



# **CONTRIBUTION TO THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

by

**THE HONORABLE DR. MICHAEL DARVILLE  
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**ON**

## **MID-TERM BUDGET DEBATE**

House of Assembly

17<sup>th</sup> March 2022

10:30AM

**Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker** for another opportunity to stand to my feet and to give an account to this honorable house about what we have been doing in the Ministry of Health and Wellness during the last six (6) months. Before getting into the meat of my presentation with your leave I would like to thank the great people of Tall Pines for this wonderful opportunity to serve and to say your MP is working and with the relaxation of the COVID-19 rules many of our new programs will be launched along with the Tall Pines urban renewal center.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

I would also like to congratulate our Prime Minister and his team from the Ministry of Finance for the excellent work they are doing in restoring confidence in our local economy. His commitment to hard work and compassion for the less fortunate keeps all of us on this side focused on the key deliverables outlined in our Blueprint for Change. Under his leadership we have done more in seven (7) months than the former administration has done in their last four plus years in office.

Yes, the proof is in the pudding, our COVID-19 cases are down, the economy is growing, our tourists are coming back, our children are back in school and investors are expressing renewed confidence in our country.

We remain grateful to the Bahamian people for the wonderful opportunity to serve and we intend to remain accountable and transparent with the people's purse, our policies, and with the execution of our transformative agenda.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

Few if any among us would disagree that COVID-19 has dominated our conversations and our lives over the past two years. Two years ago with all of the panic and fear that accompanied this pandemic, it was hard to conceive of a time when we would be able to return to some degree of normalcy in our daily lives, in our schools, in our homes, in our places of worship and in our ability to socialize with family and friends but after four waves of this deadly pandemic I am cautiously optimistic that we are heading in the right direction. The recent statistics on COVID-19 cases this past week show that on average we have recorded a total of four (4) cases per day with an average positivity rate of just over two percent (2%), well below the World Health Organization (WHO) benchmark of five percent (5%). Sadly, this week we recorded two (2) deaths from COVID-19 however the number of persons hospitalized remains low at thirteen (13) with only two (2) persons in the Intensive Care Unit. At the Ministry of Health and Wellness, we have responded to these encouraging signs by relaxing some of our health rules.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

These improvements have been due in no small part to the many persons who have heeded the call to become vaccinated and to the responsiveness of residents in adhering to the stated health protocols of social distancing but particularly mask wearing in public places in the heat of the fourth wave. At the height of the Omicron infections, we also believe that our evidence-based decision to offer free testing and medical grade masks to the wider population also had a positive impact in slowing the community spread of this highly transmissible variant of the COVID-19 virus.

Our COVID-19 free testing initiative began as a pilot programme in October 2021 in Inagua and since then has expanded to multiple locations nationwide, with more than thirty-four thousand (34,000) tests completed across the country to date, at a cost of five hundred twenty-five thousand dollars (\$525,000). During the first week of January when we began the free testing and mask initiative in Nassau, we recorded two thousand nine hundred seventy-one (2,971) positive cases of COVID-19. By the 10th week this year, which is the week of March 7th, the number of recorded positive COVID-19 cases has fallen sharply to twenty-one (21) cases which is roughly a ninety-nine percent (99%) reduction since January of this year.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,** We at the Ministry of Health and Wellness strongly believe the rapid antigen test has been an important component in limiting the spread of COVID-19 during the fourth wave of this deadly pandemic.

However, I wish to inform the public that these positive trends do not give us license to throw caution to the wind. We must remain vigilant and impress upon those among us who are unvaccinated to become vaccinated as soon as possible.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

The Centers for Disease Control in the United States has also responded positively to our improved COVID-19 experience by moving our Travel Risk Advisory Rating from Level 4 which is “very high” to Level 3 which is simply “high”. As these trends are sustained over the next month, we believe we will qualify for a further decrease in our risk rating down to a Level 2. As we have seen from past experience, these reductions in our rating have a positive impact on our tourism sector and by extension the wider economy.

We all must remember, we are in this together and with each of us doing our part we can together impact our tourism sector, our economy and by extension our own pocketbooks in a very positive way.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

Our vaccination campaign started almost exactly one year ago with first doses being administered on March 14, 2021. Since that time, three hundred thirty-two thousand five hundred forty-nine (332,549) doses have been administered in The Bahamas which includes first, second, extended primary series and booster doses. While our country's vaccination rate has been increasing we have noticed that as COVID-19 infection rates decline in country the rate of uptake of vaccinations has also slowed. As of March 9th, forty per cent (40%) of our total population is fully vaccinated. But when we compare vaccinated persons to the population eligible to be vaccinated our percentage increases to just over fifty per cent (50%). So, we have a way to go to reach the levels achieved in the USA and by a few of our Caribbean neighbors. When we examine vaccination rates in our country by age bands, we see the lowest vaccination rates among persons under the age of thirty (30) and this is not surprising since at the start of the pandemic this group was thought to be less vulnerable to infection. This perspective has since changed and I encourage all members of the general public who have some vaccination hesitancy to visit our ministry's website at [www.bahamas.gov.bs/health](http://www.bahamas.gov.bs/health) or the Ministry's Facebook Page to get factual information regarding the vaccine so that Bahamians everywhere can make informed decisions regarding how they can protect themselves and families against COVID-19. Vaccination slots are open for booking across our archipelago. Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines are available at all vaccination centers and the public is encouraged to book

