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STRENGTHENING OUR HEALTH SECTOR TO IMPROVE DELIVERY OF SERVICES IN SVG

Excerpts from the 2023 Budget Address

Introduction

The delivery of health services in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines remains a top priority for our government which continues to effect significant improvements to all aspects of our country's healthcare system. *The 2023 Budget address delivered by the Minister of Finance, Hon. Camillo Gonsalves. During that address, Minister Camillo Gonsalves provided an overview of the developments the ULP administration will implement during 2023.*

Perhaps it is instructive to point out that in 2001, the New Democratic Party spent just 35 million EC dollars on the health sector. Under the ULP administration, that figure is 96 million EC dollars. Here is the excerpt from the budget address printed below.

At the moment, the worst of COVID is behind us. Let us take the opportunity to thank every healthcare professional and worker at the clinics, hospitals and isolation centre for their awe-inspiring bravery and heroism throughout the public health emergency. When fear and fatalities were rising, and understanding was in short supply, our nurses and doctors stood faithfully steadfast to an oath that many of us would not have had the courage to honour. We owe them our gratitude. No nation in the world was prepared for COVID back in March 2020.

The fact that we performed as well as any, and better than most, is due in no small measure to the quality of the people who serve in our health sector. The year 2023 provides us with the opportunity to look up beyond the immediacy of the Pandemic and to continue our mission to reform and transform our delivery of health services. Our commitment to our health sector has been steadfast and apparent. Budget 2023 sets recurrent spending for the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment at over \$96.1 million for the first time.

Our budgeted recurrent spending for 2023 is 72 percent higher than just 5 years ago and 60 percent higher than in 2013. Budget 2023 heralds an ambitious sweep of current projects and fresh initiatives that, taken together, represent another leap forward in our Wellness Revolution. The "Strengthening Health System Resilience Project," estimated at over US\$100 million, funded by the World Bank, the OPEC Fund for International Development and the Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, will strengthen the legislative and regulatory framework of the health sector, implement best practices for quality assurance and infection prevention, upgrade a strategic plan for the health sector, and develop a hospital governance model, a health information system action plan, a waste management strategy, and a health financing policy to ensure the sustainability of the system.

Health Services Expansion

The "Strengthening Health System Resilience Project" will see the construction and equipping of a state-of-the-art US\$92 million 134-bed Acute Care Hospital at Arnos Vale, on the site of the former ET Joshua Airport. Designs for the Acute Care Hospital have been completed, and the funding for the construction is arranged through both OFID (US\$30 million) and the World Bank (US\$62 million). The construction of the hospital is expected to begin in the second half of 2023.

When the Acute Care Hospital is completed, the existing Milton Cato Memorial Hospital will be repurposed as a maternity and paediatric hospital while maintaining its accident and emergency capabilities. The Acute Care Hospital will be the crown jewel of this fresh chapter in healthcare in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. It will provide various services, including trauma care, acute care surgery, urgent care, critical care, emergency medicine, inpatient stabilisation, and outpatient care. The facility will also offer a full range of allied health services required to support diagnostic, treatment, and rehabilitative interventions, including medical laboratory technology, radiography, pharmacy, audiology, optometry, physical therapy, psychology, and social work.

Budget 2023 delivers more sophisticated medical equipment to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. For example, we will spend \$1 million to deliver the country's first hyperbaric oxygen chamber. The oxygen chamber is of particular interest to fisheries and tourism sectors, as it is an indispensable tool in fighting decompression sickness in divers – a condition known as "the bends." As more and more markets open up for our fisherfolk and as more and more tourists come to dive our waters and 38 reefs, the oxygen chamber will

undoubtedly save lives. Additionally, the hyperbaric oxygen machine is a powerful tool in treating diabetic wounds, gangrene, burns and more.

Additionally, Georgetown's Modern Medical and Diagnostic Centre will have two pieces of ultramodern equipment installed. The first is a CT Scan, which will supplement the one existing at the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital. The historic addition to our diagnostic arsenal is the country's first MRI machine, which will be installed and operational by the second quarter of 2023. The base for the MRI has been assembled, the housing is being installed, and the machine will be functional by the middle of this year. You don't need a long memory to remember when Vincentians had to travel overseas for CT Scans, MRIs, Chemotherapy, Dialysis and Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy.

By the end of this year, all of those services will be available right here in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. And that's before the Acute Care Hospital even opens its doors. Budget 2023 also pays specific attention to the refurbishment and expansion of existing clinics and hospitals, as well as designing the next generation of specialised healthcare facilities. The Port Elizabeth Hospital will be expanded and renovated. The Milton Cato Memorial Hospital will receive another \$1.7 million in refurbishments. The existing South Rivers clinic, as well as clinics in Biabou, Cedars, Diamond, Greiggs, and Lowmans will all receive attention. The long-delayed initiative to upgrade the Enhams Clinic to a Wellness and NCD centre for specialised care will begin by mid-year, with a \$600,000 investment.

Next-generation architectural and engineering designs on several facilities will also be completed in 2023 to allow construction to begin in early 2024. Design work has already started for the Calliaqua and South Rivers clinics to be upgraded significantly to full polyclinic status. Diamond, Byrea and Belair clinics will also receive modern clinics of the highest quality.

Lewis Punnett Home

In 2019, the government determined that what passed for geriatric care in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was unacceptable, not befitting a modern, civilised country.

The ancient Lewis Punnett Home for the elderly was a throwback to a previous era, when the old and vulnerable were not treated with the respect that their age and wisdom demanded. So we relocated the residents of the Lewis Punnett Home to a completely refurbished building in [Stoney Grounds] as a temporary home, and we promised the nation that we would construct a modern, world-class elder care facility on the footprint of the old Lewis Punnet Home in Glen.

Last year, demolition work began on the old facility, and preliminary designs for a modern facility were submitted for consideration by the Ministry of Health. The redesigned Lewis Punnett Home will be a 120-bed facility with capacity for further modular expansion at estimated costs of US\$10 million dollars

The health policy of our ULP government has indeed transformed our health sector by leaps and bounds over the last 21 years. This will continue with more investments in infrastructure, technology and human resource development. From Fancy to Chateaubelair to Union Island, our people can all boast of the significant improvements they are seeing and accessing as regards the delivery of healthcare in this country, and the many benefits this nation enjoys, thanks to the excellent health policy of this government.