

Welcome to Launch of Assessment Centre June 3, 2015

S. Daly, S.C. (Chairman)

MC Cheryl Moses-Williams - Public Education & Communications Manager

Protocol list

This is not quite our first official function following the proclamation of the legislation that would make the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago operational, but it feels as though it is - just 16 days after proclamation.

It has been a difficult and exciting path that has brought us to this point. There are those who see only that the original Children's Authority Act was passed in 2010, some 15 years ago. Those who have been inside the process know that the product that has emerged in 2015 has been refined through many hours of meetings by many stakeholders, and is a much more robust, integrated model than it was at the outset.

It is my long awaited and pleasant task to welcome each of you to our launch of our child assessment centre. It is a small facility, but one that will serve our children well. As you will hear, it is focused on the children we are to serve, and gives us the capacity to assess the needs of a child holistically. We have been sensitive to the bad experiences children have often had in the past when they have come to the attention of the authorities, with repetitious questioning, sometimes blatant disbelief, and no-one whose priority is the child's welfare.

I know that other presenters will talk about the steps that have been taken to prepare for start-up with hundreds of hours spent meeting with stakeholders and consulting with experts. Our role as advocate for children also makes us educators, and we have already been able to reach out to many of the professions with whom we will interact.

As a member of the two previous Boards I would wish to thank the other members who contributed so much to setting the Authority firmly on the path to success.

Justice Annestine Sealey,
Vashti Swamber

Dr David Bratt
Dr Maria Dillon- Remy
Ehaab Ali
Michelle Sogren
Joseph Ragoonanan

Continuing onto the second board we had

Dr Sam Shafe
Reaaz Dabideen
Gregory Sloane-Seale

who were joined by

Dr Joanne Paul
Valerie Taylor
Khadijah Williams-Peters
Shabaana Mohammed
Trishanna Cassieram

And right at the end of its term, Dr Derick Forrester

And now we have a newly-appointed Board about to start its work with myself, Reaaz Dabideen and Dr Joanne Paul continuing and new members including Anna-Maria Mora, Hazel Thompson-Ahye, Vidya Rampersad, Angela Iloo, Danesh Maraj and Shannnen-Marie Russell.

Over the period from 2009, the Boards have held 72 statutory meetings, and Board members have contributed their time generously to sitting on committees, being part of interview panels, and being available to support the Authority whenever they have been called upon.

It would also be remiss of me if I did not mention two extremely significant external developments which have assisted us greatly.

Between December 2013 and May 2014 the Child Protection Task Force was meeting and making recommendations. Its chairman, Diana Mahabir, whose passion for the wellbeing of children is known to all, facilitated our request that the

operationalisation of the Authority be made the first item on the Agenda of the Task Force. She also did everything in her power to assist us in having salary scales approved. It sounds like a small thing, but it was the key that unlocked the door to the Authority being able to staff-up for operations. I hope that Diana is proud of what we have been able to accomplish in the year since the Task Force came to an end in May last year.

Secondly the Police Service has established a Child Protection Unit with trained and sensitised officers. This will be an extraordinarily valuable resource, and is an essential aspect of the ability of the Authority and the Police Service to work together with proper protocols in place, and with a common understanding of the special requirements of children. However our message is also that child protection is everyone's business, and reporting children who may be at risk is an obligation.

As our new board discovered at its first meeting, this is not a journey to be undertaken casually. It is hard work.

Some of you may recall that when domestic violence legislation was being introduced, there were many who did not believe that there was a real problem. The immediate flood of applications for protection orders revealed that there was, and that the problem was even larger than previously suspected.

In much the same way the number of reports on our helpline within its first 10 or so days shows that the problems faced by our children are significant. We received 400 calls, at least 200 of which were deemed immediately credible and have resulted in follow-up action.

Although we are staffed for start-up at about 115 staff members, our full complement of staff should be around 240, as the facilities that we manage will increase. There are still significant gaps in the range of services that we can provide, and my Director has asked me to remind those who can release funds, that additional funds will be required if we are to complete our start-up and provide the services that everyone hopes for, and which should encompass all children who need the resources.