



MINISTRY OF LABOUR &
SOCIAL SECURITY

"Providing Opportunity, Stability and Social Protection"

Sectoral Presentation 2024

**THE PEOPLE'S MINISTRY,
NO ONE LEFT BEHIND**

Presenter:

The Hon. Pearnel Charles Jr., MP, JP
Minister of Labour and Social Security



Wednesday, May 29, 2024



Gordon House

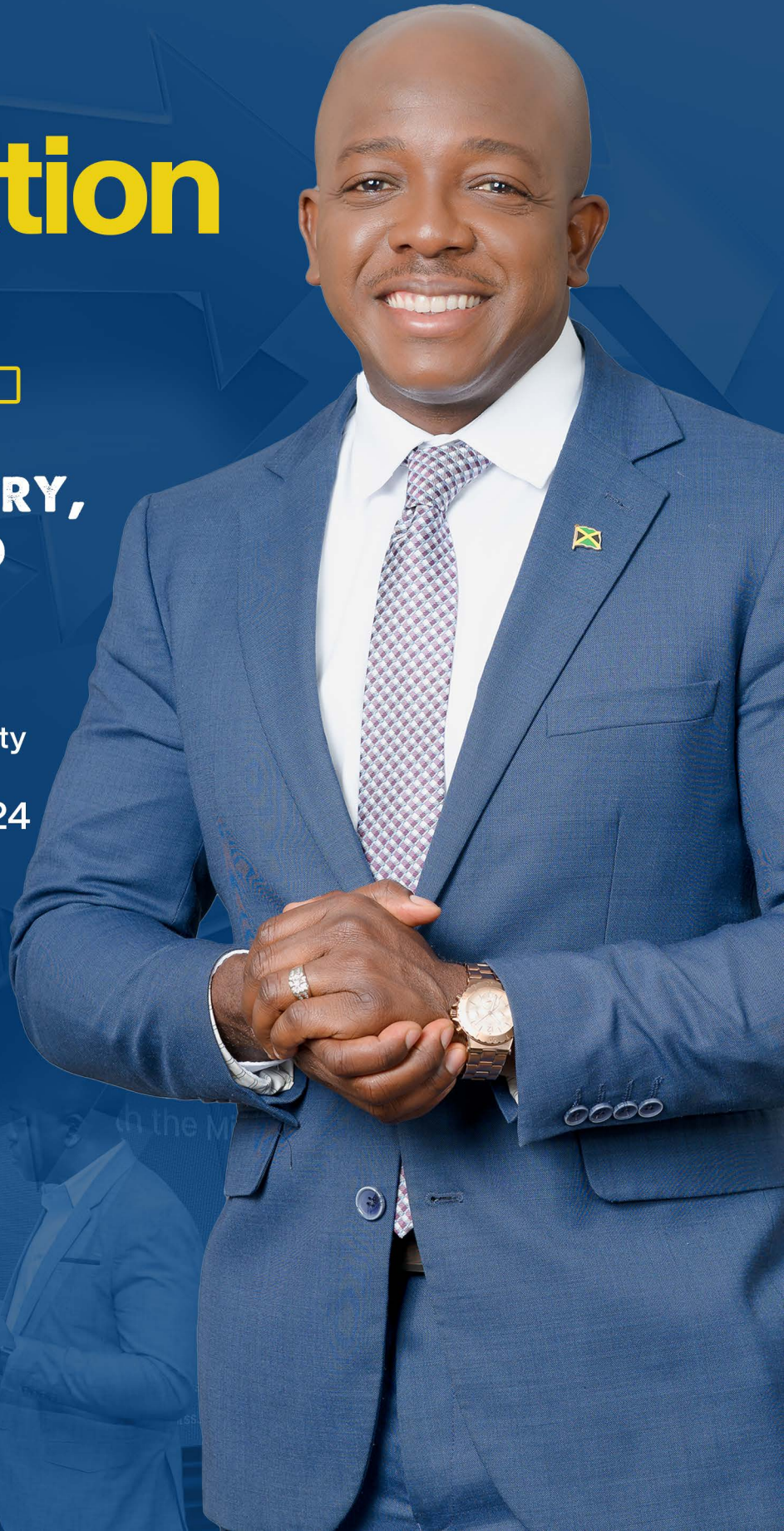


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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

As a Jamaican I stand before you with a deep sense of responsibility and urgency as we address the critical issues facing our nation's most vulnerable populations. Our mission, as stewards of social justice and economic opportunity, is to ensure that every citizen, regardless of their circumstances, has access to the support and resources they need to lead dignified and productive lives. The challenges are significant, but so too is our commitment to overcoming them. Madam Speaker, I lead the "Peoples Ministry where No One Is Left Behind".

Madam Speaker I am profoundly grateful to God for the strength, wisdom, and guidance that sustains me. As the Psalmists say, "The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand." Though discernment is not listed as a fruit of the spirit, it remains a gift from the Almighty that our leader, the Most Honourable Andrew Holness, Prime Minister of Jamaica has been blessed with. Thank you for entrusting me with The People's Ministry where we take care of the most vulnerable.

Madam Speaker, family is the compass that guides us; they are the inspiration to reach great heights and our comfort when we occasionally falter. I am forever grateful to my wife and children for their unwavering support and many sacrifices while I perform my duties as Minister. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Madam Speaker, some 17 years ago the Chief, Parnel Charles Sr, who I am proud to call my father, stood in this Honourable House as the then Minister of Labour and Social Security. He is still the best role model I could ask for. who continue to be a pillar of strength.



THANK YOU

My parents provided all the tools my siblings and I needed to be successful in a challenging and competitive world. I remain grateful to them for all they have done. Thank you to my sister, the Member of Parliament, from Eastern St Thomas, Dr. Michelle Charles, who sits with me and to all my siblings and family

Madam Speaker, I have been fortunate to be paired with one of the brightest minds in government. To my Minister of State, Dr. the Hon. Norman Dunn, thank you for your sharp eye and tireless drive to protect, empower, and uplift our Jamaican people. Madam Speaker, no man is an island and I express my gratitude to the leadership team and staff across our ministry and agencies, and all my managers and staff in our parish offices across Jamaica, most ably and aptly led by Permanent Secretary, Mrs. Colette Roberts Riden. It is their unwavering commitment that ensures our services reach every Jamaican. Thank you all for your dedication behind the scenes, as we work together to ensure that No One Is Left Behind and that the People's Ministry succeeds.

Heartfelt gratitude to my executive team, security team, and constituency team for their hard work, sacrifices and unwavering dedication. I am honoured to have you by my side. Madam Speaker.....The African proverb sums it up best "if you want to go fast go alone, if you want to go far go together."

We have a constituency development plan Madam Speaker, and we will continue to work on developing our human capital and providing opportunities to our people while we look forward to the significant agricultural and infrastructural investments to commence in this financial year.

