

December 10th 2021

VACCINATION WILL HELP PUT PEOPLE BACK TO WORK

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic, so declared in January of 2020 has created many challenges and caused much hardship for countries across the globe. The nature of the pandemic, being caused by a strain of the corona virus that was totally unfamiliar to scientist and medical professionals, made it very difficult for countries to respond in a coordinated manner with many adopting “knee-jerk” reactions to address the impacts of the virus. The impact on health was immediate and tragic with many individuals becoming critically ill and dying in a matter of days as healthcare systems became overwhelmed by the rate of hospitalisation and care required. It would eventually become clear that there were other dimensions to this pandemic beside health, as it also impacted the economic, social and security situations of countries. Here in SVG, Comrade Ralph and the ULP administration recognised the potential impact of Covid-19 on these four indivisible dimensions and carefully crafted a response that provided a wholistic solution to the integrated challenges. The 267 million reported cases and 5.67 million deaths worldwide is a clear indication of the serious health challenge posed by the pandemic and with new variants constantly emerging, the threat to health remains imminent. Our Ministry of Health has reported over 5600 cases with 76 Covid-19 related deaths since the first reported case just over 18 months ago. When we contemplate that this virus has infected such a significant number of individuals and killed 76 so far, it cannot be disputed that it is the most deadly single event in our lifetime. As the reality of

the impact of the pandemic on our citizens hit home, we must also develop and appreciation of the devastating impact it has and continues to have on the economy, and the consequences to life, living and production.

Economic Slowdown and Job Losses

Once the severity of the Covid-19 virus including its lethal effect especially on the elderly and those with underlying conditions was understood, countries adopted measures intended to curb the spread of the virus. Many of these measures restricted people's movements and so lockdowns became one of the most readily used measures by governments globally. For many countries this meant closure of borders restricting travel in and out of those countries even for their citizens, and airlines were grounded. At this point only essential trade was permitted by most countries and this created even greater problems for developing countries. For countries like ours that depend on tourism, the closure of borders by our source markets resulted in a grinding halt of our tourism industry. Figures from the OECS indicate that visitor arrivals shrunk from over 3 million in 2019 to just over 165 thousand in 2021 so far. The ripple effects of this slowdown in tourism specifically, but in other sectors more broadly, caused businesses to close temporarily in some instances and permanently in others or reduce their hours of operation. For the employees of those businesses, this meant loss of jobs or loss of income and across this country, this was the fate of thousands. The vast majority of those who lost jobs remain unemployed as businesses are still trying to recover, and some may never reopen their doors. Even with the income support offered by this government, the challenges remain for hundreds of families where the bread winner lost his/her job or is receiving significantly reduced income due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Getting these individuals back to work is a priority of this government as we seek to bounce back from the pandemic.

Vaccination and Getting Back to Work

The new normal that has emerged as a direct result of the pandemic, is the growing requirement by consumers that individuals providing services to them be vaccinated. On the other hand, the responsibility of employers to provide a safe working environment for their employees dictates that in managing the risks posed to certain category of workers, measures be implemented to reduce the possibility of infection and transmission at the workplace. Over the last year, the public and private sector entities in SVG have suffered multiple disruptions arising from covid-19 cases in the workplace. Our government has responded by requiring frontline workers to get vaccinated to minimise that risk and provide that first layer of protection against the virus. Airlines have resumed flights to this destination and cruise ships are making calls again, but the activity generated remains relatively moderate and limited in scope and reach. The insistence of maintaining bubbles by the cruise ships means that many vendors in areas with low vaccination rates may not feel the bounce in activity. The vaccination rate in SVG remains disappointingly low with just about 23% of the population being fully vaccinated and this will continue to hamper our ability to recover. The vaccination of our frontline workers is a great first step, but we need to go beyond this and continue to move towards achieving population immunity so that economic activity can improve. Even as individuals who were laid off patiently Await re-employment, they must deal with the reality that our low overall vaccination rate with delay their ability to get employment. We commend those frontline workers who have done their part in keeping this country safe and getting us closer to our goal of population immunity and we encourage other employees in the public and private sector to get vaccinated.

Conclusion

Comrade Ralph continues to reiterate that he doesn't wish that any public officer would walk away from his/her job over the vaccine requirement, but instead get vaccinated and continue serving our country. The reality is, vaccination will do more to get people working again which is the intention if we all play our role showing social solidarity as members of a society. None is being forced to leave and it must never be seen that way, instead we are asked to be our brother's keeper, as we get vaccinated to protect ourselves, but also to protect each other and get our economy vibrant again creating more jobs and other opportunities for fellow citizens.