



Summary of Proceedings

Public Hearing

Held on **Friday March 25, 2022** from 10:27 a.m. to 12:21 p.m.

Subject matter: An Inquiry into the Mental Health and Psycho-social Services Available to the Population during the COVID-19 Pandemic (with a specific focus on measures to curb substance abuse and suicide).

Venue: Virtual via the Zoom platform

Committee Members

The following Committee Members were present:

- Mr. Paul Richards
- Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP
- Mr. Avinash Singh
- Mr. David Nakhid

The following Committee Members were excused:

- Mr. Rohan Sinanan
- Mrs. Penelope Beckles, MP
- Mr. Roger Munroe, MP
- Mr. Esmond Forde, MP

Witnesses who appeared

The following officials appeared before the Committee:

Ministry of Health

- Ms. Melanie Noel Deputy Permanent Secretary

- Dr. Hazel Othello Director, Mental Health
- Ms. Keisha Lewis General Manager, Mental Health NWRHA
- Mrs. Lyra Thompson-Hollingworth Coordinator, National Alcohol Drug Abuse Programme

Ministry of Education

- Mrs. Lisa Henry-David Chief Education Officer Ag.
- Mrs. Natalie Robinson-Arnold Social Work Specialist, SSSD
- Mrs. Irma Bailey-Reyes Interim Supervisor, Development Assessment and Intervention Unit, SSSD

Ministry of Social Development and Family Services

- Ms. Sheila Seecharan Permanent Secretary
- Ms. Loraine Reyes-Borel Director, Social Displacement Unit
- Ms. Lisa Ifill Director, Social Planning and Research
- Ms. Kathleen Sarkar Assistant Director, National Family Services Division

Key Issues Discussed

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Health (MOH)**:

Data on Suicides

- i. Statistics from the MOH for the period 2019 to 2021 showed that there was an increase in the number of persons dying by suicide during the pandemic period.
- ii. The trends of the statistics indicated that there were more males who completed suicides in comparison to females, however there were more females than males who attempted suicides.
- iii. The MOH provided the following suggested causation factors for suicides:
 - a. Substance use related-conditions;
 - b. Relationship breakdowns;
 - c. Previous history of mental illness;
 - d. Social challenges;
 - e. Financial challenges; and
 - f. Interpersonal conflicts.
- iv. Deaths by suicides are reported to the TTPS, as such, the MOH does not interface directly with the family of the deceased.
- v. There were challenges to data collection during the pandemic.

Substance Abuse

- vi. The National Alcohol Drug Abuse Programme (NADAP) engages with students in communities to prevent substance abuse disorders.
- vii. There was an increase in the number of persons requesting the services of NADAP during the pandemic period.
- viii. The influence of advertising alcohol in communities with higher vulnerable populations.
- ix. The need for advertising of the NADAP's services on social media platforms other than Facebook, in order to grasp the attention of the youth.

Provision of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS)

- x. The MOH provided MHPSS through the following mediums:
 - a. Helplines;
 - b. through collaborations with stakeholders; and
 - c. Information on services via the website findcairett.com.
- xi. The need for additional clinical child psychologists within the public services as clinical child psychologists from Trinidad prefer to migrate to other countries or work in private establishments which offer greater benefits.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Education (MOE)**:

Substance Abuse

- i. Substance abuse amongst students on the school compound is reported by the principal to the school supervisor who then reports it to the district offices.
- ii. Data collection on substance abuse was a challenge as teachers were unable to accurately observe the students' behaviour due to the virtual environment.
- iii. There are parenting programmes available through the SSSD to provide guidance to parents on coping mechanisms for their children.

Depression and Suicide among school students

- iv. Statistics from the MOE highlighted that 634 secondary level students and 22 primary level students were diagnosed with clinical depression for the period 2019 to 2021.
- v. There were nine suicides amongst students during the period 2019 to 2021.

Cyber-bullying

- vi. There has been an increase in the reports of students who were victims of cyberbullying during the pandemic.

Human Resource Issues

- vii. The Student Support Services Division (SSSD) is currently functioning at approximately 50% capacity, as there are 328 vacancies within the Division.

- viii. The MOE has been engaging with the On-the-Job Training Programme as well as lobbying the relevant Service Commissions to assist in filling vacancies.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS)**:

Outreach Services

- i. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) conducted outreach services and sensitisation services on familial issues and mental health and well-being during the pandemic using the following media:
 - a. Public Information, Education and Sensitisation Series (PIES) Programmes;
 - b. Radio and television programmes; and
 - c. Social media platforms.
- ii. The MSDFS intends to expand the current outreach services with the aim of engaging communities

Socially Displaced Persons

- i. The differences in the procedure applied by the MSDFS for conducting street counts of the socially displaced before and during the pandemic.
- ii. The discrepancy in the number of socially displaced persons highlighted by the MSDFS in their street counts and the number of socially displaced persons who are seen being provided with meals within POS during the day time.
- iii. The suggestion that not all persons being provided with meals within the POS area may be street dwellers but may also include persons who are experiencing levels of poverty.
- iv. The conditions and treatment of the persons at the Centre for Socially Displaced Persons (CSDP).
- v. There are some socially displaced persons housed at the CSDP who are outpatients of the St. Ann's Psychiatric Hospital.
- vi. The MSDFS intends to assess and relocate socially displaced persons who have a mental illness or a substance abuse disorder by the end of the year.
- vii. The need for the MSDFS to conduct a "national scan" of the population to determine the socio-economic circumstances and/or substance abuse and mental health issues that prevail in the country.

This public hearing can be viewed on demand via our YouTube Channel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuUtzM3zsc&list=PL-SY0ndJDfa5LAYQn79awq-7kf1N3BqX6&index=8>

Contact the Committee's Secretary

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Committees Unit

April 08, 2022.