



Sen. The Honourable Barbara Cartwright

Minister of Social Services

**Contribution to the 2026/2027 Budget
Debate**

Tuesday, 23rd June 2026

**The Senate
Nassau, Bahamas**

Madam President,

I rise to make my contribution to the 2026/2027 Budget Debate as Minister of Social Services.

As I do so, I am reminded of the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, (ACC) and I quote, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred; let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy;” end quote.

These words remind me of the duty I have as Minister of Social Services to care with compassion for those who are suffering or experiencing challenges.

For me, the Ministry of Social Services is not just another government agency; it is the conscience of our nation. It is the safety net that catches the fallen, and the ladder that helps the ambitious climb.

This is the philosophy that will lead me; and by the grace of God, I will not fail.

Madam President, Before I proceed with my contribution, I wish to thank our Honorable Prime Minister, for appointing me as Minister of Social Services and Senator.

Having worked closely with the Hon. Philip “Brave” Davis for over 8 years; I can attest to his deep love for our country and compassion for the Bahamian people. Serving under his leadership has made accepting his offer to sit as a Cabinet Minister and Senator an easy one.

I hold no illusion about the difficulty of this task. I am deeply honoured to be entrusted with it.

To my mom, Agnes Cartwright, my daughter, Tarj and my village, too many to name; I say thank you for your love and support. I am truly grateful to all of you!!

I also want to congratulate you, **Madam President,** on your return to leading this chamber, and our new elected Vice President, Senator J’Ann Major, along with other Senate colleagues.

Madam President,

The Ministry of Social Services has rightly been described as the Heartbeat of the Nation. Its work reaches every corner of our archipelago. It touches the life of the Bahamian, from the cradle to the later years of life. It supports children, families, older persons, persons with disabilities, victims of abuse, persons facing hardship, and citizens who find themselves at the lowest and hardest point in their lives.

I came to this Ministry with my own understanding of its work. From my first day, that understanding has deepened. I was received with great warmth by the Permanent Secretary, Mrs. Phedra Rahming-Turnquest, the management team and by staff at every level. To each of them, I extend my sincere thanks and gratitude.

I also look forward to working hand in hand with State Minister for Social Services, Honorable Bacchus Rolle, who will be instrumental in driving the government's agenda for this Ministry.

Madam President. I am not a social worker by profession. But all my adult life, in every job I have held, and every appointment undertaken, I have performed social work in some shape or form.

I am a woman who cares deeply for people, especially the poor, the vulnerable, and those who too often feel unseen.

Madam President,

Poverty reduction is one of my central mandates.

Poverty is never about money alone. It is the result of many negative factors one faces in their life – some forced, some unforced, some inherited. Whatever the genesis, poverty destroys institutions, and it destroys relationships at every level - between husband and wife, parent and child, friend, and friend. When those bonds deteriorate, the consequences are dire.

The strength of the Bahamian family determines the strength of the Bahamian society. That is why it is so important that we do all we can to lift families out of poverty.

Our work will build on the progress gained over the past five years under this Davis-led Administration. More citizens have been approved for health assistance. Support has reached more families in need. But Madam President, the demand for shelter is on the rise.

Shelter is now one of the clearest and most urgent needs facing the Ministry. Providing access to affordable, safe, and secure shelters is one important way we can lift our people out of poverty. When our fellow citizens have no safe place to sleep, that is more than a housing issue. It is a social issue. It is a family issue. It is a child protection issue. And it begs our full attention.

Madam President, for too long, the narrative of Social Services has been one of “handouts.” With this budget we are signaling a fundamental shift in our philosophy.

Our goal is not merely to provide social assistance; it is to promote empowerment and human dignity.

There is no dignity in permanent dependency. There is no pride in a system that keeps people trapped in a cycle of “just enough to survive.”

The Ministry of Social Services should not just be a place where you go when you have failed or have challenges, but a place you go so that you may finally succeed.

Madam President,

The Ministry of Social Services addresses challenges that are often whispered about in the shadows, but not confronted enough in the public.

If we are to be a proactive Ministry, we must be a brave one.

We cannot inspire if we are not honest. We cannot heal what we refuse to name or discuss.

We must speak of the non-payment of child support. We know the data, but more importantly, we know the stories.