Madam Speaker, I am here because of the people of Southeast Clarendon and to them I continue to be grateful and committed. I must acknowledge and thank my Councillors, Caretaker, party workers and supporters for their continued belief and support in me and our larger vision. I must also thank the various Ministries, Departments and Agencies across government that have continuously partnered with us and have been willing to go the distance to improve our service delivery to the people of Jamaica. Caretaker, workers and supporters for their continued belief and support in me and our larger vision.

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THE PEOPLE'S MINISTRY

Madam Speaker, today I will demonstrate that the Ministry of Labour and Social Security is truly the 'People's Ministry'. Our comprehensive range of programmes and services are designed to foster greater human capital development through the positive impact on the lives we touch. My Ministry delivers programmes for everyone in all spheres of society, whether you are a baby in the womb, or the 110 year old super-centenarian, Ms Nora Welsh, from Hanover.

Madam Speaker, a year ago the Prime Minister tasked Minister Dunn and myself with the responsibility of taking the Ministry of Labour and Social Security on a journey of transformation. This transformation began with rigorous stakeholder consultations and social dialogue. We engaged our staff and clients in all fourteen parishes across the island. Additionally, we engaged the public through social and traditional media, listening to their comments and feedback. What we realised, Madam Speaker, is that our staff and our clients were both seized of the need for transformation.

The information we gathered will be used to inform the wider transformation process. Madam Speaker, while we are going through this process, we are taking steps to make changes that will immediately enhance the clients' experience as they interface with the Ministry. I can report, Madam Speaker, that we have rolled out the MLSS Client Contact Centre to improve communication access to the Ministry. Already we have received significant positive feedback from our clients.

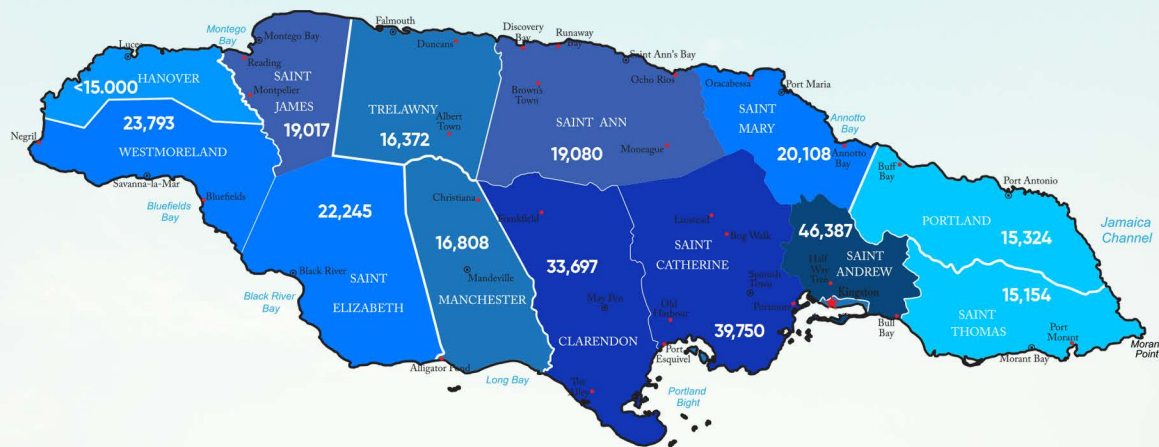
SOCIAL SECURITY

Madam Speaker, the work of the Social Security Division is a living testament of the mantra "No One Left Behind". My Ministry, the People's Ministry touches the lives of every Jamaican and has been instrumental in addressing the needs of the most vulnerable among us. We have been leading the way with impactful programmes such as PATH.

PROGRAMME OF ADVANCEMENT THROUGH HEALTH AND EDUCATION (PATH)

Madam Speaker, for over 22 years the Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education (PATH), has been supporting the needs of many of our most vulnerable and is evidence of the Ministry's commitment to Jamaica's Vision 2030 Goal Number 1- "Jamaicans are empowered to achieve their greatest potential".

This critical programme accounts for 82% of the Ministry's social assistance budget and 54% of the Ministry's recurrent budget. For the year 2023, PATH was a lifeline for approximately 302,000 beneficiaries. For the 2024/2025 Financial Year, we have increased the budget for PATH by 28.8% and in June, beneficiaries will receive an increase in their bi-monthly benefits.



Number of PATH Beneficiaries



(FIGURE 1: Map of PATH Beneficiaries by Parish who have received at least one payment between January and December 2023 (excluding poor relief beneficiaries).

JAMAICA 60 HOPE FOR CHILDREN TRUST FUND

Madam Speaker I want to laud the Prime Minister, Most Hon. Andrew Holness for the insight to establish this ground-breaking initiative, The Jamaica 60 HOPE For Children Trust Fund. This Fund Madam Speaker will not only help close the wealth gap but also help to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty for poor individuals and their families. Madam Speaker any child who is part of a PATH household or a Ward of the State, once born in Jamaica on or after the 60th anniversary of our independence (August 6, 2022) can participate in the programme.

“The HOPE for Children Trust Fund will provide each eligible child with a long-term savings account funded through annual contributions from the Government. Parents, guardians or other donors will also be able make deposits into the account for the future benefit of the child. The accumulated funds including interest will be accessible on or after the child’s 18th birthday for specific purposes such as education, purchase of a home or commercial property, or business investment

Madam Speaker we welcome the establishment of Jamaica 60 HOPE (Hope, Opportunity, Prosperity and Empowerment) For Children Trust Fund. We are on the PATH to breaking the cycle of poverty and leaving no one behind.

Importantly, in April of this year Madam Speaker, we acknowledged 29 PATH top achievers who, with the support of this programme, have excelled in PEP and CSEC. We are proud of them and continue to encourage them along their journey.

We also acknowledged 4 former PATH beneficiaries who have excelled in their academic and professional pursuits and are now ‘PATH Trailblazers’. Their achievement reaffirms the notion that it is not where you start but how high you aim for your success that is important. Madam Speaker, my Minister of State is also a living testament of what is possible when a poor country boy is given the right support.

Madam Speaker recognizing the need for improvement of this programme, the Ministry hosted a series of townhall meetings across Jamaica to hear from stakeholders and allow them to share their views and recommendations for an improved PATH. These meetings confirmed that PATH has played a major role in assisting many of them to achieve success.



Notwithstanding the successes, we heard concerns regarding the PATH selection criteria, customer service and the School Feeding Programme, as well as recommendations for greater stakeholder collaboration.

