

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS

ANNUAL REPORTS

- (1) 2019-2020 Annual Report**
- (2) 2020-2021 Annual Report**

**SUBMISSION: Ministry of Women, Children and
Social Protection**

**VENUE: Big Committee Room, Government
Buildings, Suva**

DATE: Tuesday, 28th May, 2024

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS HELD AT THE BIG COMMITTEE ROOM, EAST WING, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, SUVA, ON TUESDAY, 28TH MAY, 2024, AT 2.33 P.M.

Interviewee/Submittee: Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection

In Attendance:

1. Ms. Eseta Nadakuitavuki - Permanent Secretary
2. Ms. Emi Bainimarama - Director Corporate Services
3. Ms. Emily Kamoe Veiqati - Acting Director Women
4. Ms. Venina Duvuduvukula - Principal Accounts Officer
5. Ms. Ela Tukutukulevu - Acting Director Child Services
6. Ms. Salote Biukoto - Principal Welfare Officer

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, members of the media, the Secretariat, ladies and gentlemen - a very good afternoon to you all. It is a pleasure to welcome you this afternoon.

For information purpose, pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public, except in few specific circumstances which includes national security matters, third-party confidential information and personnel or human resource matters and deliberation and development of Committee recommendations and reports.

The public hearing will be open to the public and the media so for any sensitive information concerning this inquiry that cannot be disclosed in public, this can be provided to the Committee either in private or in writing.

At the outset, I wish to remind honourable Members and our witnesses that all questions asked are to be addressed through the Chair. This is a parliamentary inquiry, and all the information gathered is covered under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act. Please, be reminded that we do not condone libel or slander of any sort.

In terms of the protocol of this Committee meeting, be advised that movement within the meeting room will be restricted. Minimise the usage of mobile phones and all mobile phones are to be on silent mode while the meeting is in progress. I will now give the time to honourable Members of the Committee to introduce themselves.

(Introduction of Committee Members, as well as Officials of the OAG)

As clearly outlined in Standing Order 109(2)(b), the Standing Committee on Social Affairs is mandated to look into matters related to health, education, social services, labour, aviation, culture and media.

The Standing Committee on Social Affairs is currently deliberating on the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 Annual Reports, and the Committee is here to engage and have a fruitful discussion on the issues and achievements on the period of the Reports, as well as some of the future plans of the Ministry in moving forward.

Before us, we have representatives from the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection, who are here to make their submission on the two Annual Reports. I will now take the

time to invite the Team from the Ministry to introduce themselves before we proceed with the presentation.

(Introduction of Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection Officials)

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Once again, thank you for availing yourselves to be part of this inquiry this afternoon. Without further do, I will give the floor to you, Madam Permanent Secretary (PS), if you can proceed with your presentation and the responses to the questions that was sent by the Committee to your office, please.

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Thank you, Madam Chairperson. On behalf of the Ministry and also on behalf of our honourable Minister and Assistant Minister, we are here to share and respond to the questions that were asked in regards to our Annual Plan for 2019-2020 and also the 2020-2021 financial year.

I take it that you have read the materials that were sent to you. We have sent you more than probably what you have asked, but we hope that, that will answer some of the questions. But, first, we will go through the presentation.

The next slide is basically the roles of the Ministry, which we all know. We will just skip that quickly and go on to the next slide which is basically the statutory obligations. Just a correction, on top point number four, it should read, 'the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018'. Also, point number seven – Domestic Violence Act 2009 and Child Welfare Act 2010, not Decrees, so we apologise for that, Also, we would like to take up the Social Justice Act 2001.

Moving on to the next slide, we are also bounded by international conventions, that is, the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1993 and also the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) and also the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Moving on, those were the number of beneficiaries under the Social Programme that we have got under Poverty Benefit Scheme (PBS), Care and Protection Allowance (SPS) and Disability Allowance. We also look after the Fire Victim Assistance and also the Rural Pregnant Mothers Food Voucher. So, in total, the number of beneficiaries is approximately 78,458.

Moving on, we have got Child Welfare Cases. We have tabulated in months but this is for the financial year that we are referring to. We will be happy to answer any questions as we go along.

We also look after older persons, so the slide articulates the grant recipients from the HART Home, Channel Home of Compassion, the amount that we disbursed and also the balance from there, and we will respond to the under utilisation or non-utilisation of those grants.

The next slide is on the women's institutions. We do give out grants to women's institutions that provide training to our women in the rural settings and also in the semi-urban. The Fiji Women Crisis Centre, basically, hold the Help Line for domestic violence. As you can see, we started off with 50,000 it now stands at 200,000, based on the number of calls that have come through the Help Line.

Major highlights for the 2020-2021 financial year, again, we will just highlight the number of recipients or beneficiaries that we have. This is the year that we introduced the Bus Fare Programme and you can see that there is slight increase in the total beneficiaries from 78,000 last

year (2023) to 132,796 because we have added the 44,000 under the Bus Fare Programme when it was introduced.

We thought we will just share the Social Protection Programme where we did a recertification to actually confirm the recipients that still need to be in the programme or those that we can win them out. As you know, we have six Programmes. One that I would like to mention is the Family Assistance Scheme. That scheme is basically intended for family members who have gone through certain shocks in their life cycle. They come in and they are covered under the Family Assistance Scheme for three years. After the three years, they are supposed to be weaned out from the Programme. So, when we did a recertification, we were able to identify them and started taking them out from the Programme.

