



Summary of Proceedings

Public Hearing

Held on **Friday April 29, 2022** from **10:25 a.m. to 12:44 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
- Mrs. Penelope Beckles, MP
- Mr. Avinash Singh
- Mr. David Nakhid
- Mr. Roger Munroe, MP

The following Committee Members were excused:

- Mr. Rohan Sinanan
- Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP
- Mr. Esmond Forde, MP

Witnesses who appeared

The following officials appeared before the Committee:

Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs Division

- Mrs. Jacinta Bailey-Sobers Permanent Secretary
- Mr. Bertrand Moses Coordinator, Child Affairs Division

- Dr. Tameka Romeo Gender Support Lead
- Dr. Ayanna Sebro Technical Director, National Aids Coordinating Committee

The Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago

- Mrs. Rhonda Gregoire-Roopchan Deputy Director, Care Services
- Ms. Elizabeth Lewis Deputy Director Ag., Legal & Regulatory Services
- Mrs. Vandana Siew Sankar-Ali Assessment Manager
- Dr. Krista Ali Psychologist

Trinidad and Tobago Association of Psychologists

- Mr. Charles Collier, MA President
- Mrs. Marcia Tappin-Boxill, MA Chairman, Trauma Team
- Dr. Karen Moore Chairman, Ethics and Licensure

Trinidad and Tobago Depression and Suicide Foundation

- Ms. Kezia Worrell Founder
- Ms. Chyann Riley Director

Elder Associates Limited

- Dr. Patricia Elder Founder/Director
- Dr. Brent Pereira Clinical Director
- Mr. Ronald Tagallie Trauma Unit Director

Lifeline

- Dr. Lucretia Gabriel Chairman
- Ms. Delores Robinson Creative and Executive Director, GOOTS

Key Issues Discussed

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs Division)**:

Overview

- i. The Gender Affairs Division is the national focal point for gender and development in Trinidad and Tobago.
- ii. Its mandate includes the promotion of principles of gender equality and equity through gender mainstreaming.
- iii. The draft national policy on gender and development guides the work of the Division and addresses mental health under the thematic areas of gender-based violence, health and well-being and gender and special interest groups.

Substance Abuse

- i. The Gender and Child Affairs Division was in the process of establishing two drug rehab community residences for boys in Tobago.
- ii. The Division had also partnered with New Life Ministries Drug Rehab to undertake a pilot project with respect to substance use and abuse of children in schools.

Challenges with Current State of Mental Health Services

- iii. There was no facility for children who need long-term mental health services. The Gender and Child Affairs Division was working with the Ministry of Health to establish such a facility.
- iv. In the interim, Cabinet had agreed that some provision will be made at Mount Hope for a limited number of beds for children who need long-term mental health services.
- v. There is a need for greater collaboration across ministries and institutions to treat with mental health issues.
- vi. There must be a clear understanding of roles, responsibilities and protocols, particularly when dealing with case management of children's mental health.
- vii. There is also a need for improved data collection systems across Ministries and other institutions dealing with mental health issues.

Support services provided

- viii. The National AIDS Coordinating Committee re-established the HIV/AIDS hotline in December 2021 to augment some of the services provided through the Ministry of Health

and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to support people living with HIV.

- ix. The hotline receives an average of 30 calls per month.
- x. The Gender and Child Affairs Division developed Child Zone, an online repository of activities, media, information and mental health and other material related to child protection.
- xi. The Division used both traditional and social media platforms to promote the Child Zone and collaborated with the Student Support Services Division of the Ministry of Education to introduce both the Child Zone platform and a mental health workbook to schools.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago**:

Overview

- i. The CATT is a specialised agency with responsibility for the care and protection of children who are at risk or have been victims of abuse and neglect.
- ii. The organisation advocates for the rights of children and works collaboratively with partners from all sectors of the community to develop solutions to rehabilitate children
- iii. The Authority has been operational for the past seven years.
- iv. Children are referred to the Authority either through the courts or via direct reports made to the Authority.
- v. These children often present with a wide array of mental health problems which present themselves as emotional and behavioural challenges.

Support Provided and Observations

- vi. When children require immediate psychological attention, the CATT will send the required referral letters to the nearest Accident and Emergency.
- vii. The decision is then made by medical staff whether the child will be warded at the hospital or transferred to St. Ann's.
- viii. If a parent is non-compliant with facilitating the child's treatment, the legislation (Section 22) allows the CATT to act in the best interest of the child in the absence of parental consent.
- ix. There were 55 children under the care of the CATT who were being accommodated across three centres in Trinidad and 6 children in Tobago.
- x. Of these children, three of them have formal mental health diagnoses.
- xi. Additionally, there were eight children who displayed symptoms of mental health issues who did not receive a formal diagnosis. These children were receiving treatment at health centres.