We see boys and young men wondering without a compass because the man who should have been their “North Star” walked away and did not look back. While their mother must apply to social services for food and shelter.

We must speak – painfully, but clearly – about the horrors that happen behind closed doors. We must speak about incest and domestic trauma.

In the deepest darkness, our country has for far too long been reactive – waiting for a report, waiting for a bruise, waiting for a tragedy. This must end.

Madam President, we must speak of autism and neurodiversity. Families with autistic children have been struggling financially for too long in keeping up with therapy costs.

Parents are looking for schools that see their children’s brilliance instead of their “disruptions.” Autism must not be seen as a disability to be hidden, but as a different way that requires specific, aggressive support.

We must speak loudly about the disabled who have aged out but still relying on the government for support.

And we must speak of mental health.

Madam President, reports suggest that suicide is on the rise. We must come together as a community to identify warning signs for quicker intervention and support.

In speaking on these issues, we must be proactive. There is much work to be done.

It is cheaper to build a strong child than it is to fix a broken man. It is more humane to prevent a crisis than it is to manage one.

Madam President,

The 2026/2027 Budget allocations for my ministry total (\$64,224,852) sixty-four million, two hundred and twenty-four thousand, eight hundred and fifty-two dollars. Adjusted for the removal of the Broadcasting Corporation of The Bahamas from the portfolio.

This 2026-2027 allocation represents a 3.7 percent increase over that of last year. Budget Head 43, which underwrites the expenses of the administrative arm is **eight million, nine hundred eighty-seven thousand, nine hundred fifty-eight dollars** (\$8,987,958).

The allocation for the Department of Social Services (Head 44) has increased from \$53,074,475.00 (**fifty-three million, seventy-four thousand, four hundred seventy-five dollars**) to \$55,236,894.00 (**fifty-five million, two hundred thirty-six thousand, eight hundred ninety-four dollars**), an increase of \$2,162,419.00 **two million, one**

hundred and sixty-two thousand, four hundred and nineteen dollars over last year.

Madam President, the Ministry of Social Services is a people's ministry and although we provide a lot of monetary support to individuals, the heart of our operations is our staff. There is a total of just over five hundred staff members in our 26 locations spread across our nation. In this budget, \$18.9 million (or about 29%) has been allocated to cover personnel emoluments. This is a 12.6% increase over last year's figure of \$16.8 million.

Madam President, while we are grateful for this increase as it reflects this administration's commitment to enhancing this Ministry's ability to meet its mandate, we do recognize the fact that we are still somewhat deficient regarding our staff compliment.

Notwithstanding, from what I have seen in my brief time at the Ministry, the staff in the Ministry and Department of Social Services is extremely committed and dedicated to getting the job done. Many of them, the social workers, go well beyond the call of duty to ensure that they meet the ever-increasing demands being placed on our ministry.

Their job is not easy, it's certainly not glamorous and oftentimes the very people they seek to assist seem not to appreciate the work that they do. However, today, **Madam President**, I call on you and my colleagues in this honourable chamber to say thank you to social workers and all the staff of the Ministry and Department of Social Services. These unsung heroes, who toil day in and day out behind the scenes, improve the lives of their less fortunate brothers and sisters. For this, they deserve our appreciation.

Madam President, I am pleased to report that the Ministry of Social Services expanded its reach in the community through the work of various divisions and I wish to take a moment to share a bit of what has been accomplished.

Community Affairs Division

Madam President, the Community Affairs Division continued its Stronger Families promotion and has ably done so through targeted programs in the Carmichael, Pinewood, Nassau Village and Fox Hill Communities. They have not only addressed

health matters in general, but they've created a safe space for women and men to better themselves. Our team, joined with our partners, have also used the center to mobilize our men to promote healthy relationships, mental health and share parenting tips.

Most notable is the Division's ability to move to various communities with a "backpack ready" empowerment programme - designed and tested. We recognize that each community has its own nuances and therefore the programme can be adjusted to meet the specific needs of each community.

We have heard the stories and seen the results of persons who began in search of a hobby and have now graduated as entrepreneurs - thanks to their training in sewing, baking, crafts, backyard farming, painting, and business proposal writing.

