

**January 21<sup>st</sup> 2020**

**NO ONE IS TRULY SAFE UNTIL EVERYONE IS SAFE**

*Excerpts from the address delivered to the nation by Prime Minister Dr. Hon Ralph Gonsalves on Monday January 18, 2021, outlining the strategy of the ULP administration in addressing the surge in the number of Covid-19 positive cases in this country.*

### **THE STRATEGIC PLAN**

Strategically, in the current circumstances, the plan is essentially six-fold:

1. Flatten the curve by reducing the incidence of COVID-19 and the morbidity, and mortality, connected thereto with a central focus on the protection of vulnerable populations, the early detection of cases in the communities, and aggressive early management of all cases of COVID-19. In this regard, the vulnerable populations are those with chronic non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, heart and kidney/renal problems, lupus, sickle cell anemia, and such like severe pre-existing, debilitating health conditions.
2. Maintaining a sufficiency, in numbers and quality, of the public health workforce and associated personnel, within a nimble and fit-for-purpose system to enhance their effectiveness. Boots-on-the-ground epidemiology is vital to our success.
3. Maintaining basic primary health-care activities particularly those relating to maternal and child health, and optimal care for persons with chronic diseases and medical emergencies.
4. Promoting further public confidence in the health authorities' strategic approach and work plan in fighting COVID-19.

5. Developing further an enabling environment for responsible behaviour by the population through their adherence to the advice and protocols of the health authorities on COVID-19.
6. The earliest possible introduction of COVID-19 vaccines.

A bundle of activities within the strategic plan for tackling COVID-19 are already in place. These are being refined for better delivery and others are being proposed to flatten the current rising curve of COVID-19 infections.

### **FIND, TRACE, TEST, ISOLATE, SUPPORT**

The most significant activity to be continued, and ramped up, is the inter-related bundle to find, to trace, to test, to isolate, and to support. We must be able quickly to find, trace, and isolate persons with the infection. Offering support to vulnerable persons while in isolation is critical to maintaining public health, nutritional and personal security and safety. The measures currently being implemented focus, correctly, on aggressive surveillance to allow for the early identification of positive cases through actively seeking cases in flu clinics, contact tracing, and targeted testing in at-risk populations. This week, the health authorities will further ramp up their work in these respects at the 22 designated flu clinics across all nine health districts in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

The testing capacity of our Molecular Laboratory has been challenged by the increased demands placed upon it by the sheer volume of PCR samples due to the steep rise in the number of local cases and the significant increase in exit screenings required for Canada, the United Kingdom, the USA, and Barbados. The capacity of the Molecular Laboratory will be enhanced markedly with the introduction of an automated extractor machine which is already on island. Additionally, the private sector laboratories are to be approached formally to process exit screenings for regional and overseas travel, thus reducing the demand on the public Lab.

Individuals who are travelling overseas, will be required to pay the fee for exit screenings charged by the private sector laboratories. Further, significant resources are being provided for additional storage for COVID-19 supplies and for containerised expansion of the Molecular Laboratory, preparatory to an imminent physical expansion of the Lab. These resources are available for immediate use. Moreover, more professional and technical persons are being recruited for the Lab, in addition to those recently hired.

The team at the Molecular Laboratory led by Elliot Samuel have been doing a magnificent job for our country. They go way beyond the call of duty, professionally, selflessly, and in accord with the highest ethical standards. We thank them. Thus far, the Lab has carried out some 24,705 tests for COVID-19, a commendable number absolutely and comparatively.

### **NUMBER AND QUALITY OF HEALTH PERSONNEL**

A central strategic quest has been to enhance the number and quality of nurses and doctors in our health care system and to assist in combating COVID-19. Last year, dozens of nurses (staff nurses and SET nurses), doctors, and other health professionals were recruited. Currently, 23 staff nurses are being recruited. And we will have to recruit more. Thankfully, we are training many more at the Nursing Division of our Community College. Our nurses, and nursing assistants, overwhelmingly, have been extraordinary in their devotion to their patients, professionally sound, and possessed of humane values of the highest quality. Those engaged specifically in the fight against COVID-19 have been phenomenal. We owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude; and we thank them sincerely.

Even as the health system tackles COVID-19, it must always be emphasised that we cannot drop our guard on the vital matter of maintaining basic, essential public health care for the population. Indeed, the maintenance of a sound primary and public health care system is an essential pre-requisite in the overall fight against COVID-19. This is not an either-or choice; both are profoundly inter-related. It is for this reason that the health authorities have organised the primary health care delivery in such a way to address

both the COVID battle and the primary health care requisites in a judicious and balanced apportionment of the twin sets of tasks between the 39 clinics, polyclinics, rural hospitals, and health centres.

## **CONCLUSION**

We are not a people of lamentations or learned helplessness. We are a people of resilience, discipline; hard and smart work. We will continue to strive, to seek, to find, to survive, to progress, but never to yield to challenges. We will triumph over our adversities and build an even stronger nation. And we can do it all, together. Let's dig deep into ourselves and into our determination to do even better, a determination inherited from our forbears' struggles and lives. And with God's blessings, our faith will see us through: Morning by morning, new mercies we see; all that we need thy hand has provided; great is thy faithfulness.