

Speech for **Hon. Volda Lawrence., M.P.**, Minister of Social Protection

For

Presentation of 2017 Budget – December 6, 2016

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Please allow me to extend congratulations to the Hon. Minister of Finance, Mr. Winston Jordan, and his committed staff not only for his presentation of the 2017 Budget to this Honorable House on November 28, 2016 in advance of the fiscal year, but also for its timeliness in outlining Government's policies, projects and programmes to facilitate effective implementation.

Sir, the 2017 Budget, under the theme: Building a Diversified Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese, captures all aspects of the vision of His Excellency, President David Granger who, in his address at the Opening Session of Parliament stated and I quote "the economy remains undiversified and incapable of withstanding even small shocks. What we need is a growth strategy that is broader in scope and more diversified in its outlook." His Excellency, further advocated the adoption of a Green Agenda aimed at promoting green economic sectors such as the development of climate-resilient agriculture, eco-tourism and information, communications technology with the overarching objective of ensuring a good life for all its citizens.

The 2017 Budget, with its focus on development of new, green technologies and processes, creation of more green job opportunities and support of the Government's drive towards the achievement of the Green Agenda defines a sustainable pathway to the happiness and prosperity of all Guyanese and paves the way for enhancing the quality of life of all our citizens. Let me also indicate to the opposition members that this budget contains some 102 pages of diverse

information and measures, not merely Value Added Tax; my advice is to READ the budget.

Further, I wish to compliment the Hon. Minister for incorporating in the Budget the Sustainable Development Goals which all the Governments of the Caribbean have endorsed. In Paragraph 4: 6, the Hon. Minister states: “The Green Agenda encompasses environmental protection, citizen security, education, social protection and resilience against climate change. It is about sustainable development, embracing a broad range of SDGs and aligning perfectly with multi-dimensional progress. In fact, Sir, National, Regional and International Governments have all affirmed their commitment to the realisation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda of which the Sustainable Development Goals are an integral part. In examining the Budget, all 17 Sustainable Development Goals are reflected therein, but I wish now in this Honorable House to highlight a few of them which are crucial for ensuring ‘the good life’ and the economic sustainability of the Guyanese people.

Mr. Speaker, I refer to SDG #1 which targets Ending Poverty in all its forms everywhere and by 2030 reducing at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty.

SDG #2 focusing on ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture;

SDG # 8 promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all,

SDG #6 ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

SDG #4 which stipulates ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning;

SDG # 5 which stipulates achievement of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

I wish to reiterate. Mr. Speaker, the importance of these SDGS and the others and I would like to again commend the Hon. Minister for his foresight in crafting the Budget, cognisant of the 2030 target of these Development Goals.

Mr. Speaker, in my last Budget presentation, I indicated to this House and the nation that our Government will continue to put in place measures to improve the effectiveness of our social welfare programs that will enhance the quality of life for all especially our vulnerable groups. I am therefore very pleased to report on what transpired in 2016 and to share with you some of the projections for 2017. However, before I do so, I would like to say thanks to the UNFPA, UNICEF, UNDP, FAO for their tremendous contribution and collaboration with the Ministry of Social Protection over the past eighteen months. I wish this Honorable House to know that various initiatives have been implemented and are expected to continue in 2017 with the support of these Organisations and other Agencies to boost the programmes of capacity-building of our most vulnerable groups.

Sir, I wish to report on another development which will certainly enhance our effectiveness. From the inception we realized that one of the issues hampering the MOSP from providing an interconnected service to our clients is the fact that the Ministry is housed in 5 locations. This contributes to the loss in working hours, lack of co-ordination of our programs and in many instances frustration for the persons whom we serve. The staff and I are extremely grateful that this will soon

come to an end with the provision of some 200M\$ to begin work on the High Street building.

In 2016, Sir, the Ministry of Social Protection framed its objectives and shaped its policies within the parameters of equitable distribution for the benefits for all Guyanese as extracted from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of ending poverty (Goal 1); achieving gender equity and empowerment of women and girls (Goal 5); and ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being for all at all ages. The Ministry's thrust in 2016 as it executed its four (4) programs namely: Administration, Social Services, Labour and Child Care Protection took Guyanese and more particularly our vulnerable groups much closer to the vision adumbrated by these laudable goals.