We thought we will also share the Child Welfare Act cases. As you can see, we have got a high number of cases coming through the Child Help Line. As I speak, we have also outsourced the Child Help Line to Medical Services Pacific (MSP) and we pay them a grant of \$180,000 from last year. In the prior years, we used to pay them \$200,000, just to receive the calls 24/7, and they refer the cases to our Welfare Officers who attend to them.

Moving on, that is just a pictorial of what I have talked about in the last slide.

In the next slide, after the emergencies, we would like to normalise the lives of our children, hence the reason we come up with certain programmes which we thought we will just share with the Committee this afternoon.

As you know, we also look after persons with disabilities. On the slide, it shows the organisations that we work with and the allocation that we give out to them to actually support those persons living with disabilities.

Moving on to profiling of street dwellers, we will come back to that. I know that there was a specific question related to that. This is more than just the achievements and highlights for the financial year that we are looking at.

One of the highlights for that year was the upgrade of the Golden Age Home in Labasa. We have yet to officially open, but I can say that the Home is back in action. We have 30 residents who are looked after in this Home. We also have a space that was intended to support the daycare of the polder persons. For example, if the children are working and there are older persons or parents who do not have anyone to look after them, this is an option where they can be dropped off while they go to work and on their way home, they pick them up again and take them home. But that piece of work, we have yet to do, because we have not officially opened the Home due to some minor maintenance that we are working on but, otherwise, it is in operation.

We thought we will share that this year too, we got a grant from the Embassy of Japan. The people of Japan had provided a special bus to help our older persons when they go out for excursions, and that is based in Lautoka.

For women's economic empowerment, we do provide grants to women institution, namely, the Homes of Hope. Why? Because Homes of Hope is specifically for girls - solo mums, who are housed there and those who are sexually abused through rape. The other ones are Life Bread, Fiji Muslim League and Ba Women's Forum, which basically provide training and capacity building to women around those areas.

We always have an MOU with these women institutions which lasts for a year during the fiscal year. Come the new year, we open it up for other institutions that can provide the same services, but mostly the same institutions come back to us for the grant, from the past trend. This was an exercise that was funded by DFAT on the cash top-up monitoring. We feel that it is important that we highlight this as one of the activities in the current year that we are talking about.

Moving on, this is another one on the World Food Programme. They did a survey on the post-distribution monitoring, and that is something that we are strengthening in our Ministry, to do a monitoring and evaluation. We do a baseline, we do the activities and, definitely, we have to do a monitoring and evaluation to assess the work that we have done and learn from those assessments.

This was the year in which we were asked to do the vaccination, so we thought we will just share that. As you know, we also received a bus from UNDP, specifically for the REACH programme that is under our Ministry.

We were also faced with some challenges during these financial years, and we have noted it there. Basically, COVID-19 had impacted the Ministry's deliverables, as you have asked the right question on the low utilisation or no utilisation at all.

Staff turnover is a continuous trend. Even as I speak, we are faced with a high staff turnover.

The Ministry offices, we found that is a challenge as well, which is very much calling for maintenance. You would probably know that we are housed in four different places in Suva. One is the Civic Towers, we have our Naibati Office, we are all scattered, so we are trying to put everyone together for efficiency and effectiveness of the Ministry.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, that is basically the power point presentation to give you a heads up on what we have achieved in those years, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021.

If you allow me, Madam Chairperson, I will move on to the responses. We received 17 questions, we have responded to those questions, and I believe you have a copy with you. I will not read the question, but I will go straight into probably just a brief on the responses.

Question No. 1

Please, provide all the policies in place that guide the implementation of all the programmes provided by the Ministry.

We have listed them there, but in addition to the policy, we have also added that we have our costed operation plan on a yearly basis that we work with, our Ministry's Strategic Plan and the other policies that we have that guide us to actually implement the work that we do.

Question No. 2

The Committee notes that in the 2020-2021 Annual Report, the Ministry was allocated \$138.8 million for Family Services Unit for the eight programmes. What was the utilisation and non-utilisation rate for each programme? What were the reasons for the non-utilisation of funds? What was the allocation for 2020-2021?

You have noticed that there was a utilisation or non-utilisation for each programme and it shows there on the table. In the Grants Voluntary Organisation, we have a balance of about \$126,000; Child Protection - \$1.1 million; Family Assistance Scheme, Food Allowance for Rural Pregnant

Mothers, and the list goes on. One that we did not utilise at all was the Review of the Social Protection Programme.

Our main contributing factor to the low utilisation or non-utilisation on that particular year was the reduction in the Bus Fare Allowance. We used to give out \$40 a month per recipient, we reduced it to \$20, and then we further reduced it to \$10. The reason was that this was a strategy to actually discourage bus fare holders to travel because this was during the COVID-19 time and there was restriction of movement. We feel that that was the strategy we have to put in place to actually reduce their movement. Hence, the reason we did not utilise all the funding.

The other major contributing factor was that there was no field assessment. We did not expect our team to go out to the field and conduct reviews, or even get new approvals for the schemes, due to movement restrictions.

Madam Chairperson, I would like to carry on, if you allow me to, unless there is a specific question on that.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Madam PS, we will leave the questions after you have completed with the responses.

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Thank you, Madam Chairperson, moving on to the next question.

