

# Time to act on abuse

Grandson Pst Azo 05/04/2016

**It's time to properly support the agencies created to respond to child abuse** with the manpower and infrastructural resources—the special purpose transition homes, therapeutic centres and accommodation—needed to make a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable citizens.

The Children's Authority has clearly outlined the scale of the problem they face in T&T with its report on cases between May 2015 and February 2016.

Close to 1,000 cases of sexual abuse of children were recorded by the authority over that nine-month period.

The authority is aware of as many as 4,158 children who are in need of care, protection and rehabilitation and 915 of the reports have been categorised as sex abuse cases.

Within those troubling statistics are even more troubling

profiles. Of the 148 cases of abuse against boys, 26.4 per cent involved boys between the ages of four and six.

While these numbers are disturbing, they follow a trend which began early in the new century that was formally acknowledged as early as 2011 as sharp increases in the number of reported cases of incest, rape and sexual offences became a norm instead of an occasional spike.

For most of the 21st century, the official engagement with sex abuse has been about placing the shame for these incidents

where it belongs, with the perpetrators of these crimes instead of the victims who have unfairly borne it formerly.

The public has demonstrated growing confidence in the official and NGO support infrastructure that has been introduced over the last decade and a half.

Of particular note is the Victims and Witness Support Unit, a special purpose arm of the Police Service which has come to represent nothing less than a fundamental revolution in the way that police officers respond to sex abuse cases. The Chil-

dren's Authority is still in the process of creating the infrastructure it needs to meet the considerable challenges it is finding in the field, and the Child Protection Unit of the Police Service is still to find its feet in decidedly slippery circumstances.

In November 2015, Dr Shariffa Ali-Abdullah reported that 2,500 cases had been received by the authority, with 150 of them classified as emergency cases demanding priority action.

The Children's Authority spent most of the years between 2011 and 2015 waiting on the proclamation of legislation that would allow it to take action on the laws it was created to enforce.

The Child Protection Unit was, in March 2016, still working with half the staff it needed to investigate the 1,709 reports brought to its attention between May 2015 and February 2016.

Successive prime ministers have said all the right things about the abuse of children in T&T. In January 2014, former prime minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar promised that the

Government would "put all of its weight behind ensuring our nation's children are safe."

In January 2016, after quickly establishing a Gender and Child Affairs Unit in the Office of the Prime Minister, Prime Minister Dr Keith Rowley was said, in a release from his office, to be "saddened by the reports in the daily newspapers concerning the safety of our nation's children."

Despite such heartfelt concern the support systems to manage the volume of cases coming to official attention is clearly swamping the resources available.

The statistics revealed last week offer ample evidence of the scale of the challenges faced by the Children's Authority and the Child Protection Unit.

It's time to properly support the agencies created to respond to child abuse with the manpower and infrastructural resources—the special purpose transition homes, therapeutic centres and accommodation—needed to make a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable citizens.