We are reviewing the selection process to ensure improved targeting, as we seek to dispel misconceptions about eligibility. Madam Speaker, we aim to crush the myth that the mere fact that persons have certain appliances or modern amenities in their home, means that they cannot benefit from being on PATH. We cannot have Jamaicans in 2024 still thinking that merely having a stove, fridge, microwave or “flush toilet” will disqualify them from being on PATH. Madam Speaker, the Programme’s Transformation will set the record straight.

Madam Speaker, while PATH is a well known form of support, it was never ever designed to meet the needs of all vulnerable persons. We acknowledge these challenges and the call from our Prime Minister to interrogate and ultimately improve the Programme.

I use this opportunity to remind Jamaicans that the Ministry provides a range of other programmes to assist persons with various needs. These programmes alleviate short term economic shocks, increase employability and income generating capacity and ultimately improve standard of living.



PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Madam Speaker, the work of the Public Assistance Department is critical to addressing these needs. For the calendar year 2023, over \$369 Million was spent to assist approximately 10,600 persons through the Rehabilitation Programme. Additionally, almost 7,000 food packages were distributed to vulnerable families as a part of a special Christmas intervention programme. Madam Speaker, we continue to work tirelessly to ensure No One is Left Behind.

Rehabilitation Programme

3,729 grants valued at over \$207.76 million disbursed in 2023

Short-Term Poverty Alleviation Programme

6,952 grants valued at over \$161.11 million disbursed in 2023

Special Christmas Intervention

6,905 food packages were distributed to vulnerable families in 2023

SOCIAL INTERVENTION PROGRAMME/STEPS-TO-WORK

Madam Speaker, empowering our youth through job opportunities and training is a strategic component to ensuring no one is left behind. The Social Intervention Programme is geared towards providing an avenue for employment, on-the-job training, and self-reliance through education and entrepreneurship support for our youth. In 2023, through the SIP, 367 of our youths were placed in on the job training, 423 received education grants totalling some \$50.9 Million, while 534 members of PATH households received entrepreneurial grants totalling \$87.1 Million.

Another 842 individuals from PATH households received skills training and certification through a partnership with HEART/NSTA Trust. Looking ahead to the new Financial Year, we are committed to strengthening relationships with employers, ensuring participants complete their training and monitoring entrepreneurship grant beneficiaries to promote economic sustainability. Madam Speaker, by investing in our youth and fostering their development, we are not only securing their future but also building a stronger, more resilient Jamaica for generations to come.



SOCIAL PENSION PROGRAMME

Madam Speaker, this could not have come at a more opportune time, in the midst of the pandemic when the need was greatest. This programme represented a monumental shift in providing support to our elderly. Madam Speaker, recognizing the gap that existed, the Social Pension Programme was conceptualised by this Government to target seniors over the age of 75 who are without a pension or any financial support and are not on PATH.

Madam Speaker, 14,932 persons are currently registered on the Social Pension Programme, and in the last financial year over \$408 Million was paid out in benefits. The budget for this financial year has increased by 165% to \$1 Billion. Beginning this month, beneficiaries will receive an increase of over 76% in their bi-monthly benefits, moving from \$6,800 to \$12,000.

Madam Speaker, the programme requires applicants to have a birth certificate or passport to establish their age. We know that this requirement is difficult for some of our seniors. We have therefore strengthened our partnership with the Registrar General's Department (RGD) to enable our seniors to obtain their birth certificate. I can announce that we have made changes that will allow for increased flexibility while maintaining the Programme's integrity.

Where an applicant has no birth certificate or passport, he/she can use a voter's ID or a photograph along with an attestation of another elderly person of similar age, both signed by a Justice of the Peace to register for the programme. Persons can use their marriage certificate, birth certificate of children and school record among other documents to help verify their age. I urge all Jamaicans to recommend persons who they know may qualify for this benefit.

Madam Speaker, this is evidence of a listening Ministry ... the 'People's Ministry' prioritising the people we serve, so No One Is Left Behind.



As we continue to focus on our seniors Madam Speaker, be reminded that the cohort of persons 60 years and older comprises the fastest growing segment of our population and currently stands at 13%. Through the National Council for Senior Citizens, the People's Ministry is working to improve the quality of life of our seniors.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Madam Speaker, as we seek to make Jamaica the place of choice to live, work, do business, raise families and indeed retire, we commit to ensuring that the collective wealth of experience, wisdom, knowledge and expertise of our seniors is not lost but rather, recognised and preserved. The rich stories of our centenarians and other older adults must be documented for future generations. To ensure we preserve the rich legacy of our people, my Ministry, in collaboration with the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica launched the Oral History Project under the theme "A century of Jamaican stories". We are documenting our seniors' personal narratives that would not normally be found in the history books.

Madam Speaker, as Marcus Garvey said "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture, is like a tree without roots".

ONGOING OUTREACH

As we continue to promote active ageing, during the last Financial Year 2,223 seniors participated in 61 health and information sessions island wide, 767 seniors participated in 45 digital/financial literacy workshops and 49 enrolled in HEART/NSTA technology training programmes. Additionally, Madam Speaker, approximately 20,000 meals and food packages were provided to our most vulnerable seniors.



THE NATIONAL POLICY FOR SENIOR CITIZENS

Madam Speaker, the National Council for Senior Citizens (NCSC) continues to drive the implementation of the Revised National Policy for Senior Citizens and its broad plan of action. We are grateful for the collaborative efforts of government and non-government organisations in creating a responsive framework for older persons. We will continue with a robust public education campaign to stimulate behaviour change towards the elderly, as well as the development of a Registry of Older Persons to enhance our ability to serve this group.

I convey my thanks to the committed and hardworking board members, and the team of the NCSC, some of whom are here today.

NATIONAL INSURANCE SCHEME (NIS)

OVERVIEW

Madam Speaker, I now turn my attention to the National Insurance Scheme. Last year, the NIS disbursed benefits to over 137,000 persons both locally and overseas. We are acutely aware that for many retired persons the NIS pension is their only source of retirement income. Therefore, it is crucial that they be able to access the funds on a timely and convenient basis. As a part of our service improvement, 76% of NIS pensioners now receive payments directly into their bank accounts.

NATIONAL INSURANCE SCHEME BENEFICIARIES PAID BY BENEFIT TYPE 2022 AND 2023

TYPE OF BENEFITS	NUMBER OF BENEFICIARIES	
	2022	2023
RETIREMENT	101,556	103,823
INVALIDITY	8,415	8,371
WIDOWS'/WIDOWERS	23,892	24,008
ORPHAN/SPECIAL CHILD	38	38
DISABLEMENT	943	856
EMPLOYMENT INJURY	274	311
SUGAR WORKERS	1	1
SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY	0	0
TOTAL	135,119	137,408

LIFE CERTIFICATE

Madam Speaker, a concern identified by NIS pensioners relates to the Life Certificate verification process. In response the Ministry is working with EGov to introduce an electronic method to improve this process and we will be piloting this new initiative in the third quarter.