Question No. 3

The Committee welcomes the effective measure taken by the Ministry to meet SDG 1 - to end poverty in all its forms everywhere through the implementation of its Poverty Benefit Scheme. Can the Ministry specify what is the proportion by age and sex that have benefitted from the Scheme? What were some of the challenges faced during the years under review and how best has this been addressed?

We have also given you extra reading materials on the work that we have done, specifically on the SDG indicators, and as you know, our Ministry looks after poverty alleviation, or now called social protection. We have the current statistics and the number of beneficiaries under the various schemes, also in disaggregated data, it is all in there.

We are currently looking at strengthening our Welfare Graduation Programme. That is one of the pathways, we believe, will reduce those who are dependent on the Scheme. We are also doing a cleaning up of our data and we have found some statistics that some of the recipients had been depending on the programme for more than 10 years, when they are supposed to be there for three years to five years maximum.

That is our target at the moment, we are going to look at that, and start to clean them out. We are going to revisit the family members, check on their status, maybe they have changed, and then we will start weaning them out from the Programme. So, that will probably be going towards the ending of poverty, as the question implies.

After that, we also provided an attachment on the snapshot of our data on how we have kept data that shows us all the personal particulars of the recipients, their financial, and also the programme. I think that we were specifically requested to have that.

We also have some challenges. This is on cases reviewed and assessed. On the continuation of allowance over a long period of time, I had mentioned that - we have realised that there are some who have been there for more than 10 years and those are the ones that we are going to focus on in the next three to six months, to do a review and see the situation, and we will make the assessment thereafter.

The other challenge that we have is also the review of the assessment criteria, which is proxy mean tested and also for the pension SPS is on pension tested. So, we are working on that as well.

In 2020, we lost our data. It was digitized, and we have to revert to manual processes, so that is the challenge on its own for us. But as I speak, we have already got DFAT on board under the Partner for Social Protection (P4SP), we are looking at an interim solution and also the long-term solution to automate the end-to-end process of all the Schemes that we have.

Moving on to the challenges on the other page, that is the absence of inter-operability with relevant database. As I came into the Ministry, I realised that we have to sign MOUs with other Ministries to share data, and that is something we have been advocating, that we should not be signing MOUs because it is just sharing of data across various Ministries. We have managed to overcome that obstacle, but that was the challenge at that time.

I would like to bring to your attention, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, that at the moment, we do not have a system, allowing the recipients or the system to tell us that so and so have passed on, for example, so that we can tidy up our database. We rely basically on the integrity of family members when someone passed on, for them to come and tell us. But now, with us linking to the Bureau of Statistics (FBOS) and Birth, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) data, we will be able to ascertain those who have passed on and we clean up our data at the same time. That was the challenge at that time, so we have improved the processes as I speak.

Question No. 4

Fire Victim Grants of \$100,000, is the allocation of \$1,000 to fire victims enough?

We do not want fire to happen, hence the reason we just react to this grant. So, as and when a fire happens, we assist. So, for this particular year, we had a balance of \$22,000 for 2020-2021; 2021-2022 - \$19,000; and 2022-2023 - \$12,000. I think the \$100,000 that has been given for fire victims is sufficient. As you know, in the past years, we have hardly utilised them.

Question No. 5

Under the Care and Protection Allowance Programme, the Committee notes that there was an increased allocation by \$4.3 million from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021. What is the Ministry doing in addressing young children living on the streets? Are there statistics? How can the Ministry with NGOs, CSOs, donor agencies and other Government Ministries, improve the livelihoods of homeless children?

You will notice the increase in allocation. What are we doing to address the young children living on the streets? I will now ask Salote Biukoto, who had actively participated and led the team to actually sweep the street, to respond to the question.

MS. S. BIUKOTO.- Mr. Chairman and honourable Members of the Committee, just to address this issue, the Ministry has formed a technical working group with Government agencies, faith based organisations and civil society organisations, to address the issue of street kids. We have also included relevant Government Ministries.

In terms of the faith-based organisations, the taskforce is currently working with the Methodist Church in securing a location to set up a rehabilitation centre for our street kids. We are also working with the Salvation Army, Hanisi Ministries, St. Vincent Home and Assemblies of God, to provide shelter on a short-term basis, while the Ministry works with families.

For civil society organisations, the taskforce works closely with ARUKA Fiji, Ola Fou Fiji, Empower Pacific and Medical Services Pacific (MSP), to assist with the intervention and profiling of our cases on the streets. Inspire Pacific provides counselling and mentoring for the children and building programmes around the children that they conduct intervention work with. When needed, there is free grooming services also provided for the children.

For higher education institutions and learning institutions, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, the taskforce works closely with relevant Ministries and higher education institutions in enrolling our children into courses, as well as schools if they want to return to school.

Madam Chairperson, the Government Ministries, the taskforce is chaired by the Deputy Police Commissioner and the members include: Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Ministry of Health and Medical Services and Ministry of Employment. In terms of the business houses, we are happy to inform that the taskforce received a donation from business houses, also donations in kind from Vodafone and Leadership Fiji, to provide the much-needed hygiene kit, as well as warm clothes and sleeping bags for the children.

Madam Chairperson, with the budgetary allocation in the financial year 2020-2021, the Ministry was without a budgetary allocation - we lost our budgetary allocation for that year. The Ministry depended on partners for the shelter and reintegration of children back to their families, as well as providing shelter either in the Children's Residential Homes, or with families that were providing accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic and *TC Harold*.