When I viewed the progress of this division, it exemplified true partnership – using the churches and facilitators and other partners who love what they do and share our goal of helping to build people. We recognize that everyone can positively impact a family unit and contribute to the strengthening or transformation of their community. As one participant proclaimed, "I am here to become a BETTER ME".

National Commission of Persons with Disabilities

Madam President, the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) was established to protect the rights, promote responsibility, ensure accessibility, encourage inclusion, and advance equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. Recently, the Bahamas National Statistical Institute released its preliminary report on disability in the Bahamas.

The 2022 census included six basic, functional questions from the Washington Group, which set the parameters for comparative measurement on a global basis.

Key findings from the report indicate that there are a total of 38,551 persons with disabilities aged 5 and older.

Madam President, when the 2022 disability figures are compared to those of the 2010 census, there is a significant increase in both the number and percentage of disabled individuals five years and older.

In 2010, there were 10,138 persons with disabilities, which represented 2.9% of the population at the time. In 2022, 38,551 or 10.3% of the population age 5 years or older are disabled. This means that over that 12-year period, the number of disabled

individuals in the country has increased almost four-fold. Based on this, my ministry will have to ensure that we make the requisite adjustments to provide more support to this vulnerable group. Over the coming weeks, we will work with the Bahamas National Statistical Institute (BNSI) to better understand these figures to determine a disability profile. Having more detailed information will enable us to better strategize how we will target those who are most in need of our assistance.

However, despite the large increase in the percentage of the disabled, based on the 2022 Census, that percentage still pales in comparison to the World Health Organization's (WHO) estimation that 15 to 16% of any population are persons with disabilities.

We will continue to work with the BNSI and others to understand the scope of disability within our country.

Madam President, I want to take this opportunity to assure those persons with disabilities who reside in the family islands that, if you are in need of our assistance, we are able to send the required items to your island. Please reach out to the NCPD office, or the department of social services on your island or do so by downloading the free Mobile Disability App which is available in your Google or Apple App Store.

During this fiscal year, we will continue with the successful "Adults with Disabilities" Day Programme and the review of ***Persons with Disabilities Equal Opportunities Act***. Amendments will be considered to further strengthen the Act. Our work continues to focus on inclusion and equal opportunity, while maintaining the dignity of those we serve.

Access to Grant Funding opportunities will continue to be explored and afforded to the community of persons with disabilities.

Madam President, among the promises made in the last budget was the provision of a bus/van to transport persons with disabilities. The bus provided has been specially outfitted with a lift and provides adequate space for wheelchairs.

Madam President, this Davis-led administration is very concerned about the state of the elderly. We have taken note and are perplexed by the growing numbers of abandoned seniors. As a result, along with our colleagues in the Health Sector, we will work to address this issue and intend to bring the Care and Protection of Older Persons Bill (2023) to this Parliament for consideration and passage.

Madame President, the Ministry of Social Services has and will continue to provide direct financial support to reputable non-governmental organisations that provide support to the work of protecting and caring for the vulnerable in our society. To the extent possible, we provide them with generous subventions to aid in the delivering of quality service to their clientele. Indeed, Madam President, over the last few weeks, I have had the opportunity to visit several the Children's homes and I can say that, based on what I saw, these homes do a fantastic job of providing quality care for their children. I was very impressed by what I saw.

Department of Gender and Family Affairs

I now turn my attention to the Department of Gender and Family Affairs.

Madam President, as the Bahamas Principal Delegate of the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission of Women (OAS CIM), I had the privilege of attending the 40th Assembly of Delegates, of the OAS CIM, convened in Washington D. C. in May under the theme "Women's Economic Rights in the Americas; Policies and Strategies to Guarantee Autonomy and Bargaining Power"

Countries were able to participate in discussions focused on closing gender gaps in the workforce, income and care economies as well as promoting women's financial inclusion.

The discussions had rich participation from member states across North, Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean.

I was honoured to share my country's perspective in such a forum.

Madam President, the Protection Against Violence Commission has been appointed and the Chairperson, Marissa Mason-Smith and her Vice Chair, Pastor Dave Burrows, have been meeting consistently with their members.

I note that some have expressed concern regarding a lack of funding for this entity, however, I assure the public that funds are indeed available in the 2026/2027 for the Commission under the item previously used for the National Task Force for Ending Gender Based Violence **forty-two thousand, nine hundred dollars** (\$42,900.00). Of course, any funds required beyond this allocation, will be found within the Ministry's budget.