- xii. While some children experienced challenges with cyber-bullying, other children experienced a relief from bullying that they experienced when school was held in-person. As such, the issue of bullying in the online environment needs to be viewed on a case by case basis.
- xiii. Some children experienced depression and a drop in school performance during the pandemic while other children experienced an improvement in school performance.
- xiv. The Authority placed importance on increasing awareness of online grooming of children.

Partnerships

- xv. The CATT partners with NGOs such as the Rape Crisis Centre as well as religious organisations. These NGOs assist with providing therapeutic interventions free of charge for children
- xvi. The Authority is in the process of developing MOUs and service agreements with these partner organisations.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Psychologists**:

Overview

- i. The Trinidad and Tobago Association of Psychologists was established in 2000 by an Act of Parliament.
- ii. The Association operates on a completely volunteer basis.
- iii. There is an elected executive that works through various committees consisting of members of the Association.

Key Observations about Mental Health

- iv. There has been a significant increase in the volume of demand for Mental Health Services.
- v. Generally, men are more reluctant to seek mental health care when compared to women.
- vi. There has been a spike in toddlers presenting with Autism Spectrum Disorder symptoms, however the association posits that this observation could be attributed to the lack of social interaction during the pandemic restrictions. An accurate assessment can be made once children return to typical social settings as the restrictions ease.
- vii. Some of the major factors contributing to the lack of mental health professionals in Trinidad and Tobago are:
 - a. The stigmatisation of mental health issues has created a reluctance to seek mental health services; and

- b. There is a binary view of mental health that does not acknowledge the spectrum of mental health support that can be beneficial as such, people frequently defer seeking mental health care until they have come to a point of severe crisis.
- viii. Typical outlets for relieving stress such as bars and outdoor recreation facilities were closed during the pandemic, leading to increased stress levels among the population, particularly male citizens.
- ix. The TTAP believes that the prohibition on access to outdoor activities played a significant role in the emergence of increased demand for mental health care.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **Lifeline**:

Overview

- i. Lifeline has been in existence since 1978.
- ii. The organisation is dedicated to providing services for people who are in imminent danger of taking their own lives by making a hotline available for them to call
- iii. In 2019, Lifeline received six calls per day. From 2020-2022, that number increased to between 10 and 30 calls per day.
- iv. The length of time spent on those calls ranged from one minute up to seven hours.
- v. The average length of a call was 30 minutes and the prevailing reason for those calls was suicide prevention. The age range was 20-78 years old with 82% of callers being less than 40 years old; 65% of callers were male.

Budgetary Constraints and Recommendations

- vi. Lifeline does not have the necessary funding to operate effectively
- vii. Lifeline sees the need for a multi-agency risk assessment committee to collaborate to provide mental health services

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **Elder Associates**:

Overview

- i. Elder Associates has been in existence since 1993. The organisation primarily provides Employee Assistant Programme Services and other psychological services to both private and public sector entities.

Key Observations

- ii. There was a noticeable increase in the demand for services during the pandemic.
- iii. Elder Associates faced challenges with not being able to provide face-to-face services during the pandemic. However, the virtual platform used improved the level of

accessibility of the services to people who would not have previously been able to access the services.

- iv. Between 2019 and 2021, there was a significant increase in the number of participants in counselling sessions.
- v. The most common issues during the pandemic related to inter-personal relationships, which was the situation prior to the pandemic. However there was a significant increase in the number of cases related to anxiety and depression during the pandemic.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **the Trinidad and Tobago Depression and Suicide Foundation**:

Overview

- i. TTDSF was established on August 6, 2017.
- ii. The organisation is committed to providing support to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago during the pandemic.
- iii. The TTDSF had not yet approached the Government with requests for funding.

Key Observations

- iv. The TTDSF receives both phone calls and Facebook messages from clients.
- v. These clients are then referred to health facilities or hospitals depending on the nature of the case.
- vi. The TTDSF makes 10-20 referrals per month.
- vii. Calls increased by 10% during the pandemic.
- viii. Activity on the organisations Facebook page also increased during the pandemic.
- ix. The stigma against mental health issues needs to be addressed.
- x. More Guidance Counsellors and Mental Health professionals are needed in both schools and in the workplace.

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5R0BYiGwk0>

Contact the Committee's Secretary

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Committees Unit

May 13, 2022.