Some of the challenges faced by the Ministry, Madam Chairperson, the Ministry continues to seek a budget line for the technical working group for street dwellers which we had lost, but more importantly, Madam Chairperson, Fiji does not have a Rehabilitation Centre for our street kids. We are concurrently working with the Methodist Church and Salvation Army, to see if we can secure fund. Madam Chairperson, that is just a brief on the question.

In terms of the statistical data on street kids, Madam Chairperson, in Lautoka, we have 33 street kids; in Suva, we currently have 11 who are fulltime on the streets; in Nadi, we have five; Nakasi and Nausori, we are still working on those. As we speak, we have just come out from a profiling exercise whereby we actually profiled more than 15 children. *Vinaka*.

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Madam Chairperson, if you allow me, I will move on to the next question.

Question No. 6

What are some of the effective mechanisms considered by the Ministry for the appropriate design and effective delivery of programmes, in ensuring that it achieves its intended objectives? What could be some of the challenges in achieving its intended course? Does the Ministry have the necessary database in ensuring the eligibility criteria are accurate and up-to-date? Please explain.

One mechanism that we have considered to conduct the reform on the Social Protection Programme with the objective to improve the programme, targeting and review the update of the

existing policies, so as I speak, our team are also in Lautoka reviewing another set of SOPs that we have, to ensure that we weave in the latest update of the interim solution for MIS, and also for the long-term one.

On the Social Assistance Policy, with its implementation, was endorsed in 2021. We are also engaged in some specialised role and consultancy. We would like to thank DFAT who is heavily involved in supporting us in this space.

There were definitely some key focussed areas for this year and they are listed on that page:

- The adjustment of Social Assistance Benefits amount.
- We have converted food voucher to cash.
- We also work closely with the Post Office, especially to cater for the maritime areas.
- The review of the SOP, like I have alluded to earlier on.
- The conversation of bus fare to cash and this is something we are planning to do for the next financial year. It is in our budget, we have yet to see whether our request will be approved or not.
- I mentioned earlier on the revival of our Welfare Graduation Programme. As I speak, we have received some assistance from the World Bank to actually recruit, at least, two bodies, to start up with the framework and we have got one already, and to actually do the Welfare Graduation Programme. This will assist in the weaning out of those who should not remain in the Programme. Then we can divert or use the funds to those who really need to be in the Programme. Also, it aligns to the review of the proxy mean test which we plan to do, which is in progress.
- Cabinet has approved the Adaptive Social Protection Strategy. That is great news for us.
- We have achieved the development of the interim solution for our IT. In March, we had a sneak preview on that and it looks good. We are excited about it because that will actually take up the manual intervention on the process when it is all digitised.

Of course, in anything that we do, we are faced with challenges. We have got challenges on-

- the lack of commitment from stakeholders,
- capacity and resourcing due to staff turnover which I feel it is more like a national crisis at the moment with all Ministries that we are faced with staff leaving our shores.

Madam Chairperson, on the next question on Disability Allowance that was allocated, increased, and I will ask Ms. Biukoto, again, who looks after disability, to elaborate on that.

MS. S. BIUKOTO.-

Question No. 7

The Disability Allowance Scheme budget allocation increased by \$4.36 million from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021. Please, elaborate more on the number of termination. What does it entail? Is the Ministry considering collaborating with other agencies in creating an environment that is user-friendly by all individuals, regardless of their physical abilities?

MS. S. BIUKOTO.- Madam Chairperson, the terminations for the disability allowance for 2019-2020 recorded 130 terminations. In the year 2020- 2021, there was a reduction to 60. This was

mainly due to COVID-19 protocols, restrictions, we also took into effect that our target audiences were those who were permanently disabled, so we actually took our queue from where they could come and access the services that were readily available. Just for the information of the Committee, this was one area where we faced a challenge because not all of them were vaccinated.

Question No. 8

The Committee is interested to know more on the Economic Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities (EEP). How many people (disaggregated data for gender and age group) have benefitted from such a Programme? What were some of the challenges and how best can the Government address such issues or boost involvement?

Madam Chairperson, for economic empowerment programmes, the disaggregated data, as it shows in our response, we had 38 male, 22 female with a total of 60.

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.-

Question No. 9

What is the current status of the Child Justice and Child Care and Protection Bill?

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, I think we are all aware that this was passed in Cabinet on Tuesday, 7th May, when honourable Ditoka was sitting in for our honourable Minister. And you all know that in last week's Parliament Sitting, this has been passed as well for further deliberations by the Committee.

Question No. 10

Older Persons Unit – what is the long-term plan for psychologically challenged residents? Are they getting proper healthcare services? How often is this undertaken? Is there a specialised psychologist?

As I came into the Ministry, the National Council for Older Persons (NCOP) was a bit dormant. So, when I came in, we tried to revive that, and as mandatory, we have to do that.

We have convened about four meetings, if I am correct, and last week, we had the bi-annual meeting. The last one happened in 2018, so we have done another one for this year. We are moving in this space.

We are also mandated that we have to have a Chief Executive Officer to look after the welfare of the older persons. I would like to mention that we have put up an advertisement, and we are in the process of recruiting an Executive Officer to look after the NCOP. We are going to house them at the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) up in the Brown Street. They are kind enough to give us a space where the officer will be sitting in and they act as secretariat for NCOP.

Question No. 11

What is the progress of the Golden Age Home in Labasa?

I think I have mentioned, but I just want to reiterate that currently, we have 30 residents in operation, but we have yet to formally open it. That is more than just a ceremonial activity, but the main thing is, we have the residents there who are well looked after, and the Home is in operation.