appointments using the online portal or as Walk-ins at all our pop-up sites in communities across New Providence. In the Family Islands, our vaccination campaign is being run by the Family Island Clinics and supported by the Vaccination Committee. Our mobile unit continues to support our immigrant population and members of the community who are unable to visit a vaccination center.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

We wish to express our appreciation to the United States Embassy for their most recent donation of thirty-two thousand four hundred (32,400) doses of the Pfizer vaccines through the Caribbean Public Health Agency and we are working diligently to get the pediatric vaccine in country.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

Over the past six (6) months since taking responsibility for the Ministry of Health and Wellness, I have observed the tremendous deficiencies that exist in our health care delivery system not only in New Providence and Grand Bahama but throughout our Family Islands.

During my visits at our hospitals and clinics throughout the country it was evident that the human resource component of healthcare is in a critical state. My Ministry is moving to correct these deficiencies and I am pleased to announce that the Cabinet of The Bahamas approved the hiring of some five

hundred and twelve (512) healthcare professionals to be deployed throughout The Bahamas to fill many of the gaps that currently exist. With this increase in human resources we are excited about where we are heading in the delivery of primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare services across the country.

Some of these gaps have been filled in the short term by health care professionals from the Republic of Cuba.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

With significant numbers of local nurses unable to perform their duties as a direct result of the pandemic, fifty (50) specialty nurses were recruited in January from the Republic of Cuba for temporary deployment to the Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) to assist in the delivery of hospital services and patient care with an additional fifty (50) specialty nurses expected to arrive in August this year. We have also recruited ten (10) Allied Health Professionals from the Republic of Cuba who are expected to arrive in early April of this year. Six (6) pharmacists will be deployed to the Princess Margaret Hospital and four (4) Biomedical Engineers - 2 for the Grand Bahama Health Services and 2 for PMH.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**



I further commend the Public Hospitals Authority (PHA) on the engagement of four (4) specialist physicians from the Republic of Cuba who are expected to be in the country next month: Two (2) Ophthalmologists; one (1) Nephrologist; and one (1) Radiologist who will join the PHA team enhancing our hospitals capacities to provide cross training opportunities for physicians.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Republic of Cuba for the strong partnership we have forged, not only in the past, but particularly throughout the successive waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to this temporary support from Cuba, my Ministry will train and engage one hundred (100) nurse assistants, fifty (50) of whom are scheduled for training next month. We will also engage two hundred seventy-eight (278) support staff and Allied health care professionals across the Family Islands, Grand Bahama and New Providence and once training is completed, they will be deployed throughout the healthcare system.

I am also happy to report that nineteen (19) recent University of The Bahamas (UB) nursing graduates and fifteen (15) medical doctors were also recently employed by the Department of Public Health of which twelve (12) of the doctors would be deployed to the Family Islands later this year after training.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

I now turn my attention to healthcare infrastructural upgrades at our Family Island clinics.

During my presentation at the Supplementary Budget Debate, I spoke specifically to the two (2) Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) loan facilities available to my Ministry, one for the fight against COVID-19 and the other for Infrastructural, Medical IT and emergency medical services upgrades at our clinics. Coupled with these loans my Ministry is negotiating additional bank funding and Public Private Partnership (PPP) support for the construction of two (2) state of the art hospitals as outlined in our Blue Print for Change. These loan facilities would certainly make way for the modernization of healthcare infrastructure and help to transform the delivery of quality healthcare services across The Bahamas as part of our mandate when we launched National Health Insurance (NHI) in our last term in office.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

I am pleased to report that my Ministry is working closely with the newly appointed IDB Project Execution Unit responsible for the management of the these IDB loans along with a five (5) million EU grant and I am pleased to say we are making steady progress to put shovel in the ground for the construction of ten (10) new clinics across the Family Islands with the long awaited

renovations of some seventeen (17) clinics across the archipelago for the sum of twenty-nine point five (29.5) million dollars.

During our assessment of healthcare infrastructure throughout the Family Islands and looking at possible sustainable healthcare models that would be necessary to improve healthcare outcomes, we have determined that the current emergency medical service systems on our Family Islands need immediate upgrades in order to achieve better medical outcomes for level one airlift across the country.