Mr. Speaker, I will speak on three of the programs as the Hon. Keith Scott, Minister within the Ministry of Labour, has already spoken on the Labour Programme. I will begin with Programme 1 which deals with Policy Development and Administration. Sir, despite the efforts by this and the previous government to have a Strategic Plan, we are not better off. Hence, the allocation of 10M\$ provided for in the Budget for Strategic Planning will greatly assist the Ministry in formulating programs and strategies and facilitate the execution of our tasks. In paragraph 4.37, the Hon. Winston Jordan speaks about the Government's plan to engage the Caribbean Development Bank to rebuild our capacity to plan and this coupled with the coming into being of the Poverty Measurement and Analysis Unit indicated in paragraph 4.47 should strengthen our capacity and ensure more effective management and results.

Mr. Speaker, let me share some of our successes. In 2016, under the Financial Support for Disadvantaged Persons and Persons in Difficult Circumstances, the Women of Worth Loans Programs resuscitated in 2015, continued its programme

in collaboration with the Guyana Bank for Trade and Industry. Several single females from several of our Administrative Regions benefitted from loans ranging from \$100,000 - \$250,000. Likewise the People of Worth Entrepreneurial Resources (POWER) Loans Programme, which provides loans to male single parents and couples already engaged in business ventures in collaboration with Guyana Bank of Trade and Industry, was implemented in September 2016. To date, several persons have been screened and recommendations have been made to the Bank for the processing of loans. We are also aware that many of these persons will not be able to repay a loan. Thus, the Ministry provided small grants to about 151 persons, mainly women, from all the Administrative Regions. Activities include vending, poultry rearing, cosmetology and purchase of sewing machines for a women's group in St. Ignatius, Region 9. However, the majority are engaged in vending of groceries, clothes, confectionery and food/snacks. Mr. Speaker, it is the Ministry's view that a little goes a long way in transforming the lives of individuals and it is in this regard that the small grants are being provided. It is projected that in 2017, efforts will continue and the Ministry will explore other initiatives which will allow for expansion of geographic coverage.

Sir, the Ministry is committed to transforming the lives of our Guyanese people, encouraging self-sufficiency through entrepreneurship, thus paving the way for the achievement of Goal # 1, the eradication of poverty. This underscores, Mr Speaker, the unrelenting efforts initiated in the area of training, which is critical to the successful management of any business venture and the Ministry is certainly pleased to announce the inroads that have been realised. I wish to report, first of all on the First Lady Capacity Building Initiative which seeks to empower beneficiaries through training on managing and sustaining small entrepreneurial ventures. Mr. Speaker, training was conducted in all ten Administrative Regions

and approximately three hundred and ninety (390) female single parents have been recipients of training in self-reliance and success in business. In 2017, Sir, this training will continue in new locations in the Regions and those who have been already trained in “Success in Business” will be provided with linkages to markets.

Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Minister of Finance, in paragraph 4.37 stated that strategic planning for this nation is a key priority of the Government. He continued: We will be embarking also, on the process of developing a multitude of sector-specific strategic plans, including in the areas of social protection. In 2017, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will effect its strategic planning in launching a project to extract oil from lemon grass in Buxton, the output of which will be sold to the “Rupununi Essence’ Project. In Regions 5 and 10, technical assistance will be provided for the rearing of pigs. In the long-term, this training will expand to include production of the by-products, utilising it for bio digester towards the provision of green energy, as well as ham and bacon with small farmers in several communities. (This was a thriving business venture under the PNC, for which Vashti Warner was responsible).