Question No. 12

National Domestic Violence Helpline – In the 2020-2021 Annual Report, 3,612 genuine calls were received at the Helpline:

- (1) How soon was help provided?**
- (2) Of the numbers recorded, how many cases has led to deaths (if any)?**
- (3) What sort of issues are reported?**
- (4) Does the Ministry have the necessary resources and capabilities to attend to such emergency calls?**
- (5) Also identify challenges faced by the Ministry in attending to cases.**

MS. E.K. VEIQATI.- Madam Chairperson, the Domestic Violence Helpline is a 24 hour telephone counselling mobile service that is currently being administered at the time by the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. The Ministry provides a grant of around \$200,000, and in that year, we provided a grant of around \$55,000.

Responding to the question, because it is a 24 hour counselling service, so at the time of the call, the Helpline is available during the day and night. Hence, if it is an emergency situation, help is provided as soon as possible. Because the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre also operates a shelter, which is provided for the survivor when required. Once the calls are received on the Helpline, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre refers these cases to relevant agencies based on the survivor's consent.

Relating to the question on the numbers recorded, how many cases had led to deaths, if any, we have sent this request to the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. However, we are still awaiting results on that because I think at that time, we did not record if any of the calls led to deaths. However, this could be an area we could strengthen. In terms of issues received on the Helpline, we have a breakdown of calls that consist of domestic violence, rape, attempted rape, sexual harassment and even attempted suicide.

Does the ministry have the necessary resources and capabilities to attend to such emergency calls? The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre does receive calls, however, there is a referral process that is followed. If there is any child abuse case that is received on the Helpline, this is referred to the Department of Social Welfare, which has the statutory responsibility for the care and protection of the child.

In other cases, for the woman adult survivor through the service delivery protocol, there is an agreement with other relevant government stakeholders such as the Fiji Police Force and the Ministry of Health, Legal Aid Commission and the Judicial Department where these calls are referred to. Through this agreement, through this protocol, these agencies or signatories have the duty to respond. Additionally, we have support from civil society such as Salvation Army and the Homes of Hope that do provide shelter needs for the survivors. Thank you.

MS. E.K. VEIQATI.-

Question No. 13

What is the progress of the "Shelter Guideline" (page 35 of the 2020-2021 AR)?

Madam Chairperson, the Shelter Guideline has been endorsed by Cabinet in December 2023. At the moment, the Ministry is currently trying to launch the Shelter Guideline and once this is launched, we will be working with relevant stakeholders who provide shelter needs to survivors of violence, to assess whether their structures and shelters are conducive for our women survivors.

MS. E.K. VEIQATI.-

Question No. 14

Under the Women's Economic Empowerment Programme, how many women have benefitted from the Programme and taken the initiative as part of their business?

Madam Chairperson, for this particular year, we have noted the breakdown before you 2020-2021 and 2019-2020, the Women Economic Empowerment Programmes that were implemented in those years. However, unfortunately, we have had difficulties in retrieving the actual number of women in those years as we have had in the recent past, most of our IT systems were compromised, so we were not able to retrieve this data, as well as the issue of high staff turnover.

However, with that noting, we do have the number of women who have access to the Women's Economic Empowerment Grant for the fiscal year 2022-2023, we have 40 women with the grant of \$1,000 each. For the current fiscal year, 2023-2024, we anticipate funding a total of 24 women at the sum of \$4,000 each. Noting the difficulties, the Department is working on strengthening these capabilities.

MS. V. DUVUDUVUKULA.-

Question No. 15

Can the Ministry explain further on the unreconciled variances for both financial years? The Committee notes that there was a huge variance in 2020-2021 (Page 51). What has the Ministry implemented to reduce any variance or discrepancies?

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, I believe the unreconciled variance is based on the two variances - one is the Social Protection Programme and the other is the General Ledger Salaries and Wages. In the variance for the Social Protection Programme, the Ministry has requested for the two new positions in the current financial year and was approved for in the budget which, in these two positions, they have assisted in the increase in budget line in the Social Protection Programme.

Also, there is the Accounts Desegregated Reconciliation Policy which is in draft, but we are currently following that. There are some issues that we have strengthened in terms of mode of payment. This is shared with the District and Field Officers to reconcile payments made at the District level.

Rejected payments are checked and sent back to their Districts for their needed action. Also, capacity building of Clerical Officers in the field, as well as Accounts. This is to identify where the gaps are and put into practice or in place to ensure that issues are dealt with.

We also conduct general postings on a monthly basis with reconciliations. We normally conduct this posting on general which is through the FMIS system, and we rectify any mis-posting in any Social Assistance Programme.

There has been a greater working partnership with the Programme Managers, as well within the Ministry to ensure that RIEs is submitted two weeks before the end of each quarter.

Finally, the Ministry is working with DFAT to develop a social assistance information system which should fix and rectify these variances.

In terms of General Ledgers for Salaries and Wages, the Ministry continues to strengthen our Human Resources Unit by creating new positions to ensure process requirements are met. The issue we are facing is the high staff turnover in the field.

At times, HR does not get sufficient notice of resignation and as such, notification to Accounts is late. So, in this financial year, Corporate has visited all our Offices, holding meetings at districts level, to try and address our HR issues and working towards improving our processes. So to strengthen coordination, our Accounts team and Corporate Team are meeting on a monthly basis to share information and discuss the challenges that we are facing.

