

Health for All: Putting Youth and Adolescents at the Heart of the HIV Response

[Salutations]

We are here today to examine the very important and timely theme, ‘Health for All: Putting Youth and Adolescents at the Heart of the HIV Response.’ The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), in a November 2015 report notes Jamaica as being on the ‘fast-track to ending its AIDS epidemic’ with a 46 per cent decline in AIDS related deaths and an eight per cent reduction in mother to child transmissions. This is commendable by any measure and serves as a testament to the hard work and dedication of several individuals and organizations (many present here today) that have dedicated themselves to efforts to raise awareness, eliminate discrimination and increase access. However, while we acknowledge the gains made, we must also do an honest assessment and urgently address the glaring gaps in addressing the education and needs of our adolescent population. Globally, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 10.3 million youth aged 15–24 years are living with HIV/AIDS – most do not even know that they are infected – and half of all new infections are occurring among young people. Annually, about 4 million people younger than 20 years old are diagnosed with STIs including herpes, (HPV) human papillomavirus and gonorrhoea. Unfortunately, adolescents who become infected face a lifetime of consequences.

While my colleagues from the Ministry of Health are the primary face of the national efforts coordinating stakeholders and various partners in the response to this life-changing disease, we at the Ministry of National Security readily recognize the importance of a multisectoral, proactive and progressive approach. This approach sees identifying the response to HIV and AIDS as a critical component in the assessment and mitigation of threats to the sustainable growth and development of our country. Many of you will agree with me that national security impacts everything and is impacted by all other portfolios. The value of a multisectoral approach has been tried, tested and proven especially in recent endeavours such as our work with the Violence Prevention Alliance (VPA) and their ground breaking research on the impact of violence on public health. With already limited human and financial resources, innovation, collaboration and partnership is key to fostering good governance to the benefit of all.

In my current role, one of the organizations for which I have direct oversight is the Department of Correctional Services (DCS). A department of the DCS is the Juvenile Correctional Centres formerly referred to as approved schools. These centres serve as educational institutions providing security, rehabilitation, and a learning environment for juveniles aged 12–18 who are removed by the court from the normal environment – homes, communities and families. Most of the youth under my charge already come from underserved spaces where their self worth is often diminished and those with dreams of a better life often wake up to harsh realities. Added to this

is the natural stage of development during this period of life where these youngsters are experiencing many physical, mental, and emotional changes in a controlled environment. The task of effectively communicating about sexual and reproductive health with youth under such circumstances calls for an even more empathetic, engaging and direct approach than currently exists.

Our facilities currently have an active HIV Programme which is coordinated in collaboration with the Ministry of Health. They provide all medication (ARV) according to national guidelines and also employ a phlebotomist who visits all the facilities providing HIV and STI testing. Treatment from qualified health practitioners is available to persons living with HIV and on discharge individuals are referred to parish treatment centres and provided with a written summary of their treatment and investigations whilst incarcerated. I must also acknowledge the support from a Florida-based nonprofit organization, Health Through Walls who recently employed a case manager to assist with testing and to coordinate linking ex-inmates with care in the community. This is an important intervention as many do not adhere to their treatment programme upon release and those who do sometimes experience difficulties in accessing the required support or resources. As many of you are aware, there are challenges in the system that mirror the general issues plaguing the health sector – irregular supply of some medication, poor adherence to medication routines, and concerns regarding lack of confidentiality. In spite of these challenges, we continue to work to improve the conditions and facilitate partnerships which will enable us to deliver increased care and access in an environment that places a high value on effective and sustained communication. I lead a team that is committed to restoring hope and working with the youth under our care to be the best they can be – incarcerated not incapacitated. Our desire is to prepare them to meet the challenges of adolescence and to anticipate the ones to come in adulthood so they can navigate those responsibly and achieve their full potential.

We can all agree understand that the meaningful engagement of our youth is a prerequisite for real development. A great part of the vision of prosperity for our nation lies in the development of our young people's cognitive competencies and the strengthening of the social, ethical, emotional and physical foundations. It is important that we be deliberate in our efforts to support, facilitate and involve our young people so we may direct their goodwill, enthusiasm and energy to a positive end. In pursuing health for all I accept my role in advocating for the increased participation of youth regardless of sexual preference, gender or agenda. All of us must be totally committed in this fight for the very future of our nation. In our work to put youth and adolescents at the heart of the HIV response, it is critical to recognize that the efforts, especially those channeled towards education, awareness and personal responsibility will ultimately translate to the development of individuals who are better equipped to make good decisions and positively contribute to their families, communities and nation building.

Thirty-five years ago, the world saw the first cases of what would grow to become the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In the 1980s, diagnosis equaled a death sentence; today people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS are able to live longer and more importantly access the necessary medicines and treatment. Then there is the best proven intervention – prevention. This weekend the UN High-Level meeting held in New York expanded on the bold vision originally shared last September, of an AIDS-free world by 2030. Imagine that, an AIDS-free world in less than 14 years. Possible? Overly ambitious? Well, what we do know is that in the past decade in particular, there have been significant advancements in the study of the disease and treatment. The question is, is there a strong political and social will, especially in developing spaces like ours, to apply the proven techniques and improve on them to meet this ambitious goal. In the interim, we must act quickly and decisively to address the needs of vulnerable populations and ensure that the education and services needed are accessible especially in this era of connectivity. The goal set by the UN and accepted by the global community is not out of reach but it will take unprecedented levels of collaboration and ‘all hands on deck’ – government, communities and the private sector – to support this extraordinary push to end our epidemic at home. As Kenyan environmental and political activist, Wangari Maathai puts it, ‘It’s the little things that citizens do. That’s what will make the difference.’ Let us commit to making this our ‘little thing’.

I will leave you with the words of the former UN Secretary General and Nobel Peace Laureate, Kofi Anan. ‘Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development... If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies.’