You can well appreciate, Mr. Speaker, the avenues for sustainable employment and economic self-sufficiency that will be generated through this initiative. Sir, the Ministry is planning to engage our young adults and to a large extent, offer support both with business skills and financial grants to realise their business goals. Towards this end in the first quarter, there will be the hosting of 3 business fairs where these young adults can make their proposals. Moreover, we will be focusing on implementing the Sustainable Livelihoods and Entrepreneurial Development (SLED) program for which there has been an injection of \$100M\$. (Par 4.143)

Mr. Speaker, the SLED program has a 3-pronged approach. Firstly, the objective is to encourage young people to come up with innovative ideas after which the

intention is seek Technical assistance from IAST, GSA to test them and once they are feasible, make provision to implement and bring to fruition. The Ministry wants to assist groups of young people to form Coops and establish business ventures and partnerships to develop their potential and become self-sufficient. The vision is also to empower women through Agri and Agro processing and the Ministry is considering entering into partnership with the Ministry of Business to take this venture to the next level and facilitate exportation of the produce, fostering entrepreneurial activity, self-confidence and self-esteem

Sir, the emphasis will be on earning and generating income and the Ministry will encourage persons to go back to the land and use local materials to ensure level of self-sufficiency. In Region 2, production of peas will be encouraged and appropriate markets will be sought; pig-rearing in the communities will also be encouraged, and processing is envisaged. Corn production in the Berbice River will be stimulated and the Ministry will approach NARI to assist with small machinery to boost the initiative so that food for the pigs could come from this Region. In Region 1, the green house program will extend to include ginger and turmeric production. Mr. Speaker, Regions 1, 2, 6, 10 will be specifically targeted and with the introduction of the Youth Entrepreneur Skills Training (YEST) program as well, these communities should become fully engaged in generating their own incomes.

Sir, the second aspect of the Ministry's Training programme is focused on this initiative for female single parent households; the building of Green Houses for the cultivation of cash crops. I am happy to inform this Honorable House that several female single parent families in East Bank Berbice, Region 6 were trained in green/shade house agriculture. Similar projects are earmarked for Regions 1 and

10 in 2017 and this augurs well for providing more opportunities for vulnerable residents in these Regions to become more financially independent.

This same vision for capacity-building through training targeted our Teenage Mothers in 2016. Thirty adolescent mothers from Yarrowkabra, Region 4 were trained. This initiative aimed at empowering youths to support their peers through awareness sessions on social issues included a comprehensive programme for our teenage mothers, run by the NGO, Women Across Differences (WAD). Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance, in paragraph 4.142 in reference to our youth stated: if we are to ensure that our youth are well equipped to be independent, viable and productive members of society, then we have to ensure that we are strategic in our interventions to support this vital demographic group.

Mr. Speaker, this explains the Ministry's drive in 2017 to intensify this programme for our teenage mothers to provide a platform whereby they can be fully reintegrated into the society. The Ministry will continue to partner with WAD to replicate what is being done in Georgetown along the Linden-Soesdyke Highway, in Linden Region 10 and Angoy's Avenue, New Amsterdam, Region 6. Further, Training in vocational skills will be conducted for adolescent mothers in Regions 1, 2 and 9. WAD implemented a programme- the Comprehensive Empowerment Programme for Adolescent/Teenage Mother: Enhancing their Life Skills and Competencies and is expected in 2017 to develop the second phase and pursue its collaboration with the Ministry in furthering its Empowerment programmes.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Social Protection is challenged on a daily basis by a myriad of social issues that impinge on the realisation of a good life for all our citizens, but the Ministry is determined to eliminate, as much as is humanly possible, many of the social ills that are prevalent in our society. Hence, it is the

Ministry's initiative to implement evidence-based policies and programs to strengthen the capacity of its stakeholders which will result in their empowerment. This serves as an introduction to Programme 2 which embodies the Social Services. With reference the latter part of the Budget theme: Delivering the Good life to All Guyanese, I wish to report on the Palms Geriatric Home and the Services provided for the Elderly.

Sir, in paragraph 4.149, the Hon. Mr. Winston Jordan, in reference to the care for the Elderly and persons with Disabilities, reported that a number of setbacks and poor management handicapped the process in 2016. He stated: in the new dispensation, elderly citizens can expect to benefit from improved care through the implementation of minimum standards, which seek to provide modern institutions for them..... In addition, our senior citizens' residential facility will benefit from substantial repairs to the tune of \$89.5 million in the new year.

