients.

Mr. Chairman: I want to just come in here for a follow-up--and I know you will complete. You see, the State of Trinidad and Tobago has a number of agencies and I get the sense that we do not use them very well. There is a Life Skills component that, I think, if your officers were subject to it as opposed to pure in-house, there would be benefits on customer service and less complaints coming from the public. And second, I saw from your submission, only 4,000 people, recipients of the food card, were in receipt of these trainings. So I am wondering whether you are going to be looking at all the assistance which exists in the rest of the Government service to come to service your very large Ministry. Because I do not think you are looking at the things that are in existence which are available to you. But that is something for you to consider, Madam PSs. But I will ask MP Jennings-Smith to come in.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: I just want to say, I know PS, it is high on your agenda and I know you would want persons to really respond in an effective manner. I sometimes have to call your members of staff, Mr. Gangapersad and others, and I know that you all have that concern. It is just that, you know, to set up that system to ensure that the persons out there do not have to go to other levels to get that kind of response. Thanks.

12.00 noon

Mr. Chairman: While MP Newallo-Hosein comes to pose her question—and then it will come to me because I have a question again for Mr. Gangapersad.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: And I am saying, Chair, it is a priority for the Ministry. Premium customer service, it is a priority.

Mr. Chairman: Very well. And I am saying that there are agencies of the state which can help, which would be available at no cost, I would imagine, which I think in this time of financial stress you may very much want to lean on to ensure that with the little bit that you have, customer delivery that the MPs are concerned about, can be enhanced. MP Newallo-Hosein?

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Chair. On page 9 of your report on enquiry into the management of the targeted conditional, No. 3.1, it was indicated that temporary one-off cards are also issued to regional offices and these cards are issued to families who are considered to be extremely poor and for families who lost food stuff, et cetera. For my area, in particular—as you would know the UN has indicated that Sangre Grande is the poorest region in Trinidad, and therefore, I would like to find out how many temporary food cards were issued to the regional corporation, as well—and you do not have to give me that answer now—to the Social Welfare Office in Sangre Grande, please.

I would like to know how many persons in fact benefited, and therefore, if

you could give me that answer I would appreciate it. Also, what criteria was used in fact for measuring the value of goods that were lost? Persons during the flood, how much loss was incurred in terms of their value because there are a number of persons in the constituency, from your Ministry, that received \$1,000 and I was a little bit taken aback by that because I have never heard a figure of \$1,000 being given to any family. So I just want to know what criteria was in fact used, please, and that was for hurricane Bret.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Mr. Gangapersad, Ms. Barrow, you all deal with that on the ground.

Mr. Gangapersad: Thanks, Permanent Secretary. Chair, it is just to indicate that the assistance that is given during times of disaster from the Ministry, is that a food support. As PS indicated it is the same denomination that we have, 410, 550 and 700, as well as household items which is up to a maximum of \$10,000, and it is given for particular items of household items like beds, stove, washing machine, fridge, wardrobes, et cetera. Those items have a specific cost to it. So more than likely the \$1,000 would have related to someone who indicated that they just lost a mattress. So the cost is related to the items that you reported, that the Ministry validated that was lost during the disaster. Additionally, the Ministry also gives assistance for housing repairs, and at that time during disaster the housing repairs is \$20,000. It is up to \$20,000 to do repairs to your house.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr. Gangapersad. And now I will pose a question that I have to you and to the PSs as well. You see I have been hearing that the biometric card system is a time consuming process. It is expensive, it is drawn-out, and until that system is complete you are somehow in limbo. What I would like to pose to you as the chief officer with respect to technology and that area of the organization—

Mr. Forde: Remember he said he is not IT eh.

Mr. Chairman: He is not IT, but is the chief technology officer.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Technical.

Mr. Chairman: Well a technical officer must be au courant with the technology. You see here is a situation and I would like you to consider it and maybe discuss it with the PSs. We have another agency in Trinidad and Tobago, it is called the Elections and Boundaries Commission. The EBC collects data on all of us while we are registering for a National ID Card, and I was just wondering whether to ease the work of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the EBC itself can start collecting while we are registering for our electoral districts the same information that you require to administer your own social programmes. So that when someone comes to you with his National ID Card, that ID card would already have encoded in it the information that you need and it will avoid the duplication of you trying to collection information that another agency in the country is mandated to collect.