It should also be noted that the Commission will be housed in the newly renovated V.B. Munnings Building on Pitt Rd. Madame President, with the passage of the Protection

Against Violence Act (2023), the Commission's work will be centered on ensuring that this Act is fully implemented.

Madam President, the National Women's Advisory Council continued its work and hosted another successful Women's Symposium in February 2026. The Council also held a training session on "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace" and honoured 15 women in the area of law and order for International Women's Day.

I thank Ms. Sophia Thompson and Patrice Astwood-McDonald, chairperson, and deputy chairperson of the council, respectively, as well as the other members of the council and their partners, for their hard work. Be assured that it has not gone unnoticed. We see you, and we appreciate your efforts.

Madam President, we will be building capacity within the Department of Gender and Family Affairs as we source additional staff to ensure that the Department is equipped to meet its mandate.

Safe Houses

Madam President, the Ministry of Social Services is happy to report that we are in the process of completing the renovations of two properties to serve as safe houses. We wish to thank our Former Minister of Social Services, Hon. Myles LaRoda, for commencing the process. These houses will have the capacity to accommodate up to 24 individuals who find themselves in distress. We are anticipating that these much-needed facilities will be completed and ready for use within the next 2 to 3 months. PROGRESS IS TRULY HERE!!

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Madam President,

According to the latest U.S. CDC data, autism affects about 1 in 31 children. Based on this rate, it is estimated that around 7,000 children in The Bahamas may be affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This highlights the urgent need for early screening, diagnosis, therapy, school support, and community awareness.

While there are several private schools in The Bahamas that offer services for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), it is unclear whether all are registered with the relevant educational authorities and whether they consistently employ qualified special educators, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, behaviour therapists, and other trained professionals.

The Ministry of Education has made significant strides in supporting children with special needs through dedicated special education units and trained teachers. I thank the former Minister of Education Glenys Hanna-Martin for being instrumental in ensuring that the need is highlighted. I would also like to thank the Minister of State for Immigration and Foreign Affairs, Darron Pickstock for his support in the bringing awareness to ASD. Nevertheless, the demand for services continues to exceed the available resources. With an estimated 7,000 children in The Bahamas affected by ASD, the need for specialized educational and therapeutic support remains high.

Although private schools provide valuable services, the cost is often prohibitive for many families, making it difficult to sustain long-term intervention. Additionally, while there are some services available for children, there are very limited opportunities for adolescents and adults who have aged out of the school system.

Madam President, I am happy to advise that a \$750,000 allocation has been placed in our budget.

REACH has been identified as a Key Partner and we will continue to work with them and other similar organizations to define the most urgent need that can be provided by Social Services.

Madam President, the Department of Social Services, covers a wide variety of services – from food, burial, rent and health assistance to foster care and disability allowances and more. It manages Children and Senior Citizens Homes – its scope of work is vast.

Since the last budget communication, the department continued its pursuit of transformation. We recognize that the internal customer must receive attention to give the best to our clients. This means providing improved working conditions, conducive to productivity, as well as revising policy, where required.

Madam President, many children are presently residing in residential care facilities throughout the Bahamas that can be placed in foster homes. Foster homes can provide normalcy and a sense of belonging for children having entered care because of abuse, abandonment, neglect, or being orphaned. Foster homes offer a safe, secure, and nurturing atmosphere that promotes the child's well-being and healthy development.

The Department of Social Services has budgeted \$698,350 to assist foster parents to meet the educational and clothing needs of children placed in their care.

Emotional assistance can be provided to foster parents to support the placement process and facilitate a smooth transition for the child into their new home environment. Once children are placed in foster homes and they are thriving, the foster parents can apply to the Supreme Court to become their adoptive parents.

We are in need of more caring, responsible foster parents. Children don't need a perfect home, but they need a stable home. Remember, children thrive in stable environment.

Assessment of the Department of Social Services

Madam President, a preliminary assessment of the Department confirmed that staff continue to serve individuals and families facing poverty, homelessness, crisis, and other vulnerabilities while carrying these significant national responsibilities with limited capacity. The findings also reinforce an important principle: **assistance remains necessary, but assistance alone is not enough**. This principle must guide the future direction of all assistance currently provided by the Department of Social Services.