Mr. Speaker, in 2016, several initiatives were implemented at the Palms Facility. Two doctors assumed duties to provide round the clock medical service to the residents of the Palms/ night shelter / other homes for the elderly. In addition, an Infirmary was commissioned to provide on-site medical treatment for the residents. In 2017, nurses will be deployed to supplement the service rendered by the two doctors in the Infirmary and other wards as well as off-site treatment. Further, lifts will be installed in the Institution to help move patients / laundry/ food/utensils. With regard to the building of the modern facility, discussions with the Islamic Bank are expected to continue so that works on this new Facility can begin.

Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Minister of Finance, intimated in paragraph 4.151: we believe that persons with disabilities should receive the same opportunities for improvements to be made to their quality of life as the next person. According to the Hon. Minister, the Board of Industrial Training has expanded vocational

training of differently-abled persons; some 131 disabled persons have been trained and the target for 2017 is 200 persons.

With regard to the Deaf Association of Guyana, the Ministry of Social Protection pledges to continue working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education in the development of the sign language. Mr. Speaker, we have seen the use of sign language interpreters initiated during the presentation of the 2017 National Budget, which was a first for budget presentations in the National Assembly. This speaks to having a broader section of the society having access to information. The Ministry realizes that the resource-base for the acquisition of the sign language has to be strengthened and widened so that it becomes accessible to all, and to this end, is committed to this program which will certainly change lives and make a difference. The Ministry will continue to work with the Association and will explore the possibility of establishing a Centre for the Deaf in Georgetown, through which all efforts and initiatives can be effectively channelled. In 2016, the Ministry also provided assistance to visually impaired individuals, sponsoring blind cricketers for a tour in the Caribbean and providing computers for Blind Students to pursue their studies. In 2017, the Ministry will continue to work even more to further the cause of our visually impaired persons.

Mr Speaker, on Friday November 25, 2016, Guyana joined with the rest of the world in observance of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women under the theme: Orange the World: Promoting Equality; Ending Gender-Based Violence. Sir, domestic violence, defined as violent or aggressive behaviour within the home, typically involving the violent abuse of a spouse or partner is prevalent in our villages and in all our communities, and the Ministry is concentrating all its energies to eradicate this social ill from our society and to create an ambience and climate where the good life can be engendered.

Sir, the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Policy Unit is a new unit within the Ministry expressly created to address the high incidence of Sexual and Domestic violence in our society. This Unit, now well-staffed has entered into discussions with several agencies namely the Police Force, Regional Authorities and NGOs as well as the Ministry of Public Security to come up with strategies and to collaborate to combat the prevalence of domestic violence. With the resuscitation of the National Task Force for the Prevention of Sexual Violence, in accordance with the Sexual Offences Act, it is envisaged that the Task Force will open its doors to incorporate others on board, so that a broader spectrum of stakeholders can deliberate and suggest recommendations to tackle this social scourge. Mr. Speaker, a Hotline was established in Region 6 in 2016 to great effect and it is envisaged that Hotlines will be set up in several Regions during 2017.

Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Minister of Finance underscored in paragraph 4.45 the importance of data. “Diagnosing the needs of sectors, regions and the problems faced by our people require more than mere intuition and good intentions; we must identify the data needs, collect the data and use the data to drive a performance budgeting approach to development. In the light of this, a National Survey on Violence against Women will be conducted, Mr. Speaker, and the data would be used to implement the Action Plan.

In 2016, the construction of a Domestic and Sexual Shelter was under consideration in Region 3, but Sir, this shelter will now be constructed in Region 4 in the Mahaica Hospital Compound as there is much more space on this site. The Drawings and Plans are completed and in early 2017, we shall continue discussions with the Islamic Bank on this Project. Sir, the protection of our Domestic Violence victims is extremely important and the rehabilitation and commissioning of

Domestic and Sexual Violence Shelters in Regions 6 and 10 will be effected. Additionally, in 2017, approximately 30 police stations in Regions 3, 5, 6, and 10 as well as Georgetown and New Amsterdam Prisons will be connected to the Integrated Crime Information System and 12 police stations across the country will be upgraded to handle domestic violence interviews, interviewing and case management. Further the Government will develop community safety plans for twenty communities with the highest crime and violence rates. (Para 4.121) Mr. Speaker, the work done by one of the frontline fighter organizations has not gone unnoticed by this Government. The services provided to our many women and their families who suffer from abusers is commendable and after many years of request for an increase in their subsidies, approval has been granted. Sir, the 2017 Budget has made provision for an increase of \$21.2M for Help and Shelter.