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.-

Question No. 16

The Committee notes that in 2019-2020, the Ministry was issued with a qualified opinion, taking into consideration the weak control systems identified by the Auditors (Page 32). How can the Ministry improve on its internal controls in order to qualify for an Unqualified Opinion?

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, I think in this year, 2019 – 2020, the Ministry was issued with a qualified opinion by the Office of the Auditor-General and then thereafter, we have improved. But what we have done now, we have ensured that we beef up on our staff members. We have to train them to ensure that they follow the process and they know what to do.

Moving on, we also have some timelines especially on the RIE submission to the Ministry of Finance, so we are trying to strengthen on those gaps.

As I speak, for this current year, they have completed the audit. We have also met with Office of the Auditor-General's Team to ask for an extra audit to be done for our Ministry, especially on the six scheme programmes that we have. We have to ensure that they conduct a compliance audit and also an IT audit because as they have shared with us, they are only conducting financial audit at the moment. We are more concerned with the compliance bit, hence the reason in this particular year, we were issued with a qualified opinion. So, we are trying to improve on our audit, moving forward.

Question No. 17

The Committee noted significant savings in 2020-2021, compared to 2019-2020, and noted that majority of the savings is due to COVID-19 restrictions. Does the Ministry have any Business Contingency Plans in place in ensuring that its core services are not affected during such hard times?

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, on the significant savings for 2021 compared to the previous year, we have got our response here. At the moment, the Ministry does not have a contingency plan. However, we have taken positive steps by developing our Risk Management Plan which is part of our corporate and that kind of controls or guides us around that space. The Risk Management Plan matrix has the agreed management strategy, which is the basis of business continuity plan or contingency plan.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, those are our responses to the questions that were provided, and we are happy to answer any specific questions that you may have.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Madam PS and Team, thank you very much for the responses that you have provided to the questions that was submitted to the Ministry.

Before I give the floor for the honourable Members to ask their questions, I have a few questions that I would like to ask. How is the Ministry currently addressing the problem of high staff turnover?

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Thank you, I will get DCS to respond as well, but at the moment, we are trying to come up with an exit interview. We have drafted it, and we are just workshopping it around the team to ensure that we ascertain the reason why they are leaving our organisation. If they are leaving it for greener pastures, we really cannot help it, but if they are leaving because they are not happy with their leaders, they are not happy with the culture, that is something that we can do.

I mentioned earlier on, Madam Chairperson, that it is actually a national crisis - the staff turnover. We have yet to fill a good number of positions for the past how many years. It is like a vicious cycle. As and when we recruit, we are receiving. I can share that last week, I have signed off about seven resignations. We have accepted some deemed resignation, they just do not appear, so, it is a challenge that we are facing at the moment.

As I have said, it is a vicious cycle. But we are trying our best to actually improve the work culture, improve the condition maybe, in a little way, to actually keep them. But I believe once we complete our exit interview with them, when they leave, we will be able to ascertain and then we can work around those challenges or issues that they bring up. Unless DCS has anything else she wants to add?

MS. E. BAINIMARAMA.- Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, in dealing with high staff turnover, as Madam PS has alluded to, on the number of exists that we have, in our latest report in the month of April, we did the analysis and found there is an average of about four exists in every month, that is, from August 2023 until today. As we speak, our absolute vacancy is 34, meaning these are positions that are absolutely vacant - there is no one held against the post.

The total establishment is 433 and the number on the field is 356. We have also seen the trend that the number of posts filled is, sort of, fluctuating, depending on the many reasons why they leave. But what we are trying to do is that when we do our recruitment, from those who are selected to be appointed, we also recommend to PS that we have another reserve list. In the latest that we did for a particular position, we recruited and then within a month they left. So, we did not have a problem with that because we have a reserve list there.

For senior positions, we have those down in the organisational structure to be in acting positions and then we have our NEC Volunteers who were engaged. Those are the ones that we have readily available to fill in the space, otherwise, high staff turnover is a problem across Government Ministries, and that is how we are trying to deal with it. *Vinaka*.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, for that detailed explanation. My other question is on the rehabilitation centre. You have mentioned that Fiji has no rehabilitation centre but noting the importance of the issue and the problem, what is the Ministry doing to ensure that the process of getting rehabilitation to address the problem is an immediate need?

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Madam Chairperson, I will ask Ms. Tukutukulevu to respond to that because she looks after the Child Services in the Fiji Juveniles Centre.

MS. E. TUKUTUKULEVU.- Madam Chairperson, with the rehabilitation centre, the Ministry already has the Fiji Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre for our young boys who come in conflict with the law. I know that with the increase in young boys coming into conflict with the law, the space is not enough.

The Ministry is currently working on refurbishing the existing infrastructure so that we can cater for the other cases that are coming up, otherwise, the capacity that we have is 20. Sometimes, with the fluctuations of young boys coming into conflict with the law, sometimes we go over that capacity, but the Ministry is currently working on expanding the current facility. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I have another question, this is on the conversion of food voucher to cash. Is the Ministry doing any monitoring on this because with the food voucher, the Ministry has a form of control, that the food vouchers are used for the purpose it is intended for, with the conversion to cash. Is the Ministry conducting or monitoring this just to ensure that it is used for the intention it is supposed to be used for?

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- One way to answer that question is, we want to make their lives easier, in regards to putting cash into their bank account. As we digitise, sometimes the reconciliation of food voucher was a challenge for us as well because of the manual intervention happening there. We feel that once we digitise, it will help.

