



**Statement by  
the Honourable Minister for Social Development and  
Innovation**

**Department of Financial Assistance Policy Directives**

**2024 December Session of Parliament**

Minister Speaker, I rise to announce three urgent changes that I, in my capacity as Minister for Social Development, with support from the Cabinet, have directed with immediate effect for the Department of Financial Assistance. The changes are aimed at improving the standard, responsiveness, compassion and safety of the most vulnerable that come to the Government seeking financial assistance for one reason or another.

As policymakers and stewards of our social development framework, we have a moral obligation to ensure that our policies and programmes meet the real-world needs of our people.

The first directive mandates that when families or single parents with children approach the Department of Financial Assistance, formerly known as the Needs Assessment Unit (“NAU”), seeking assistance and indicate that they have no place to live or that they are homeless, the Department must act without delay.

Effectively, what this means Mr. Speaker is that the families must be assisted and supported in securing accommodation immediately and as a matter of urgency, even if this means having to pay for hotel for a short period of time until longer-term accommodation is found.

Mr. Speaker, I do recognize that this directive may increase cost to the Department's budget outputs but Mr. Speaker, the urgency of these situations, where children are involved means that the safety and dignity of those we are here to protect must override the other concerns, including cost.

I am sure every member of this Honorable House has seen the headline in the Cayman Compass on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October, telling the story about a mother of two, who was sleeping on the beach with her children because she had nowhere else to go.

I am sad to report that although the Department of Financial Assistance was aware of the seriousness of the issue and had done all that they could within their remit, the policies of the Department were inadequate to comprehensively assist this family. Until this directive was approved on Tuesday of last week, the practice and policy of the Department was limited to approving financial assistance for accommodations and no more. Finding accommodation was the responsibility of the client.

Mr. Speaker, the combination of the limited housing available on island, the limited number of landlords willing to accept tenants who rely on Government assistance and the lack of transitional housing that is owned and controlled by Government, created the perfect storm for the nightmare that those children, I am sure, had to endure. Can you imagine, Mr. Speaker, sleeping on the beach,

in a tent, no electricity, no bathroom, and exposed to the elements of weather. This is not what we want for our children.

Mr. Speaker I will not go into what the possibilities could have been because it would be a horrific thought, but rather I will focus on how this directive will prevent this scenario from happening again.

I want to thank Mr. James Whittaker of Cayman Compass for writing the story and shedding light on the realities of what some Caymanians are facing. More importantly, I want to congratulate the mother in the story for having the bravery to share her story, not being concerned about perceived shame by the public. That takes courage in today's world of instant media.

This new policy ensures that **NO** Caymanian children who need help and whose families go to the Department for assistance will face the trauma or dangers of homelessness, because through this directive we will now be prioritizing safety, dignity, and stability above all else.

Mr. Speaker, like the article rightfully highlighted, the gap in the social assistance safety net is significantly aggravated by the lack of transitional social housing available by Government. Mr. Speaker, I remember speaking about this issue when I was in opposition last term. In fact, I brought a motion to Parliament requesting that the Government build a fifty-two bedroom apartment that they would have in their control to assist in circumstances like the one I referenced earlier. Interestingly, the former Minister, the Member of West Bay South, was at the time, the Deputy Chief Officer for the Ministry responsible for these kinds of issues.

Mr. Speaker, I say this to demonstrate that this issue is not new. What is new though, is this directive, which will ensure no Caymanian child will have to be homeless, until we find a solution to this void in transitional housing.

As Minister, I am working closely with my Ministry team in Social Development to identify a solution before the term of this Administration comes to an end.

### **Second Directive**

The second directive ensures that no parent applying for financial assistance will be required or asked to seek maintenance from the other parent as a condition for receiving support.

Mr. Speaker, we must recognize that requiring parents, particularly women, to seek maintenance from the father of their children can sometimes place the mother in a vulnerable or even a dangerous situation. For those who have left abusive relationships, the act of pursuing maintenance may heighten tensions and expose them to further harm or abuse.

As a Government, we cannot allow the pursuit of crucial financial support to become the source of risk. Mr. Speaker, we have heard of cases where mothers feel pressured into unwanted sexual acts in order for the fathers to give financial help to take care of the child. Many times, mothers are subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse or stress from the father of their children. And they accept it because they need the money from the father of their children to keep them afloat.

No one should be exposed to such abuse and potentially dangerous circumstances. This directive reflects our commitment to that principle,

safeguarding lives and ensuring that financial assistance is accessible without fear or danger.

In my research, Mr. Speaker, I could find no developed, modern jurisdictions which place this requirement solely on parents, without state support. Where maintenance has to be sought first, in order to qualify for financial assistance, the state can intervene to support the parent to seek maintenance, which helps to ensure their safety. Accordingly, the Ministry is reviewing options for my consideration, which may include adding the Department of Children and Family Services and the Department of Financial Assistance as entities who can support parents applying for financial assistance to seek maintenance.

### **Third Directive**

The third directive, Mr. Speaker, is to extend services for those receiving financial assistance by a further six months. The purpose of this directive is to prevent what can be perceived as granting help or refusing assistance to any client of the Department of Financial Assistance during the election sensitivity period. This directive will help to preserve the credibility of the Department from any political criticism.

Where there are persons who are receiving financial assistance and are no longer in need or their circumstances have changed, as per the Financial Assistance Act, 2022, those persons should notify the Department of their changes. In these circumstances, the Department can assess the household and determine whether they should still be receiving financial assistance.

Mr. Speaker, the overarching goal of these three directives is to remove any unnecessary obstacles for those seeking assistance, especially in moments of immediate crisis or prolonged hardship. By doing so, we are reinforcing the

principle that financial assistance is a lifeline and should be available quickly, especially in dire circumstances.

These measures also reflect our government's broader commitment to ensuring that our social safety net is not only robust but adaptable to the diverse needs of our people. As we implement these directives, I have instructed the Department of Financial Assistance to monitor their effectiveness and to identify further opportunities for improving how we serve the public.

Mr. Speaker, the Government's commitment is clear: and we will do whatever it takes to ensure that the most vulnerable among us are treated with care, respect and humanity.

These three directives mark another step forward in creating a society where Caymanians can live with dignity.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.