Mr. Speaker, I would like us, in this Honorable House, to turn our attention to the Probation and Social Services Sector. Sir, the number of disadvantaged and vulnerable persons who appear at our office is alarming to say the least. It follows therefore that there is need for a dynamic and well managed Unit to cope with the demands and to respond with a service of the highest quality. To this end, in July 2016, a Social Work Conference for Professional Practice was convened at the Arthur Chung Convention Centre.

This Conference was the first of its kind in Guyana and was organised in collaboration with the University of Guyana to regulate social work practice in Guyana. This conference brought together Social Work Educators and Practitioners as well as Paraprofessionals in an effort to identify the Best Practices in Social Work and to craft Standards, Rules, Procedures and Policies that will guide Social Work Practice in Guyana. This conference was eagerly received and in 2017, once these Standards and Best Practices are formally tabled, the Ministry

will embark on the Issuing of a Social Work Practice Licence, which would not only regulate the Service, but will bring prestige and respect to Social Work Practice and enhance the quality of service offered to our citizens.

Mr. Speaker, plans are on stream to boost this Social Work Sector too with the introduction of a Masters in Social Work Programme in the Department of Sociology at the University of Guyana. The Ministry together with the University of Guyana recognizes the need for higher level skills to support the Government in its efforts to address the challenges of the social ills prevalent in our society and therefore welcomes this initiative that would enhance the staff's competencies and other eligible persons involved in the field of Social Practice. York University of Canada is working closely with the University of Guyana to develop the programme that would respond effectively to the needs of the Guyanese people.

Within the Ministry, Mr. Speaker, the intention in 2017 is to review and reorganise the Probation Department with assistance from CUSO International (Guyana) to meet the needs of the Social Work Practitioners and Probation Officers so that with the requisite tools, they can liaise better with those persons who seek assistance and effectively offer them a qualitatively sound service. Sir, the Hon. Minister in the Section titled Justice Reform in paragraph 4.28 stated that key areas are earmarked for strategic interventions in 2017, one of which is the use of alternative sentencing. In Paragraph 4.29, the Hon. Minister continued: Through the "Support for Criminal Justice System Programme", the Government will ultimately reduce the use of pre-trial detention for persons accused of minor, non-violent offences by aggressively promoting the use of alternative sentencing options such as probation, community service, restitution and fines.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry intends to work closely with the Ministry of Public Security so that the Probation and Social Service Sector can transition into an

effective Unit cognizant of the relevant legislation concerning those youths involved in minor offences. The passing of the Juvenile Justice Bill, soon to be laid in this Honorable House will bring about a repeal of the Wandering Charges and it is envisaged, that alternative sentencing will become a more acceptable form of penalty, and changes in Legislation will occur. We must protect our youth and provide them with opportunities so that they can rebound, use the available resources and develop their potential for enhancement of their personal life and life in the Community.

Mr. Speaker, in 2017 both the Legal Aid Clinic in Georgetown and the Linden Legal Aid Clinic will benefit from substantial increases to their subsidies by 18.6M\$. Mr. Speaker, with an office in each region and sub region, the latest addition being Kato in Region 8 and Kwakwani in Region 10, the need for our officers to be mobile is critical to their being able to provide service to every community 7.5M\$ is allocated to purchase several ATVs for our officers.

Mr. Speaker, our Elderly feature highly on the Agenda of the Ministry of Social Protection and in 2016, this prioritization saw measures being taken to improve the Old Age Pension Scheme. I am happy to report that in just over eighteen months, the OAP reflects a 45% increase. The pension now stands at \$19,000 and over 53,000 persons are expected to benefit. At the same time, the Public Assistance will increase to \$7, 500 and both increases are to take effect from January1, 2017.