Additionally, we are taking steps to introduce an automated process to make it easier for domestic workers and other non-PAYE persons to pay their NIS contributions.

Madam Speaker, based on the 2019 Actuarial Review and the positive performance of the NIF, NIS benefits were increased by up to 76% effective April 2023. The Actuarial review as at March 31, 2022 is far advanced, and at the appropriate time I will inform the nation of any further increases.

A photograph of two men standing indoors, likely in a church or formal hall. The man on the left is older, with glasses, wearing a light brown suit and a patterned tie. The man on the right is younger, wearing a dark blue suit and a blue patterned tie. They are both smiling and holding a large, rectangular gift wrapped in silver paper with colorful patterns and a large blue ribbon bow. In the background, there is a red banner with a yellow cross, a wooden podium, and a large black speaker.

NATIONAL INSURANCE FUND (NIF)

Madam Speaker, the National Insurance Fund (NIF) exists because of the National Insurance Scheme (NIS). The NIF serves as the repository for all NIS contributions and related income. As of March 2024, the unaudited net asset value of the Fund stood at \$190.76 Billion. This represents a 17.5% year-over-year growth.

Madam Speaker, we are now seeing the positive results from the various reform initiatives which began in 2019. These include increasing contribution rates from 5% to 6% as well as increasing the insurable wage ceiling from \$1.5 Million to \$5 Million. These reform initiatives coupled with steady investment income have resulted in a healthy stream of income available for long term investments.

For this upcoming year, the National Insurance Fund intends to focus on several high-priority areas, including:

- The continued reform of the Fund with a view to maximising the rate of return on investments.
- A revised investment policy to minimise risk exposure and ensure long-term sustainability.
- Re-alignment of the Fund's Real Estate Portfolio.
- Divestment of low-yielding and non-performing real estate assets to optimise the NIF's investment strategy.
- A \$209 Million renovation of the Kingston and St. Andrew Parish office located on Ripon Road.
- Architectural design and plans for new NIS offices and a Government Services Centre in May Pen, Clarendon at an approximate cost of \$26.2 Million
- Projected expenditure of \$35 Million during this Fiscal Year, to improve investment properties within its portfolio for compliance with The Disabilities Act and related building codes.

SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR INCREASED RESILIENCE AND OPPORTUNITY (SPIRO)

NEW SOCIAL PROTECTION INITIATIVE

Madam Speaker, the Government of Jamaica recently signed a US \$20 Million loan with the World Bank to enhance the effectiveness and expand coverage of our social protection programmes, through the Social Protection for Increased Resilience and Opportunity (SPIRO) Project.

One major activity under the new project is the design and implementation of an integrated Social Protection Information System, which will accelerate the transformation of the Ministry's systems and significantly reduce processing time across all programmes. The SPIRO Project will also bolster employment services and labour market research tools. These initiatives will further widen the Ministry's reach in ensuring No One Is Left Behind.

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Madam Speaker, the Marshall Hall led Labour Market Reform Commission recommended the establishment of an unemployment insurance scheme. The need for such a scheme was brought into sharp focus by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through SPIRO we will implement Jamaica's first ever unemployment insurance benefit. Details of the proposed model, governance, management and investment strategy will be submitted to the Cabinet for approval in this Financial Year.



INNOVATION TRANSFORMATION PROJECT (ITP)

Madam Speaker, as we continue our thrust to improve our services, initiated the Innovation Transformation Project (ITP), we will prioritise improvements through greater use of technology, innovation and automation.

I have appointed an ITP Steering Committee comprised of representatives from the private and public sectors to provide strategic direction and oversight. Phase one of this Project, will focus on greater use of digital payments for PATH, Pensions, and other social benefits, the development of an NIS Portal for contribution tracking, a mobile Application for the Overseas Employment Programme as well as the modernization of the Work Permit system.

INCLUSION AND PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Madam Speaker, the Ministry plays a pivotal role in fostering inclusion and safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities. We believe that ensuring the well-being and inclusion of persons with disabilities is a fundamental role of any society. Through a range of initiatives provided by the Jamaica Council for Persons with Disabilities (JCPD), Early Stimulation

Programme (ESP) and the Abilities Foundation (AF), we aim to foster inclusion and provide opportunities and services to persons with disabilities. During the last Financial Year, these entities provided training, assistive devices and economic empowerment grants to over 6,000 persons with disabilities.

EARLY STIMULATION PROGRAMME (ESP)

Madam Speaker, as the 'People's Ministry', we are addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by children with disabilities. In that regard, the work of the Early Stimulation Programme is critical especially as it is the only fully funded government service for children below 6 years with developmental delays. Some 3,124 children from 232 communities island wide, received early intervention services in the last Financial Year. 175 children received assistive aids and 1,910 children received therapy. Madam Speaker, 193 parents and caregivers received training in coping skills and strategies to care for their children with disabilities.

Our mobile intervention unit took this service into the rural areas and conducted 280 therapeutic sessions. Additionally, The Stimulation Plus Centre, a school operated by the ESP has seen a 90% increase in the number of children enrolled. Additionally, in 2024/2025, we plan to expand our ESP services in the parishes of Manchester and Trelawny, and increase the number of specialised personnel working in this area.

Madam Speaker, most recently we were pleased to welcome Sara Minkara, Special Advisor On International Disability Rights Bureau Of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour, U.S. Department of State. We discussed Jamaica's effort in implementing the Disabilities Act and creating an inclusive society. She reaffirmed the need to see persons with disabilities through different lenses, not as persons who need charity or to be pitied, but as right holders.

PARTNERSHIPS

Through a partnership between UNICEF and the JCPD, Jamaica's Social Protection System and Health System delivery for persons with disabilities are being strengthened through the development of an interactive Management Information System for the Council. The Information System will enable medical practitioners to upload medical certificates electronically, thereby reducing processing times for disability certification.

UNICEF will also support the development of a mobile application that will allow persons to remotely register, check certification status, apply for grant assistance and interact with the JCPD virtually.

Additionally, Madam Speaker, our partnership with the Canadian Local Funds Initiatives, provided training in climate smart technologies to 25 rural women with disabilities enrolled at the Abilities Foundation.

Through another partnership with the Microsoft NoVA Data Centre in Virginia, USA, 21 staff members and students of the Abilities Foundation received training and certification in information technology. With the success of this first cohort, the partnership will continue in 2024/2025 to provide training to another 20 persons with disabilities.

Finally Madam Speaker, we recognize and salute our long standing partners such as the Digicel Foundation, Food for the Poor and other private sector groups who continue to provide substantial support to the Ministry and the community of persons with disabilities.

I implore every employer in Jamaica who has the facilities, to employ a person with disabilities to do so. Let us recognise their potential; they may be your best employee yet.