Do you think if the EBC starts collecting that information as part of its mandate and then you have a memorandum of understanding as you have in the Ministry of Legal Affairs on life and death certificates, that that would expedite the process, minimize the amount of work you have to do in that area, and then allow you and your staff to really focus on delivering your services to the population? You see I am concerned about the cost and the fact that there is duplication, and the potential having started collaboration with the Ministry of Legal Affairs that there can now be collaboration with the other agency which really is charged with collecting information more than most in the country and simply sharing the information with you on their platform. Do you think that is an idea that can work and will assist your large Ministry to discharge its function?

Mr. Gangapersad: Chair—

Mr. Chairman: I am thinking outside the box and I will tell you why we are doing that. As an economist I understand the financial gravity of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, but yet we want to discharge our functions to the people in the most efficient way. Looking at all the agencies in the state the question is: can we now have a closer collaboration so that line Ministries like yours, huge Ministries, cannot duplicate what others are doing, but simply use the information which exist in other arms of the state?

Mr. Gangapersad: Well Chair, just to answer that question simply, when the whole issue of life certificate came up in the past we did invite all of the stakeholders as it relates to our grant for the disabled. The EBC was one of those, as well as Immigration and the Registrar General. So we did engage in discussion, and the Ministry for information of this proceeding is moving in the direction of collaboration. In fact, we have signed on to a MOU with the Registrar General, we are soon to do the same with Immigration. We are also at the cost for signing an MOU with the National Insurance Board, and it is primarily to get that kind of synergy in terms of having to get client to be running from office to office just to get information.

And just to answer your question, clearly there is merit in collaboration. What we collaborate on might be the details what gone, but clearly we are already at the stage where we have at least started the conversation, and for some so advanced that we have signed MOU and the others we are at poised to do the same.

Mr. Chairman: But you think that—because I have seen it done elsewhere. In North America there is a Social Insurance Card. That SIN number has the data that you need for everything, almost all transactions, and I am simply wondering whether our National ID number in the ID card office—I know that is a statutory

corporation. It is not a Government, but we all are arms of the state. They all take from the Government's purse, and if our National ID can have encoded in it all the information you need, then would that not make your job in expediting the biometric aspect of your work easier? So that if you as the chief officer in charge of that area of the Government is of the view that you can simply get the information from another place—because they are charged with collecting information. Your office is charged with delivering to the customers. You collect information as a means, not as an end. The EBC collects information as a means. That is their function in order to register us as voters. So that I think if our National ID Card can then have encoded in it all the information that you need, that would mean that if they could start now it would mean that your job, and the two PS's job would now be focused on delivery of customers to the service.

So I would like you all to consider that. When you come back—you will be coming back—I will raise it again. We are looking at solutions because in this time of financial scarcity we have to use all available resources to ensure that the people at the ground, and your people, are the most vulnerable in the country, the people you service. So we are looking at delivery, and we are looking at expediting the information gathering process, and we are looking at harmonizing the various arms of the state as you are as said doing so. I think you have mentioned all the agencies except the EBC. So we will be looking into that, and I would like if you can give some thought together with your senior officers, may be even send us in writing how in fact that process could work. I now ask MP Esmond Forde to come in after I pose my own solution. It may not be the best solution you know, but it is one more than people have.

Mr. Forde: Thank you. With regard to the temporary food cards that are issued are they issued with any amount of assessment, or it is just given out on an ad hoc

basis; or is there an assessment done first to issue the temporary food card pending the permanent food card that will come subsequently?

Mr. Gangapersad: There are several scenarios under which a temporary food card can be issued. One is during times of disaster and usually it is done with an on field assessment where food was lost, and from all indication that there is no food in the house it is given, and that is given almost on a universal basis. You do not have to do any means test for that.

Mr. Forde: Good. And then the person would make a formal application?

Mr. Gangapersad: Well it is given in the disaster to treat with that issue. If there is need for a food card, then the person can apply for a food card.

Mr. Forde: Okay.

Mr. Gangapersad: The temporary card is also given to cover the period between where an application for a permanent card has been approved but one has not been issue as yet. Because when the administrative process of requesting the card might take some time, so the temporary fills that gap. The third condition under which a food card is given is when the preliminary assessment is done. A person comes into one of our officers and a preliminary assessment is done, and there is a range. There are scores that are assigned based on the assessment and anybody who gets a score that is below 15—and in the scheme of things that is considered a person who may be suffering from extreme food needs, they have no money at all—the temporary card is issued and up to three temporary card is issued. The second one—however, after the first assessment you are asked to bring in document and whatever it is to complete the applicant, the second one is only issued once you produce the document or there is some reasonable explanation as to why you do not the document to submit.