In addition, the removal of the requirements for them to pay for drivers' licenses, travel tax and now the passport fee are all measures in support of the Elderly. Mr. Speaker, I wish to state that the incentive that the Opposition implemented for the Elderly to exempt them from the payment of Electricity and Water lacked transparency and **did not benefit all the elderly consumers.** This is a caring

Government, Sir, there is no disparity in the distribution of the pension; all are entitled to the same equitable increase without exception.

Other measures that have been taken to ease the burden on the Elderly are (1) improving the efficiency of the OAP payment system and the oversight of Senior Citizen Homes. Mr. Speaker, the Ministry in collaboration with the E-Government Agency, Ministry of Public Telecommunications has commenced testing an Electronic Pension Payment System. In 2017, there will be full implementation and operationalization of the Electronic Pension Payment System, which upon completion, is expected to improve the management and administration of the Old Age Pension payments. The Ministry will review the present Poor Law Act. of 1942 to address the several issues which plague this safety net work. ,(Seniors who do not have birth certificates, those without Identification Cards and also those who set out to abuse the system as is the case of those who are now seeking to encash vouchers from as far back as January 2016.

Sir, The Ministry has developed and finalized Minimum Standards for Elderly residential facilities in line with international best practices and Guyana's obligations under international treaties and agreements. In 2017, the Ministry will establish a Senior Citizen's Homes Oversight Committee which will provide the guidance and support to bring all Senior Citizens Homes in compliance with the Minimum Standard. Also an additional 500,000\$ is provided in the 2017 budget for one of our oldest private homes for the Elderly, the Dharm Shala.

Mr. Speaker, I want to inform this Honorable House of the success story of the Hugo Chavez Home which accommodates our homeless persons. The residents of this Institution have capitalized on the skills training with FAO and the Ministry of Agriculture and are now producing ducks, sheep, eggs in addition to their vegetable farm. The climate at that Institution is motivational and it is the

Ministry's hope that other homes will emulate the residents of the Hugo Chavez Home and transform their lives through similar initiatives. The residents can supply you, Members of this Honorable House with their produce, so do not forget to place your orders. There is enough for consumption and for sale, so let us support their business venture.

Mr. Speaker under the Section titled Safeguarding Public Security, rebuilding Public Trust, the Government is launching a multi-agency collaboration to tackle narcotics, smuggling and human trafficking. The National Anti-Narcotics Agency (NANA) will be launched to promote greater coordination between agencies that are involved in the fight against transnational crimes such as people trafficking and a draft of the Trafficking in persons (TIP) Master Plan, done in 2016 will serve as a strategic guide for our efforts going forward (p 4.119).

Sir, the Counter-Trafficking in persons Unit has been very vigilant and in 2016, received some forty-one reports of suspected trafficking in persons which resulted in 103 alleged victims being rescued, 5 persons being charged and placed before the courts. In January 2016, the Ministry signed an MOU with Sisters of Mercy on their safe house for victims and in July 2016, Guyana was removed from the tier two watch list of countries, after two consecutive years to tier two reflecting Guyana's concentrated efforts to combat this inhuman scourge. In 2017, 10M\$ will be provided for the Unit to boost its service towards bringing the perpetrators to justice.

In 2017, the Unit will continue its vigilance, the Victims' Rights Handbook, the first of its kind, will be launched to explain the rights of victims as highlighted in the Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act #2 of 2005. Further there will be increased collaboration with the International Organization for Migration, Jamaica Trafficking in Persons and the Ministry of Education on the development and pilot

testing of a Trafficking in Persons module to be incorporated into the schools' social studies curricula at the Primary and Secondary levels. There will also be the creation and release of a local documentary on Trafficking in Persons which is intended to eliminate myths on trafficking in persons through education.

Mr. Speaker, I regret to inform this Honorable House that the Ministry was unable to achieve its objectives with the Guyana Women's Leadership Institute. This does not mean that women have been ignored. I have outlined significant developments in other areas. In 2017, the Ministry will seek to address deficiencies and gaps and begin to fulfil what should have been done among which are capacity building for 150 women through training and non-formal education to improve their opportunities to access and eradicate the root causes of poverty in communities in Regions 1, 4, and 10 so as to enable them to attain self-reliance and sustainability. There will be training of twenty (20) "Grass Root" women in Information Technology, exposure to the law and you, employability skills and gender-based violence awareness and Local Government.