Therefore, as part of Component 3 of the 1053 IDB loan facility the Project Execution Unit budgeted in excess of nine hundred thousand (900,000) dollars to purchase new ambulances to be deployed to Family Island clinics. Included in that total is an allocation for the training of ambulance drivers and other EMT support staff. These projects will not only have a significant impact on the quality of healthcare delivery for residents of these islands but will pave the way for increases in both local and direct foreign investments projects and home ownership.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

After discussions with BC, plans are currently in place to ensure that fiber optic connection is available to our Family Island clinics which is absolutely necessary to launch our telemedicine platform and services to assist

physicians in remote areas, something the former administration talked about for years but failed to deliver. As Minister I am excited by the direction this New Day administration is heading and I look forward in updating this Parliament and the Bahamian people of our progress during the months ahead.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

Also by way of the IDB loan facility, weather resistant prefabricated isolation modules will be purchased and mounted on foundations at all of the major clinics across the country including New Providence and Grand Bahama in order to provide immediate quality healthcare for COVID-19 or other infectious disease patients suffering from mild to moderate symptoms. This will improve medical outcomes and help to prevent community spread.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

I now turn my attention to the Rand Memorial Hospital and the outlying clinics.

In the Supplementary Budget nineteen (19) million dollars earmarked for the expansion of the Rand Memorial Hospital was removed from Head 60, line item 311312 and replaced by five (5) million dollars to support some essential upgrades at the Rand, West End, Eight Mile Rock, Sweeting's Cay and Hawksbill Clinics.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

For too long the Rand Memorial Hospital has wrestled with morgue facilities that have failed to keep pace with the growth and usage of that institution. Today I am pleased to say that an RFP went out and I am pleased to report that the bids are in and a contract will be awarded shortly for that work, along with the completion of the outstanding work at the Radiology Department to replace the mammography and other diagnostic equipment that have been out of service for much of the pandemic.

Over the last four (4) months my Ministry along with our healthcare planners and architects have been working closely on the design of the new state of the art hospital for Grand Bahama and I am pleased to report we are making steady progress and intend to break ground on the northern hospital at a new green field site. The former administration said it could not be done, but in partnership with the BECK Group, the PHA and the Ministry of Finance we will be seeking permits from the Technical Department at the Grand Bahama Port Authority prior to brief the RFP process before a contract is awarded.

I am particularly excited about this ambitious project that was promised to the people of Grand Bahama in our last term in office.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

My Ministry is working closely with the PHA to upgrade health infrastructure at the Sandilands Rehabilitation Centre (SRC) and the Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH). I would like to take this opportunity to welcome our newly appointed Acting Managing Director, Mrs. Aubynette Rolle whose appointment took effect on February 28<sup>th</sup> of this year.

She comes to the position as an eminently qualified healthcare executive. A former nurse, midwife, a qualified attorney and counselor, Mrs. Rolle has relevant experience as a decision maker in both public and private health sectors. The PHA and indeed our entire Public Health System is well served by her appointment to lead the Authority.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

I am also pleased to advise this House that this Administration has appointed a new Board of Directors for the Public Hospitals Authority, led by Chairman Mr. Andrew Edwards an attorney by profession. The Board held its first meeting on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2021.

Both Mrs. Rolle and Mr. Edwards have hit the ground running awarding a contract to upgrade the Princess Margaret Hospital Morgue, the renovation of an accommodations unit for medical staff on the hospital compound and work will soon begin on the Male Medical Ward at PMH.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

I now turn my attention to National Health Insurance (NHI) to speak to our commitment to take NHI to the next level and provide catastrophic health care insurance for all Bahamians. The new board is currently in place lead by former House Speaker Dr. Kendal Major and programs are currently being reviewed to line up with our Blueprint for Change. Much work has been done in driving the universal primary healthcare services, but we intend to do much more to ensure that the poor and the unemployed have access to high-cost medical care which most of the time not available in the public healthcare system.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

A lot has been done in my Ministry in the last six (6) months to activate our transformative agenda despite finding in excess of fifty (50) million dollars of un-budgeted debt that crippled the Ministry of Health and Wellness, the Department of Public Health and the PHA. As a new minister I have had to stabilize my Ministry in order to get it back in a functional state. The former administration should hold their heads down in shame for the state they left our healthcare services in and for squandering a real opportunity to deliver essential changes.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,**

Our Blueprint for Change clearly outlined what we promised the Bahamian people at the last general election. We intend to deliver on those promises for healthcare reform while working closely with my colleagues to create opportunities for employment and training for young Bahamians who are interested in healthcare professions.

**Finally, Mr. Deputy Speaker,** before I take my seat, I would like to thank all the hard-working staff across the healthcare sector who continue to give good service to our employer - the Bahamian people. Over the last six (6) months your New Day Government sowed good seed in fertile ground. We have a lot of work to do to reap the harvest, but my Bible tells me that with God on our side our labor will not be in vain.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker,** the 2022-2023 Budget Debate is just around the corner, and I will provide more ample expansion at that time on our new programs at the Ministry of Health and Wellness

Thank you