Mr. Forde: I am good, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, thank you very much. Sen. Ameen. You ready? Okay. MP Newallo-Hosein.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Yes, thank you. Mr. Gangapersad you indicated that you have in place MOUs for several Ministries which you are required to collaborate with, would you state whether NIB, in particular, had anxiously look forward to signing an MOU in light of the fact that the biometric card would have brought so much benefits to both entities, both NIB as well as the Ministry, as they collaborate on a number of issues?

Mr. Gangapersad: Chair, just to indicate the context of the MOU with National Insurance Board, what is required as was indicated earlier on by one of the members, is that whenever an applicant applies for a grant in social welfare one of the first things that we request of them is information pertaining to their contribution or to their benefits payable at NIS, and what it requires is for persons to come and sit in our office and to be issued with this form, and then go to the NIB and sit in their various offices and wait for another person there to deal with them to issue the information.

In total, we have approximately 25,000 persons making application all told for all grants in the Ministry. It means that 25,000 persons are going to sit at NIB offices across the country waiting for information. The MOU is going to allow us to share that kind of information without the client having to move from office to office. So clearly what we are doing at our end is to set up a system that will allow NIB to see the persons who apply and to provide us with the information that we require.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. You know I am simply wondering why in fact we are not harmonized with information sharing. For example, if in fact I supply you with my ID Card number, a unique number, should you not in

assessing the harmonized database be able to see what my NIB contributions have been, whether I am obtaining a pension or a disability grant, and if I am the trying a fast one by now asking for a food card? Because I would imagine if we have one card that we must supply, whether my driver's license is supposed to be in order or something, if our one card can do that, then it means simply that someone presents his National ID Card to you, you punch in the data and every time he is the recipient of some state grant from your office, or an NIB grant or any other grant, it should come up in his database. So if that is the case with the information sharing, then we would be able to simply sit at the computer terminal, assess the customer. Could you forward your ID card and I have all the information readily available I could get—in fact, it might even be linked up with the Ministry of National Security so we see exactly what your status is with respect to all assistance you get from the state. As the chief officer in charge of that technical area do you think we are light years away from such a system, or do you think if we work collaboratively amongst all arm of the state we should get there over a three-year period?

Mr. Gangapersad: It was the intention of the biometric system when we engaged the provider. It was a system that was supposed to be national, and in fact when you look down in the past there was a national smart card policy that was supposed to incorporate all agency. It had many applets on a card. So it could have had your driver's permit, your birth—everything on that card including grants, library passes and stuff like that. It is not light years away. It is doable and I think it requires the will to do it.

Mr. Chairman: Could you then speak to your technology officer, the one who really understand IT and IT platforms, on what really is needed in order for us to get to this system over a three-year period? Because unless we get there a lot of

problems will happen in the interim. We do need to harmonize information now, certainty to discharge efficiently the job you have to do because you would get the information to know whether someone who has asked for a smart card is indeed a smart man. The information would be in front of you without you having to do field checks and so on. You would be already in possession of all the other grant he or she has gotten, his income and everything. So that if your technology officer can now work on how we can get to that stage where all agencies now share information, we would, I think, be able to really improve upon the efficiency. So that of the 10,000 people or so who were removed from the system, they should automatically be removed by computer. Computer should pick it up and say, "Well you are already in the receipt, unless you can prove otherwise, of course, we have been able to identify you electronically that you do not qualify". So once you speak to your technology office at the level of this Committee, it may require some legislative changes to ensure that information is shared, but I cannot know unless I get the information from the technology officers on how doable this is once the parties collaborate, that is NIB, EBC, the legal affairs. Once there is collaboration the legislative changes would be our remit in this particular Committee.