Mr. Speaker, the Gender Affairs Bureau is a new unit which subsumed the Women's Affairs Bureau and Men's Affairs Bureau in recognition of the important inherent gender issues common to both parties. In 2016, the Bureau Hosted a sensitisation session for media personnel on the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Acts - how they should be reported and rules and regulations that need to be observed. A national conference on Gender and Development was also hosted and consultations held in several regions. In 2017, the Bureau will undertake training and sensitisation sessions with 100 community policing groups in order to improve response to gender-based issues.

The Gender Affairs Bureau is currently in discussions with the European Union and United Nations Agencies for technical assistance. These consultations will see

the conclusion of the formulation of the National Gender Policy from which an Action Plan and Strategies will be developed to guide the actions of the Bureau and promote effective mainstreaming of gender in programmes and operations. The Bureau will also start engaging companies in terms of labour issues, domestic and sexual violence and harassment in the workplace. We must strive for the achievement of Gender Equity and Goal #5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Mr Speaker, the Government is committed to strengthening family structures and as such, the Hon. Minister promises in paragraph 4.147 that we will see an expansion of support systems and programmes designed to result in improving the quality of life for children, women and men. To facilitate the process of reconfiguring the family unit, the Family Court was operationalised in 2016 to handle all issues relating to family, including divorces, adoptions and custody. According to the Minister, the Family Court will serve to resolve matters in a participatory manner while prioritizing the well-being of children who might be involved.

Sir, at the beginning of the year, the Ministry had to deal with the painful reality in which the lives of two of our precious assets were snuffed out in a fire at the Drop-in Center. Mr. Speaker, as a result of this unfortunate incident, we had to stop and take stock of the facilities and conditions under which our children are housed. The Drop-in Center has proven inadequate to house our vulnerable children, and so the Ministry is currently pursuing options for a building that will accommodate our children and 3 families with all the necessary facilities and safety procedures so that there will be no recurrence of that tragic incident. 20M\$ is budgeted for this project in 2017.

Mr. Speaker, there are several children with disabilities who need a home, some not because they are homeless but rather because their families are unable to care

for them properly. The Ministry will be rehabilitating one of the buildings in the Mahaica Hospital compound to provide a home for these little ones in 2017. Further, the Ministry in partnership with the Regional Democratic Council of Region #6 will be making available two homes to house our children who are abused, one for the boys and one for girls.

In paragraph 4:148, the Hon. Minister of Finance alludes to the responsibility of adults in the upbringing of children so that they can enjoy a happy and productive childhood. Sir, the Hon. Minister has pledged Government's commitment to work with parents and guardians in need and has spoken of the programme that the Childcare and Protection Agency have mapped out for the new year.

According to the Hon. Minister, the CPA will be rolling out a special parenting skills capacity building programme for parents and guardians whose children were temporarily removed from their care. It is expected that around 280 parents will benefit from this training in 2017. Further, the Minister mentioned that there was a new mentorship programme in progress. This is to encourage persons to foster children during the first quarter of 2017 in order to address the backlog of children permanently placed in institutional care and to alleviate the financial responsibility of adoption. To this end, The Foster Care stipend has been increased to \$20, 000 and in 2017, efforts will be made to target 250 children in the foster care programme to reduce the number of children in institutional care.

Mr. Speaker, the health and well-being of our children is critical to our plan for sustainability and our campaign against the perpetrators must be intensified. We intend to continue using all the media at our disposal, traditional, print, broadcast and social media in 2017 to raise the level of awareness of the Guyanese

population to the plight of children who suffer abuse. It is the Ministry's belief that much more can be achieved with a collective effort, so let us all propel ourselves into action to root out the scourge of child abuse in our society. We want to make a covenant with all communities in Guyana to be more protective of our children. Through this covenant the public will be educated on the destruction to the health and wellbeing of a child who is a victim of abuse and neglect.