Madam President, during the fiscal period of 2025/2026, the Department provided 1,731 temporary shelter assistance at a cost of \$3,058,600, in New Providence alone.

This figure reflects the Government's ongoing effort to ensure that no vulnerable Bahamian is left without support during a time of crisis.

While temporary accommodation remains an essential intervention, it is insufficient to meet the demands. Therefore, our objective must be to support individuals and families in moving toward stabilization, responsibility, resilience, and long-term functioning.

Madam President, Social Services is an investment in national stability. This is especially true in the area of temporary shelter.

Every family prevented from homelessness, every individual assisted through a period of crisis, and every person successfully transitioned toward stability, represents an investment in stronger communities and a stronger Bahamas.

The goal is not simply to provide temporary shelter in response to homelessness. Rather, the goal is to provide a pathway to stability, one that leads to reducing reliance on the state and promoting empowerment.

Madam President, I am advised that those clients who have been able to save and to exit our shelters, generally complain of their inability to find affordable housing, particularly for large families. This means that the current policy to provide a maximum of \$1,200.00 per year in rental assistance to a successful applicant is not adequate. Consideration will be given to seeking an increase to provide a greater level of financial assistance.

Madam President, as I said, Poverty Reduction is high on the Davis led administration's agenda. The Ministry of Social Services is encountering a great deal of homelessness even though unemployment numbers have improved. The high rise in the cost of rental properties is one of the contributing factors. The Ministry will engage other relevant Government entities to discuss an innovative model that provides families with temporary housing while permitting them to save and transition into home ownership.

The model, "From Poverty to Stability" is designed to provide a structured pathway for vulnerable families to transition from poverty and housing insecurity toward homeownership, economic participation, and long-term stability.

The programme proposes the identification 20 twenty families, in the first instance, currently living in poverty who demonstrate the willingness and potential to participate in the programme. The Programme is holistic and will also include job training and workforce development, and other relevant areas will be provided.

Once the programme is deemed successful, it will be replicated throughout the Bahamas.

Closing

Madam President,

Since my appointment to this Ministry, I have felt the urgency of this work in a very personal way. Behind every request for assistance is a person carrying a burden. Behind every application is a family trying to make ends meet. Behind every crisis is a Bahamian who needs help, and who needs that help delivered in a timely fashion with dignity and fairness.

That is why our work must continue to move forward.

We will strengthen the services we offer to the public. We will enact legislation and policies where they are needed. We will improve coordination. We will increase staff

where resources allow. We will continue the work of modernising our systems so that they make interacting and transacting with my Ministry more efficient.

But our goal cannot simply be to respond to crisis after crisis. We must help our people move from crisis to stability. We must help reduce long-term dependency on social assistance. We must strengthen families. We must create pathways for vulnerable Bahamians to build better futures for themselves and for their children.

That is the path we chart.

From crisis response to resilience.

From dependency to opportunity.

From poverty to stability.

Madam President, even with our best efforts, the Government alone cannot carry out this work. The needs are too many. The pressures facing families are too real. The hardship in some homes is too deep. That is why, under my leadership, the Ministry will continue to call on others to stand with us in support of the vulnerable, the elderly, the disabled, the abused, the displaced, and all those who have fallen on hard times.

We will continue to work with NGOs, churches, civic organisations, community groups, and private citizens to reach as many people as possible.

We encourage families, wherever they are able, to care for elderly parents and relatives who need support.

We encourage those who are financially stable, mentally, and physically able, of good character, and committed to helping a child in need, to consider adopting a child currently in foster care.

Because **Madam President**, this work belongs to all of us.

The Ministry of Social Services may be the safety net, but the fabric of care across our nation must be strengthened by families, churches, communities, civic organisations, and every citizen who believes that no Bahamian should be left alone in their hardest hour.

Madam President, I feel the weight of this responsibility. I accept it with humility. And I pledge that I will lead this Ministry with compassion, urgency, and a deep commitment to the people who need us most.

It will take all of us working together to ensure that every Bahamian has the chance to live with dignity, security, and hope.

Madam President, I am pleased to support the 2026/2027 Budget.

I thank you.