We do have monitoring and evaluation or the welfare officers who are currently on the ground, they do review. They have a target on the cases they review, whether they change the status of the recipients, to ensure that checks and balances are taking place so as to ensure they are using it for the intended purposes.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Does the Ministry have a qualified psychologist to assess the mental status of the residents at the aged care homes?

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- We do not, but we do have an MOU with the Ministry of Health and the MOU allows the health officers to visit the Homes to provide that care, and we also have nurses there. As you know that the Golden Age Home was previously with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, but they moved to our Ministry, if I am correct, in 2018. But we still have nurse practitioners who are present to provide the services that you have asked for.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Madam PS and Team, for your presentation and the responses provided to all the questions. My question is in regards to the policies in place. Do you think there is a need to review some of the policies to better provide the services to the members of the community?

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Definitely, I believe some of the policies that we have are quite old and because of the changing needs of our recipients, the changing landscapes of the work that we do, we call for review.

Currently, we are focusing on our SOPs. As I had said earlier on, there is a team in Lautoka at the moment to review the SOPs, specifically for the Social Protection Programmes. Ms. Tukutukulevu is sitting here, they have just done a review on the Child Services, and we have a continuous list of policies that we review when we feel it is due. At the same time, I would like to mention that we have a National Gender Policy that is currently under consultation to be reviewed by SPC, who will be assisting us on that.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Madam PS, there was a mention of the termination of the assistance provided to the disabled people during that financial year. What is the status now? As we all know, we need to assist them. Can you provide some information on the status now?

MS. S. BIUKOTO.- Madam Chairperson, just to answer, the Disability Allowance Scheme is actually a life scheme, so they keep getting their allowances until they pass away. The case is only terminated, as I have said, when they pass away, and that is usually when they come back to claim for the Fiji Care Insurance. We actually reconciled the Fiji Care Insurance that family members try and access where we actually help. So monthly, we are averaging 40 deaths at the moment, taking into account, the Ministry of Health has stated that we have three amputees everyday. So, I am taking that if there are three amputees, given the high NCD rate, that is all contributing to the terminations that we are experiencing. So, Madam Chairperson, that is just in short, the issues around terminations that we are going through at the moment.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Chairperson, Madam PS, there is a lot of talks about this Golden Age Home in Labasa. Was that built for the people of Labasa or for the relocation of senior citizens from Lautoka?

MS. E. BAINIMARAMA.- Madam Chairperson, in response to the question, there are three Homes currently, in Labasa, Lautoka and Suva. Labasa Home has been there for a while, and it was just renovated because of its structure, et cetera, so it was not built for the relocation of Lautoka.

We are working on the relocation of the Lautoka Golden Age Home but for the Labasa one, that has been there for a while but not meant for the relocation. There was a thought of relocating the residents of Lautoka back then because of the report that was given by the Divisional Engineer West. But we have changed and have identified a site which we could not secure, but there was another site that was identified where we will relocate the residents of Lautoka Golden Age Home, while we rebuild their current home. The Labasa Home was meant for its residents but not for relocation from Lautoka.

HON. P.K. BALA.- The reason why I asked is because last week in Parliament, we heard that there was a plan to relocate the senior citizens from Lautoka to Labasa. That is why I asked.

Now, going back to Lautoka, we were on our tour to Lautoka and we were told that they have found a new location for three years or something. But that building is not on ground floor, it is a double-storey building. How are you going to manage that?

MS. E. BAINIMARAMA.- Madam Chairperson, we have done the plan in consultation with the management of the Lautoka Golden Age Home. The plan is to refurbish the Matanakilagi House to be conducive to the residents. We noted the double-storey, and we need to also put up a fence. So, the scope is going to be conducive to the residents.

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, no, my concern is whether they are going to stay at the ground floor or are they going to stay on the first floor because I know that building, there is not enough space on the ground floor. So, I am just asking whether any feasibility study was done before agreeing to that location?

MS. E. BAINIMARAMA.- Madam Chairperson, we could not secure the Ba Mission Hospital. We looked around in consultation with the managers of the Home, we then identified that building and they have assured us that it is conducive to having the residents and they will be based at the ground level, while the office will be on top.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you. On the presentation that you have done, Madam PS, I have seen the grants to women's institutions and the grant amount is the same - \$80,000 to each institution. So, is this grant given based on a fixed sum or on the size of the organisation or on the activities they carry out? I can see Ba Women's Forum. I know for myself they do a lot of things compared to, I mean, I am not against the other Homes, but is there any logic behind this?

MS. E.K. VEIQATI.- Thank you, Madam Chairperson, I would like to respond to the question. That is the grant that has been provided for those institutions. However, we are currently looking into assessing the needs per institution. We have not conducted an impact analysis on the institution, however, that was the standard ground that is provided to the institution every year on an annual basis.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Is that the right way of doing things?

Anyway, I have seen this REACH programme, you have mentioned and given us a figure, but it is not mentioned here on the Division.

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, the REACH programme is funded by UNDP. We have just given out the individuals, we have put it in gender and also children, but you are right. It says five Provinces, but we can provide the name of those Provinces later on.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I believe you have engaged Fiji Care Insurance and this is in regards to insurance for the recipients. What all does it cover and what would be the premium per person?

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Madam Chairperson, I will ask Ms. Biukoto to share a bit on that, please.