NEW LIMB NEW LIFE PROJECT

Madam Speaker, the Ministry lauds the partnership between the JCPD and the Ministry of Health and Wellness on the New Limb, New Life Project. Through this initiative, \$54 Million has been made available to provide prostheses to 200 clients of the JCPD.

Since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on September 25, 2023, some 58 clients with lower limb loss have received much needed prosthesis. Madam Speaker, this Project is part of a wider thrust towards inclusivity, integrating persons with disabilities as productive members of society, and ensuring No One Is Left Behind.

Madam Speaker, the recently launched Accessibility Checklist serves as an important tool that provides guidelines to facilitate the accommodation of persons with disabilities in the built environment. This tool was used to audit the Ministry's office at Heroes Circle and I am pleased to report that the findings were favourable. We are moving further in our efforts to ensure that there is greater accessibility across all Ministries.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry, through the JCPD, will be partnering with the Faculty of the Built Environment, University of Technology (UTECH), to conduct a peripheral Accessibility Audit of Ministries in the new school year. The aim of this exercise is to ensure compliance with The Disabilities Act by assisting Ministries to identify gaps and ensuring adherence to accessibility standards and reasonable arrangements to accommodate persons with disabilities.



Madam Speaker The Accessibility Checklist which is on the JCPD website (www.jcpd.gov.jm) is accessible by QR code at the back of your booklet and will be emailed to all the Ministers and Parliamentarians and I implore all of you to use it. Sensitization sessions on how to use the Accessibility Checklist will be conducted across Municipalities to promote accessibility in new buildings. In keeping with last week's emphasis on Labour Day 2024 Madam Speaker, we will continue, and urge all Jamaicans to "Ramp up the Access... Show that you Care".

PROMOTION OF INCLUSIVITY

Madam Speaker, in the current Financial Year, the Ministry introduced a pilot programme for the employment of capable persons with disabilities in the Overseas Employment Programme. This initiative involves partnering with the Abilities Foundation, engaging overseas employers and establishing a support system to assist workers with disabilities during their employment.

Madam Speaker for the first time, we have a batch of 3 farmers who are persons with disabilities and will be participating in the Overseas Employment Programme in Canada starting June. This is ground-breaking Madam Speaker, we are ensuring no one will be left behind.

UPSKILLING AND RESKILLING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES- ABILITIES FOUNDATION

Madam Speaker, we are focused on securing new partnerships with City and Guilds to include additional academic courses, and continue the Hydroponic and Traditional farming training courses, which will also be conducted to further enhance a workforce that will be ready for employment. Looking ahead to the 2024/2025 Financial Year, Madam Speaker, key areas of focus will include improving social and economic services, obtaining international certification of key business processes and actively enforcing Disabilities Rights. These initiatives, Madam Speaker, will form the core of the I am Able Campaign, a new initiative to increase awareness, improve access and integrate our Persons with Disabilities.

THE DISABILITIES RIGHTS TRIBUNAL (DRT)

The Disabilities Rights Tribunal, is a body established under The Disabilities Act, that will hear and settle complaints of discrimination. So far five cases of alleged discrimination have been referred to the Tribunal. I am pleased to report that The Disabilities Rights Tribunal convened its first hearing on May 21, 2024.

LABOUR DIVISION



THE LABOUR MARKET RECOVERY IN JAMAICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Madam Speaker we can proudly say that Jamaica is one of the best performing countries in labour market recovery within the Latin American and Caribbean region. In 2022, the Caribbean region experienced a gradual recovery in labour force participation rates as workers returned to the labour market, following sharp declines in employment brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Jamaica demonstrated notable resilience, with our labour force participation rate increasing from 64.7% in 2022 to 65.5% by the end of 2023.

Moreover, Madam Speaker, Jamaica continues to show positive improvement in the level of unemployment. At the close of 2023, the country registered an all-time low unemployment rate of 4.2%, compared to 6.6% in July 2022. These levels have outpaced the overall unemployment rates for the Caribbean and Latin America, which recorded 9.3% in 2021 and 7.0% in 2022.

Madam Speaker, while more persons are employed there are still challenges being faced in some sectors in recruiting the skill sets required as we improve our productivity. Within the local labour market, there are reports from employers within several industries, of difficulty recruiting and retaining suitably qualified workers. Demand for higher wages and benefits has created a worker driven labour market, as workers have taken advantage of the opportunity for self employment and own account work since the pandemic. Additionally, some workers who were engaged in online and flexible work arrangements have remained in these types of work arrangements. Madam speaker it is clear that when we look from the workers perspective we recognize that some persons are still interested in employer employee relationships while others are interested in own account work. What this means madam speaker is that our programs have now been tailored to address 2 distinct needs of the labour force, the first tier will require partnership with the Ministry at HEART for entrepreneurship training and incubation centres to drive the growth of emerging micro businesses and green jobs. The second tier will focus on job readiness training for job seekers.

Madam Speaker, we recognize the urgent nature of the issue regarding the shortage of skilled labour. We see this as a much needed opportunity to address the shortage and rollout the initiatives announced by our Prime Minister to mitigate this issue, including measures but not limited to:

1) Establish the CARE Programme through HEART – aimed to grow Jamaica’s labour force by providing training to every young person not currently enrolled in a training programme.

2) HEART Accelerated Apprenticeship Programme

Madam Speaker, training, technology and modernization of workplaces are pivotal to addressing the demand for labour. It is also crucial to prioritise re-skilling and up-skilling initiatives. Employers are encouraged to implement flexible work arrangements as a means of improving output and productivity.

My Ministry Madam Speaker also commits to improving and expanding the talent pool within the LMIS to assist employers in recruitment.



LABOUR RELATIONS

Madam Speaker, Jamaica continues to enjoy robust tripartite collaboration with employers and workers. As a key part of the tripartite, the role of trade unions in social dialogue remains strong. I take this opportunity to thank and commend the Jamaica Confederation of Trade Unions (JCTU) for its active involvement as a member of the Labour Advisory Council (LAC) and the National Minimum Wage Advisory Commission. Madam Speaker, the Jamaica Employers Federation (JEF) has provided yeomen service in tripartite discussions on policy and legislative priorities that impact the Labour Market. I extend my appreciation to Mrs. Helene Davis-Whyte, Past President of the Jamaica Confederation of Trade Unions, and Mr. David Wan, Past President of the Jamaica Employers Federation for their long and dedicated service in the leadership of their respective organisations.

I would also like to specially recognize Ms Shirley Pryce, former President of the Jamaica Household Workers' Union (JHWU) for her years of advocacy which led to the development of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Domestic Workers, C189.