You can send a little note in writing after you have discussed with the IT officer on how we get to that stage of having a one card do all with respect to collecting all the information on some one. But my sense is that EBC might have to be in charge of collecting the bulk of the data with other agencies just adding little titbits on it. But MP Newallo-Hosein has a follow-up on that.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Chair, I just want to concur with what with it is you are saying. However, with the biometric card because of this fingerprint there are a number of persons outside with duplicate ID cards and we know that, and it is not just duplicate, they have triplicate and so forth. Therefore, the biometric card will

in fact clean up across the country, across agencies, across Ministries, this system of whether it is corruption you want to call it, or mismanagement, abuse, whatever it is, and therefore, I really would like to encourage the Ministry, the PSs to reevaluate what it is you are about to implement—forget about the past. Remind us what you spoke about Mr. Gangapersad about the platform, but it is not simply the platform. It is in fact implementing this system where you can remove as much as possible the abuse of state funds, and state funds that people are looking at is limited, and therefore, yes we are looking at the ID card but also even the ID cards there is that system of abuse and that will eliminate it. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Just as a follow-up to my colleague. IT people will solve that. There is no rule which says a National ID Card cannot also be biometric. You need fingerprint, and once a National ID Card is biometric I am telling you, the both PSs, you can then exert all your energies to the poor people of Trinidad and Tobago because another agency would have already done 95 per cent of the data collection that you would have to do. So that is something that we will on the national agenda coming out of this meeting, a National ID Card, a biometric ID card to assist the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, all for the poor people of Trinidad and Tobago. Sen. Khadijah Ameen.

Miss Ameen: Mr. Chair, before I ask my question, when the idea of a national biometric information platform was first introduced in terms of legislation, the idea was to integrate the National ID Cards but all the information. Not only the welfare and social support, but HDC housing, the Ministry of Legal Affairs with your birth and death documents, marriage records as well, and all of these things including name changes and so on will be on one platform. I do not know if the Ministry of Legal Affairs ever embarked on a full scale programme to implement that, and that may be the Ministry that could take the responsibility so that the

social development people could focus on social development.

My question, Mr. Chairman, having regard to the contribution by Mr. Gangapersad concerning victims of natural disasters such as floods that they can access furniture, appliances, beds and so on if they lose their things in the flood. I know that Mrs. Layne-Pereira indicated earlier that the DANA forms which is an assessment exercise is still being conducted in some areas. As a former local government councillor I have participated and worked alongside your representatives when they are out on the field and it could be very time consuming if you do not have the intervention, for instance, of the regional corporations sending their workers to help pick up the information and so on, I want to ask, one, if you have a deadline by which you want to collect that assessment for the recent floods; and, two, having regards to the cried that we have heard where people are turned back and saying that they do not have money, do you believe the Ministry is in a position with its present allocation to meet the needs of these thousands, well hundreds definitely, perhaps thousands of people who have been severely affected by the flooding and lost everything in their homes?

Mr. Gangapersad: Yes, there was a commitment to complete assessments by Friday—this Friday—and just to indicate as well that the Ministry did engage the members of the defence force. As you are probably aware, over the past two weeks we had between 40 to 50 members of the defence force out of the teams in the Ministry and, in fact, just from the St. Helena area in seven days' time, five days' time in fact, they covered almost 900 homes together with members of the defence force. In the Sangre Grande region, the regional corporation did get involved, and in so many other areas the regional corporation officers as well as the defence force and officers of the Ministry just so that we could get the assessment done on a timely basis.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: The money to pay, you would be aware that the Cabinet did approve an additional \$35 million last Cabinet meeting for response to the disaster.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much for that response. I do not think I have any more questions from members of the Committee at this time. We seem to have exhausted our line of questioning on this subject. Before I ask both Permanent Secretaries to offer some closing comments, I have to say that before this enquiry I knew very little about this particular subject, and this has been a very informative one. In fact, when it was recommended I wanted to know what was this all about, had no prior knowledge, but after today's hearing I think we have made some valuable inroads with respect to this very, very critical initiative to assist the most vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago.

What has come thus far from today's hearing is I think that we do need to engage officers in this programme with some requisite sympathetic training in customer care, given that practically all the individuals who try to access this programme are really the poorest in the society and we do need to understand their specific needs, respect their dignity and understand the circumstances in which they live, that there are other agencies such as the life skills programme in the state which can be used to provide free training to supplement that which the Ministry offers in-house.

We do know that there is a need to understand clearly what we mean by a family, what we mean by a household. We need some definitions because I would imagine if the definitions are not clear certain individuals who feel that they qualify may be excluded based upon the definitions which are currently in use, and I would like to know whether the definitions are international or whether we need to tailor them for the Trinidad and Tobago environment. It has come to light that

the given the cost of the programme there is a need for there to be some local content in the purchasing. It is to a large extent dedicated towards the ensuring as per the quality of life of poor people, the minimum calorie intake on a daily basis for an adult. That is the basis upon which the numbers would have been arrived at scientific basis, but we do know that you need things like cleaning material, dishwashing liquid. You cannot really say food alone if you are to ensure that the poor person can live reasonably well, but there is that issue about local content, and the recommendation I would put forward for the Government is to see whether the merchants can be encouraged via moral suasion or other types of inducements to have more local content in their places of trade so that the options are available for people to purchase some locally grown or produced products.