MS. S. BIUKOTO.- Madam Chairperson, just on the Fiji Care Insurance, the benefits are funeral benefits, as well as life insurance and accident claim. For those who are receiving social protection assistance from us, if their house catches fire, it is also covered in the Fiji Care Insurance benefits.

I need to confirm the premium that we pay at the moment, Madam Chairperson. I can actually provide you with that figure. I just do not want to guess, I might be wrong.

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Just to add on to that, for the Fiji Care Insurance, the budget does not come from our budgetary allocation, but is paid directly from the Ministry of Finance to Fiji Care, but it just involves the benefits under the programmes.

HON. P.K. BALA.- This is very interesting, the street kids. There were some street kids that were picked up from the streets of Ba Town and taken to Veilomani Boys Home. Unfortunately, those boys who were taken, they went and spoiled the boys who were staying there. They stayed on for some time, maybe two or three weeks, then they just went away.

However, but we see a big statement by your Assistant Minister saying that we have learnt this, we have done that. Was there any study done whether it is right for the Ministry to take the street kids from the street to those established homes? It was a very sad story when I heard from them when I visited the Veilomani Boys Home because those boys who have been residing there, have been good boys and these people maybe forcefully or just for the showcase by your Assistant Minister to make a headline in the newspaper, made this effort and then went and basically spoiled

the good boys. Then after a few weeks, they went away from there. In future, you need to be very careful. Why do you establish Homes? It is not just for the sake of doing it. Is there any response to that?

MS. E. NADAKUITAVUKI.- Madam Chairperson, I would like to start, and then I will get Ms. Biukoto to add on.

It is a very good observation. We are asking the same question. At the moment, at the Juvenile Centre, they have changed the name to Rehabilitation Centre, and I have been asking the team. I hope that the children who come through Rehab Centre go out a better person rather than coming in and then go out worse off than as they come in.

Exactly the same scenario you have mentioned. Because of the 'No Drop' policy too with the Police, they probably just steal a packet of biscuit, and this is the real example I am talking about. They come in and they mix with other who probably are worse off offenders, so the influence and peer pressure is rubbed on to the other kids.

Again, the same story with our established Homes, like you rightfully said, and we are trying to find a solution to that. What is the best recipe on how we are going to tackle the children that run off from the street. When we interviewed some of them, they said they do not have love from home, because by right, we want to integrate them to their family, find their parents. But they run away, they love to stay on the street because that is where they find love.

It is a big problem. As I have said, we are trying to find a solution. We are calling out to other stakeholders, faith-based organisations and others that we are working with, to work together to come up with the best solution.

One classic example, Madam Chairperson, during the cyclone that we had, we transported these children who sleep on the bus stand to Draiba Primary School because that was the Evacuation Centre. We dropped them off, they had hot meal or something, they ran out again. They went back to the same bus station and slept there because they said that, that is home to them. So, we have to look at it holistically to actually ascertain the real root cause of the problem. Why they want to come out, and then come up with the best possible solution. I think there is no one solution fits all kind of thing. That is just my initial respond, but I will probably ask Ms. Biukoto if she wants to add on to that.

MS. S. BIUKOTO.- Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, if I can just build on from where Madam PS has commented on the statement that was made in terms of children that we took off the street and we tried to provide shelter for them in one of our Homes in Ba. In reality, Sir, there were children that we took in. In reality, one or two of them have actually ended up back on the street. In reality, we are mandated under the law that any child, even on the street, we still have to provide shelter.

For the boys that we have, Sir, in the submission that we made, Madam Chairperson, I had said that one of our challenges is the need for rehabilitation. For those on the streets, the need is actually to have a home or a place where we can provide shelter where we actually take them through rehabilitation. It is not just rehabilitation, it is resocializing them back to norms.

It is not the first time we have used the Centres, we have been doing it in the past, but the only difference is when we did use the Homes, the numbers for children in remand was actually less than what we are doing now. Our numbers on the streets have actually gone up in the last few years.

Madam Chairperson, there is no easy solution to our children on the streets, that is something that the Taskforce is working on. We are hoping that with the budget and the possibility of working with faith-based organisations, that we will actually have the Rehabilitation Centre for our street kids, specifically for our street kids.

Madam Chairperson, that is just, in short, our response to the question in regards to street kids. Thank you.

HON. P.K. BALA.- As I have mentioned earlier on, Madam PS, during our tour to the Golden Age Home in Lautoka, we were told that there was only one nurse, who looks after the Nursing Station and the senior citizens at the Home. Can that be looked into, because for one person to handle that is too much? That was the concern that was raised.

You have also said that there is a proposed official launch of the Fiji National Shelter Guideline. Is there any timeframe for that?

MS. E.K. VEIQATI.- Madam Chairperson, we do have a proposed timeframe which is between June to a new fiscal year. We are just sorting out schedules at the moment within the Ministry to organise for the launch of the Shelter Guideline.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, since there are no other questions, I would like to sincerely thank Madam PS and your Team for availing yourselves this afternoon to be present in this meeting. Thank you for your comprehensive responses to the questions that was sent out to you, as well as your supplementary questions.

The Committee and Secretariat have taken note of all the discussions that we have had this afternoon, and I know it will help in the compilation of our Committee Report, which we will further table in Parliament, I think, in the August Sitting. If the Committee has any further questions in future, the Ministry is requested to accommodate the Committee's request. Thank you.

The Committee adjourned at 3.47 p.m.