I recognise the new leadership of Mr. St. Patrice Ennis, President of the Jamaica Confederation of Trade Unions, Mr Wayne Chen, President of the Jamaica Employers Federation and Ms Elaine Duncan, President of the Jamaica Household Workers' Union.

Madam Speaker, we have heard the concerns regarding the use of fixed term contracts, where workers do not enjoy similar rights and benefits as permanent employees. I have appointed a special committee of the LAC to examine the issue and make recommendations on the way forward.

NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE

Madam Speaker, the promotion of decent work remains a fundamental pillar for the Ministry. Over the past eight years, this government has moved the National Minimum Wage from \$6,200 in March 2016 to \$15,000 per week effective June 1, 2024. This represents a 142% increase, demonstrating our continued commitment to workers and to leaving no one behind. Additionally Madam Speaker, we have kept our word to equalising the national minimum wage and the minimum wage for industrial security guards.

OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME

Madam Speaker, I now turn our attention to a programme that for several decades has been a beacon of opportunity for approximately 15,000 Jamaicans annually, the Farmwork Programme. Under the Overseas employment programme, as it is properly termed, hundreds of thousands of Jamaicans have benefited from the temporary employment opportunities in Canada and the United States, enabling them to earn a decent income, gain valuable work experience, and acquire new skills that are transferable upon their return to Jamaica. Madam Speaker, in 2023, 9,587 Jamaicans travelled to Canada under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), with 626 participating in the low-skilled program. Additionally, 4,306 Jamaicans were dispatched to the United States for agricultural work, and 1,238 were deployed to the hospitality sector.

ENHANCEMENTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Ministry of Labour and Social Security is committed to continuously improving the Overseas Employment Programme to ensure that it remains relevant and beneficial to our citizens. To this end, we have implemented several key enhancements:

1) Orientation, Training and Certification: We started this exercise with a sensitization session with Members of Parliament who represent the eyes and ears of this Parliament at the constituency level. We have revised our orientation and selection process to include psychometric testing and revised literacy and numeracy tests. Additionally, we have expanded our pre-departure training programmes to include training and certifications in our effort to ensure No One Is Left Behind. This initiative ensures that our workers are well-prepared to meet the demands of their overseas employment and to excel in their roles.

2) Worker Welfare: The welfare of our workers is of paramount importance. We have strengthened our support systems, increasing the number of liaison officers to provide comprehensive assistance, including healthcare services, legal aid, and counselling. Our liaison offices in host countries are equipped to address any issues that may arise, ensuring that our workers are protected and their rights upheld. Of note, are the routine visits to employers and workers by our Liaison Officers which have more than tripled moving from 71 to 224 for the first quarters of 2023 to 2024 respectively.

3) Partnerships and Collaboration: We work with our government partners to ensure regulations and standards are satisfactory and we are actively seeking to expand our partnerships with international employers and agencies. By forging new alliances and strengthening existing ones, we aim to increase the number of employment opportunities available to Jamaicans and to diversify the sectors in which they can work.

4) Digital Transformation: In response to the evolving global landscape, we have initiated the digital transformation of the Overseas Employment Programme. This includes the development of an online portal that streamlines the application process, provides real-time updates, and facilitates better communication between the Ministry, workers, and employers.

At this time I wish to acknowledge our longstanding partners, in particular the High Commissioner of Canada, Her Excellency Emina Tudakovic and our US Ambassador N. Nickolas Perry. May our partnership continue to be strengthened.



Ms. Tanisha Gaynor (centre), one of the 25 graduates of the Strategic Engagement of Rural Women with Disabilities in Sustainable Farming Techniques programme, shares information about hydroponics farming processes with Hon. Parnell Charles Jr., Minister of Labour and Social Security (right), and Her Excellency Emina Tudakovic, High Commissioner of Canada to Jamaica (left). Occasion was the Closing Ceremony of the Canadian Local Funds Initiatives/Abilities Foundation Project at the Abilities Foundation facility on Constant Spring Road, Kingston, on February 27, 2024.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Madam Speaker, the legislative agenda for labour and social security is a cornerstone for fostering a robust and equitable workforce in Jamaica. Crafting and implementing effective labour laws is crucial for safeguarding workers' rights, ensuring fair wages, protecting vulnerable workers and providing safe working conditions. This is essential for our economic growth and social stability.

Active on the Ministry's agenda is the reform of archaic legislation and review of fines and penalties for a number of our labour legislations as well as accomplishing the goal of achieving decent work for all workers. We continue to advance work on the Labour Relations and Disputes Act and we are moving to consolidate our labour laws. As a first step, with the support of the International Labour Organization we will develop an Employment and Labour market policy. I must acknowledge the regional Director of ILO, Joni Musa and his team who recently visited with us and joined in one of our Labour Advisory Council meetings. We look forward to expanding this collaboration.

OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH (OSH)

Madam Speaker, as we equip Jamaicans for employment we are also prioritising workforce protection. The Ministry has now received the 3rd draft of the Occupational Safety and Health Bill and we are currently completing the drafting instructions to be returned to the Office of Parliamentary Counsel by mid June.

The Ministry has been monitoring industrial workspaces to promote safe and healthy work environments in an effort to ensure that contractors and workers are adhering to the regulations and safe practices.

Madam Speaker, for the last Financial Year, the OSH Department conducted a total of 2,077 compliance inspections. The Ministry received 163 accident reports of which four were fatal accidents, three occurred on construction projects and one at a factory. Madam Speaker, accident prevention requires the combined efforts of regulators, employers, workers and their representatives to ensure that unsafe acts and conditions are eliminated from our workplaces. I urge employers and operators of industrial establishments to follow the established rules and if necessary to reach out to our OSH Department for guidance or assistance.

OSH COMPLIANCE INSPECTIONS

2,077 achieved for the Financial Year 2023/ 2024

ACCIDENTS REPORTED

226 accident reports completed in the financial year 2023/ 2024.

Four (4) fatal accidents were reported

EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES UNIT

Madam Speaker, the Ministry issues licences to Employment Agencies to place individuals in jobs. In so doing, our Employment Agencies Unit (EAU) serves to ensure compliance with the laws as well as the fair treatment of jobseekers. For the 2023/ 2024 FY the Unit issued a total of 97 licences, conducted over 150 inspections and hosted 13 sensitization sessions with agency operators and other stakeholders.

Madam Speaker let me use this platform to raise an important issue with our job seekers. BE AWARE and ALERT.... As you embark on your quest for local or overseas employment opportunities, we urge you to remain vigilant against employment scams. Examine carefully any offers that seem too good to be true or require upfront payment for visas, travel expenses or job placements. If it seems too good to be true then it is likely to be so. Protect yourself and your future by checking the Ministry's website www.mlss.gov.jm for the list of licensed private agencies.