We have broached the idea of the Ministry collecting less and less information. If we have the greater collaboration with other agencies of the state, and that a smart ID card or a biometric national ID card which collects all the information relevant to what you want and which can then be used every time we access every single service of the state, our driver's license, our food card, soon as you try the first card you are asked for, can I see your ID card and it is registered. I think if that card ever comes into being then the information and the data that you require to make very quick decisions for equity and efficiency. You see, we are looking at both. We need the people who qualify to obtain the benefit quickly, but we need to ensure that the people who do not qualify are ejected quickly from the programme given the funds you have that has to be allocated and it is targeted to the vulnerable.

So that just as in the joint select forum we came up on the idea of eliminating life certificates and implementing it with death certificates as per MOUs between Ministry of Legal Affairs, I think we now should be looking at

MOUs with the EBC to ensure that they can collect the bulk of the data, and that card can then be used for all transactions with the state entering into the database, but that will require, of course, the input of your IT specialist so that your systems can in fact be on a common platform and you can read the information that is available. So from my view, as someone with a National ID Card presented to you should have information once you input his data on all his NIS benefits, all his food card benefits, all his disability benefits, when they were paid, whether he is in receipt of a HDC house, and I think once we get there the information would be readily available to make your jobs efficient.

I have rambled on, but these are the suggestions. I now will ask after this very fruitful morning—I have so many things now that I would like to ask because I am becoming more and more involved in programmes for the poor, given the fact that the economy is not going to generate too many advantages for them over the next couple of years. I would ask the PSs in this very critical Ministry to offer us closing comments before we close our session this afternoon.

Ms. Barrow: PS Bailey-Sobers is going to respond for the both of us.

Mr. Chairman: Very well, okay.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Chair, Vice-Chair, Members, I wish to thank the Committee, again, for the opportunity to share and thank you also for the valuable contributions and suggestions that you have made. Certainly, we have committed to give consideration to these and to also provide you with the additional information you have requested.

The policy prescription of the National Development Strategy for Vision 2030 is for a paradigm shift in the way we deliver services, in order to bring about better management and social protection programmes, efficiency, effectiveness. But the need for concerted action is based certainly on the reality of our current

circumstances and we are aware that we can no longer expend resources the current way that we are delivering services, so we are committed to moving forward with the restructuring of the Ministry speedily. And focusing on customer service has come up as one of the priorities, integrated delivery and also the IT and management systems that would enable us to improve the quality of life of the most vulnerable citizens of our country. So we make those commitments and again, we thank you for the rich discussion this morning as part of this session.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, thank you very much. Are you sure you do not want to make some closing remarks, PS Barrow? No, I think she wants to make a few closing remarks herself. I know, I saw it. I mean—[*Laughter*] you can close.

Ms. Barrow: The only closing remarks that I would want to just emphasize that the technology that we have across the different Ministries and Departments sometimes make it difficult and the compatibility that we may not necessarily have so that we can sync our different systems. But it is certainly something that we want to move towards, having that kind of collaboration between the different Ministries so that we can move towards having one card.

But a lot of times, what keeps back the Ministries from moving sometimes quickly, in those directions, is really the compatibility of our systems. And for example, even our interaction right now with immigration, right, because we have had discussions with them, they have their own system, we have our systems and it is really to find that common ground and really try to found out how we can have the same system across the board where we can all have the same type of access.

Mr. Chairman: Right. “Yuh see?” I knew you had something valuable to say because then it is sending a signal that we would have to consider the Ministry of Public Administration which would be charged with ensuring that their platform is common across all Ministries so that public administration can be made more

efficient.

Before I adjourn this meeting, I would like to thank all officers of the Ministry of social services for being here. You have enlightened us with the responses to our questions. I would like to thank members of the media for being here so that they can transmit to the population what transpired this morning. All of our viewers and listeners, especially those who took the time to send in questions, I wish to thank them for being with us. And Members of the Committee, again, it is really very good, having the Committee, the Joint Select Committee, looking at this extremely critical Ministry so that we can always act in the service of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and in this occasion, the poorest and the most vulnerable. I thank you all for being here and good afternoon.

12.34 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*