Even as we focus on protecting our children, at the other end of the spectrum, it is imperative that our toddlers are nurtured in the correct way. To this end, day care centres were issued with directives concerning the minimum standards that had to be put in place to be operational. Mr. Speaker, the much needed staff has been employed and the R&L (Registration & Licenses) process has begun. There are **280** day care centres/play schools on record but only 65 % will be able to meet the Minimum Standard. Continued preparation is being done to have the first batch presented with their License before the end of the year. Several sensitization sessions had to be conducted with the Managers and Administrators of the centres as well as inspection to the buildings by the City and Regional engineers and the fire Department to meet their satisfaction before the licenses can be presented.

The 23 Residential Care Centres/ Children's Homes will be targeted for R & L in keeping with the Child Care Services & Development Act 2011. This is apart from the work with the Day/Night Care facilities which will continue throughout the new year. There is a programme set to roll out in the new year – The Early Childhood Development (ECD) Awareness Programme at the Health Centres in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health to sensitize young parents of the importance of children having positive early childhood experiences.

Further, ECD Advertisements will be done to sensitize parents on what they need to know of the day/night care services they select for their children. The Child Care and Protection Agency is extremely appreciative of the work of UNICEF, which launched the Situational Analysis Document, the UNFPA that hosted the Symposium on Teenagers and has just launched the International Report on Girls and the High Level Policy Dialogue that was initiated by the Ministry to address the issues of our youth.

Mr. Speaker, a forum for children to publicly talk to high ranking officials and others without fear or prejudice is being organized. This is in keeping with a Child's right to be heard which is pivotal to ensuring the realization of the other rights enshrined in the CRC. The target is to have the participation of 300 children from across Guyana drawn from schools and special groups congregated to present their thoughts and views on matters of their interest and wellbeing. The target is the primary school children since there is not much opportunity for them to give their opinions. The timing for this is just after the Secondary Schools Entrance Examination is completed.

Sir, another crucial area in 2017 will be Capacity Building for Child Protection Staff and other Service Providers to Children to expose persons who work in children services with the opportunity for personal & professional development – the development of skills and techniques for improved service delivery .Provision of higher accredited training for social workers, case workers and caregivers at the children care centres will be implemented in an effort to expose the children to quality staff. **\$16.1Million is set-aside for this training.**

Sir, these are some of the projects that we envision for the new year. While some of our efforts are hamstrung by staff shortage, and our being housed in different locations, we will this year, stand firm to our commitment to Guyanese and

sharpen our focus on promoting the Green Agenda and delivering the good life to all Guyanese as we have promised. Numerous initiatives, under our strategic planning programme will be undertaken and will lend to a development agenda that addresses current and emerging challenges; restore the dignity of vulnerable groups; offer protection to every Guyanese, including persons with disabilities, the elderly and children.

Our women and youth, Mr. Speaker, will be empowered through the Youth Entrepreneurial Skills Training (YEST program), the Sustainable Livelihoods and Entrepreneurial Development (SLED) Program and the Hinterland Employment and Youth Service (HEYS) which has been allocated \$991 million in 2017 (Para4.143). There are substantial savings too with regard to the tax threshold and the VAT that has been removed from essential consumer items among which are pampers for adults and babies, sanitary napkins/panty liners. These can be labelled as savings for our women. I am convinced that, with the efforts of all, the collective effort, we will bridge gender disparities, and significantly reduce major social ills, such as youths in conflict with the law, violence and sexual offences, violations of the labor laws, Trafficking in Persons, and youth unemployment.

Mr. Speaker, The Ministry's focus in 2017, will be devising and designing ways of lifting our citizenry out of the claws of poverty through provisions of jobs and empowerment. The Entrepreneurial Idea must be engendered in the minds of our unemployed peoples. Guyana is blessed with resources that are waiting to be tapped. We owe it to ourselves to be proactive; we must invest time and effort in acquiring requisite skills and knowledge to forge ahead. Let us together develop a comprehensive plan of action cognizant of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. We must adopt a

participatory approach, and in so doing transform our lives and accomplish the good life which awaits us.

I do look forward to the implementation of the plans in this Budget! A year dedicated to even harder effort awaits us.

WITH ENTHUSIASM AND PRIDE, I COMMEND THIS BUDGET TO THIS HOUSE FOR ITS ADOPTION.

Thank You.