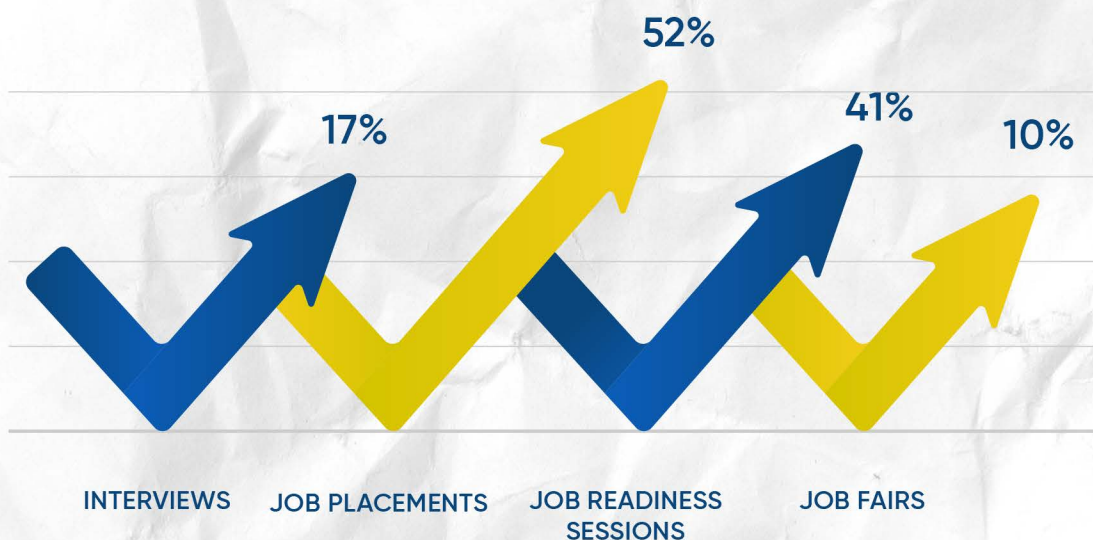
ELECTRONIC LABOUR EXCHANGE (ELE) and LABOUR MARKET INFORMATION SYSTEM (LMIS)

Madam Speaker, The Electronic Labour Exchange (ELE) is an online platform designed to connect job seekers with employers. It serves as a virtual marketplace where employers can post job vacancies, and individuals can search and apply for available positions. The Labour Market Information System (LMIS) collects data from multiple sources, including the ELE, other government agencies, surveys, and research to provide comprehensive data and insights into various aspects of the labour market. This includes employment trends, skills demand, training needs and labour force indicators.

2023 saw increases in 4 critical areas namely, job readiness sessions, referrals, job fairs and placement. Forty-one percent more job seekers were successfully placed in jobs, 17% secured interviews, there was a 10% increase in job fairs, and an 18% increase in referrals and 52% increase in job readiness sessions. We are making 4 major improvements in this area to strengthen the Ministry's local employment services. Firstly, the ELE platform will be rebranded as JamaicaJobs.gov.jm and a robust public sensitization programme will be launched in social and traditional media. Madam Speaker, all jobs that are available across MDAs will be posted on JamaicaJobs.gov.jm. I call upon all MPs to encourage their constituents as well as employers, unions and other social partners to make use of this important resource. The rebranded JamaicaJobs.gov.jm portal will be free, available and at your service. We will be restructuring our on-the-job training policy and procedures to expand reach and provide more opportunities for targeted groups such as members of PATH households. Secondly, we will increase the number of job fairs, career workshops and recruitment drives. Madam Speaker, last week we were engaged in a customised recruitment drive and job readiness training for an employer that required 400 new workers as part of its expansion program. Additionally, Madam Speaker, we are exploring a major partnership with Microsoft to enhance data on critical labour market supply and demand

.Madam Speaker this is the 'People's Ministry'... where No One Is Left Behind!!

ELECTRONIC LABOUR EXCHANGE (ELE) 2023



WORK PERMIT

Madam Speaker, as our country, makes efforts to sustain the positive indicators, we must deliberate on structuring systems that attract and facilitate skilled labour finding its place across our sectors. Despite historically low unemployment levels, there is still a high demand, creating gaps in the labour market for critical skill sets..

We are mindful that the changes in the population age structure can also have varying implications, necessitating the need to attract labour from other countries. The impending implementation of CARICOM full free movement is one for which we have to prepare.

WORK PERMIT INVESTIGATIONS



349 investigations conducted for FY 23/24

341 investigations were conducted for FY 22/23 2023

01

APPLICATIONS RECEIVED

Work Permit Applications FY 23/24
New and Renewed applications - 5,155
Work Permit Exemptions - 749
Marriage Exemptions - 162

02

APPLICATIONS APPROVED

Work Permits FY 23/24
New applications - 2,092
Renewed - 2,624
Work Permit Exemptions FY 23/24
New applications - 261
Renewed - 181
Marriage Exemptions FY 23/24
New exemptions - 86
Renewed - 76

NEW WORK PERMIT SYSTEM

Madam Speaker, in 2023/2024 a total of 5,904 Work Permit and Work Permit Exemption applications were received. Of this amount, 4,716 work permits were approved. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security continues its effort to replace its existing legacy Work Permit System, with a modern and efficient system. The New Work Permit Processing System is in the User Acceptance Training phase. Once implemented, the system will eliminate the need for paper-based applications, significantly reduce processing times and create a more robust integrated system with other areas of government.

Madam Speaker, this system is being developed through the Transformation Implementation Unit (TIU) and funding from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). These changes are part of the wider transformation of the Ministry to be more efficient in its operations by employing digital solutions.

PRODUCTIVITY

NATIONAL POLICY ON PRODUCTIVITY

Madam Speaker, our Prime Minister has been championing productivity, peace and prosperity. At the Jamaica Productivity Centre's (JPC) our mandate is to facilitate and promote productivity improvement in Jamaica to drive sustainable economic growth, improve living standards, and enhance the nation's global competitiveness. We note Madam Speaker that Jamaica experienced its lowest unemployment rate of 4.2% in the 4th Quarter of 2023.

We are moving ahead to improve on this positive outcome and to drive productivity in Jamaica by workforce skill development, technological innovation, efficient resource management and supportive policies. One such critical policy being developed is the National Policy on Productivity. The Policy will be a strategic tool to prioritise and improve productivity across all sectors of the economy while creating a roadmap to achieving greater efficiency in the production of goods and services. The Policy Concept Paper is to be submitted to Cabinet.



FUTURE OF WORK

As we navigate the evolving landscape of the global economy, it is imperative that we proactively address the "Future of Work" in Jamaica. The rapid advancement of technology, integration of artificial intelligence, shifting economic paradigms, and changing workforce demographics present both challenges and opportunities for our nation. Our vision for the future of work is rooted in adaptability, inclusivity, and resilience, ensuring that every Jamaican can thrive in this new era.

The integration of cutting-edge technologies, including artificial intelligence, automation, and big data analytics, is essential for boosting productivity. We are seeing an increase in the number of platform workers, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift towards flexible and remote work arrangements. Many are now benefiting significantly as they provide services or perform tasks through online platforms or apps, often as part of the gig economy or freelance work. As the nature of work evolves, so too must our social protection systems. We are enhancing our social safety nets to provide comprehensive support for all workers, including those in non-traditional employment, ensuring that No One Is Left Behind.

Madam Speaker, we acknowledge that many platform workers operating outside the formal labour market face various challenges. Accordingly, there is a need for policies and a regulatory framework for this emerging category of workers. Madam Speaker, the upcoming conference of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) will focus on decent work in the platform economy. The global focus on platform workers underscores the fact that the challenges faced by Jamaica in dealing with such workers is not unique.



Madam Speaker, I use this opportunity to announce and invite colleagues and Jamaica to the Future of Work and Productivity Summit that will be held on June 19-21, 2024, under the theme, "Enabling sustainable productivity improvement and innovation in Jamaica." The venue will be announced shortly.

INNOVATION AND PRODUCTIVITY COMPETITION 2024

NATIONAL POLICY ON PRODUCTIVITY

The Ministry introduces its inaugural Innovation and Productivity Competition for the Public Sector to further encourage productivity, Madam Speaker. This competition will identify the Public Sector Innovation and Productivity Organization of the year to be named in June 2024 in honour of World Productivity Day and our Productivity week of activity celebrated on June 20, 2024.

This competition will introduce productivity measurement and monitoring tools, enabling public sector entities to showcase their progress in applying these techniques. Madam Speaker this competition is one of many tools being used to foster a more productivity-focused public sector and improve efficiency in public service delivery. The competition is a part of the Future of Work and Productivity Summit activities to prepare our workforce for Industry 6.0 also known as the sixth industrial revolution.

JAMAICA PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME

NEW INITIATIVE FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

Madam Speaker, I am proud to announce the launch of a groundbreaking initiative: the Jamaica Partnership Programme (JPP). This innovative programme is designed to provide comprehensive support to vulnerable groups within our society, including the elderly, persons with disabilities and low-income families. Through the Jamaica Partnership Programme, we aim to unite stakeholders to address their needs with sustainable solutions, leveraging expertise and resources through coordinated outreach and networking efforts.

Madam Speaker, we will conduct thorough assessments to pinpoint the urgent needs of vulnerable groups, consulting with various stakeholders including the diaspora, community leaders, and advocates. Having witnessed firsthand the impact of our current initiatives, such as the New Limb New Life Project, which provides prosthetics, we aim to replicate these success stories through the Jamaica Partnership Programme. The Project is in its proposal phase and relies on partnerships. I am therefore urging the private sector, diaspora members, international aid organizations, and donors to collaborate with us. Madam Speaker, our goal is to supply more assistive devices, create community centres for seniors, and launch livelihood support programs for vulnerable individuals. Especially now, there's no greater cause than uplifting each other. Let's work together to ensure No One Is Left Behind.



Minister of Labour and Social Security, Hon. Parnell Charles Jr. (right), presents special needs student Delano Clarke (centre) with school supplies donated by Digicel Foundation at the Stimulation Plus Child Development Centre on Hanover Street in downtown Kingston on August 21, 2023. Sharing in the presentation is Digicel Foundation's Education and Special Needs Project Officer, Jeneard Williamson.

CLOSING REMARKS

Madam Speaker, as I close my maiden contribution as Minister of Labour and Social Security, it is important to highlight the accomplishments of the Andrew Holness administration of which I am proud to be a part. I reaffirm the unwavering commitment of the Government of Jamaica to advance the welfare of our citizens through the dedicated efforts of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. Our tireless pursuit of equity, empowerment, and opportunity has not only transformed lives but continues to strengthen the very fabric of our nation.

Madam Speaker, one must recognize the significance of the increase in the National Minimum Wage, the second increase over a year. There is also the increase in the minimum wage for security guards, a matter long overdue and well deserved by those who work day and night to provide a welcome feeling of comfort at our banks, supermarkets, schools and in so many other areas of our daily lives.

Madam Speaker we increased the budget for Social Pension benefits by a whopping 165% following an increase in NIS pension up to 76% last year. This is the People's Ministry, where No One Is Left Behind. PATH beneficiaries are also enjoying an increase in benefits starting next week, as a result of a budget increase of 28.8%. We will introduce unemployment insurance to strengthen the National safety net, Madam Speaker, even as we expand access to opportunities for employment in our effort to ensure No One Is Left Behind. The 4.2 % measure of unemployment is our lowest ever and remains a globally admired and coveted achievement of which Jamaica is proud.

This is the People's Ministry, where No One Is Left Behind. There is the New Limb New Life program in partnership with the Ministry of Health and Wellness, Madam Speaker, this is a step in the right direction. We launched our Customer Contact Centre, first ever, which has significantly improved the speed of access to the ministry and responsiveness to customer queries. The result, Madam Speaker, increased customer satisfaction. There is the new kid on the block Madam Speaker, the Disability Rights Tribunal. Madam Speaker, We Care! This is the People's Ministry, where No One Is Left Behind.

The Accessibility Checklist is an initiative, Madam Speaker, which will have a meaningful impact now and for generations to come as we embrace accessibility and inclusivity as a norm in our society. For persons with disabilities, "I am Able" will become the rallying cry with the roll out of our new program by that name.

There is the piloting of a new, electronic registration system at our parish offices which will make registration for services and responses to queries on applications and requests for information faster and more efficient. Increased customer satisfaction, Madam Speaker. Continuing with technology integration, Madam Speaker, the new Electronic Work Permit System to be rolled out before the end of the year, in conjunction with the Transformation Implementation Unit of the Ministry of Finance and the Public Service, will be a paradigm shift in an area which has suffered a fair share of criticism.



(Hon. Pearnel Charles Jr., Minister of Labour and Social Security (right), listens attentively as Miss Julina McDonald (left), a centenarian from Clarendon, reads a passage from the Bible during his home visits to centenarians on October 20, 2023.)

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This is the People's Ministry, where No One Is Left Behind.

As we move forward, let us continue to collaborate, innovate, and advocate for a future where every individual, regardless of circumstance, can thrive and contribute meaningfully to Jamaica's prosperity. Together, let us build a society, where compassion and solidarity prevail, and where the dignity and rights of all are upheld.

Madam Speaker, we are listening, learning and improving and as the People's Ministry, we will be taking out services across Jamaica. We will be working to ensure No One is Left Behind.



Please scan to see the Ministry of Labour and Social Security Accessibility Checklist Manual- 2023 Edition