



REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

STATEMENT

BY

**SENATOR THE HONOURABLE JENNIFER BAPTISTE-PRIMUS
MINISTER OF LABOUR AND SMALL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT**

On

MOTION FOR THE 17TH SITTING OF THE SENATE

Section 6(2) of the Education Act Chapter 39:01

SENATE

MARCH 12, 2019

Madam President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on ongoing national efforts towards addressing the needs of students with physical and learning disabilities.

Madam President, firstly, the Government has always been cognizant of the need to empower persons with disabilities and to provide them with the opportunity to exercise their freedoms and fundamental rights. In addressing this issue, we must view it through the lens of human rights, and treat it with utmost priority.

International Framework

The Sustainable Development Agenda of 2030 establishes the importance of addressing the issues faced by persons with disabilities, with Goals four (4) and ten (10) being of specific reference to the matter under discussion today. The importance of growth, full employment and equal education opportunities for persons with disabilities, to which this Government is committed, is firmly enshrined as part of the international community's commitment in this area.

In addition, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Trinidad and Tobago in 2015, represents a major step towards realising the right of disabled people to be treated as full and equal citizens.

This Government has been committed to ensuring that persons with disabilities are afforded and are able to enjoy such a right.

Madam President, I wish to draw attention to the Draft National Policy on Persons with Disabilities, which was developed in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Section 7.5 of the Draft Policy addresses work and employment for persons with disabilities.

National Framework

I wish to remind everyone that the Vision of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development is “**Decent Work ... Industrial Peace ... Opportunity for all**” which is in line with the National Policy Framework, Vision 2030 that provides the Theme of **Putting People First – Nurturing our Greatest Assets**.

Through the work of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, the Government takes its role seriously as a leader with respect to the observation and compliance to ratified international labour standards. I wish to share that, on June 3, 1999, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago also ratified ILO Convention No. 159 on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment as it relates to Disabled Persons. Permit

me, Madam President, to share with this Honourable House, a brief outline of the Convention.

The Convention promotes the philosophy of decent work for persons with disabilities based on the principles of equal opportunity, equal treatment, mainstreaming and community involvement. The instrument intended to give persons with disabilities access to equal opportunities for decent and meaningful employment to improve their livelihood in mainstream culture.

The Convention speaks, among other things, to the following principles of Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Policies for Disabled Persons:

- The formulation, implementation and periodical review of a national policy on vocational rehabilitation and employment of disabled persons;
- That appropriate vocational rehabilitation measures are made available to all categories of disabled persons, and that there is promotion of employment opportunities for disabled persons in the open labour market;
- Co-operation and co-ordination between the public and private bodies engaged in vocational rehabilitation activities;

- The provision and evaluation of vocational guidance, vocational training, placement, employment and other related services to enable disabled persons to secure, retain and advance in employment; and
- Training and availability of rehabilitation, counsellors and other suitably qualified staff responsible for the vocational guidance, vocational training, placement and employment of disabled persons.

The Government has taken a structured approach to increasing employment opportunities for persons living with disabilities. This approach is rooted in the Government's philosophy of "prosperity for all" and couched in its drive for data-driven decision making.

I would like to bring the attention of this Honourable House therefore to the ongoing work of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development in improving decent work opportunities for all citizens, including our most vulnerable groups. The Ministry, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, commissioned a survey to assess the willingness of employers to hire persons living with disabilities. Research from Fraser et al 2011 and countless others concluded that the "perception of the employer has been identified as one of the most

important factors that determines whether a person with disabilities will be hired.”

Madam President, it is clear that this Government is working. You may not be hearing us shouting from the hill tops but we are working silently and strongly.

Using the National Employment Service’s database of employers the Ministry in 2016 implemented this project to gather baseline data to inform its next steps. The specific objectives of this survey were as follows:

- To assess employers’ attitudes /opinions on the hiring of persons with disabilities in their organisation;
- To assess current employer practices and challenges by company size and industry sector;
- To assess the existence of any perceived challenges and concerns in hiring, and retaining employees with disabilities, as well as identify the current strategies utilized to overcome these challenges;
- To determine the possible opportunities for partnerships with organisations to facilitate the hiring of persons with disabilities.

The survey also included a range of specific questions aimed at assessing the level of support in the form of training and development afforded to persons with disabilities who were already in employment.

As expected, the survey produced a range unique and interesting findings which together with the views of our varied stakeholders are being used to re-shape government's approach to expanding the range of opportunities available to persons living with disabilities.

On the basis of this survey, there is work to be done at all levels. We must work towards changing attitudes, we must strengthen our portfolio of legislation in support of persons with disabilities and most of all search within ourselves for the creativity and genius required to truly expand the range of opportunities available to persons with disabilities.

What's Next?

At the policy level, the Ministry has conducted twenty-two national stakeholder consultations which would inform the amendment of our labour legislation framework with the aim of creating a modernised system under which all can exercise their rights and execute their responsibilities. As part of this exercise, the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development has developed Draft Policy Positions in respect of setting Employment

Standards, which will inform an Employment Standards Bill. The Positions protect employees from, amongst other things, discrimination in all its forms at the workplace. One such protection is proposed in respect of preventing an employer from discriminating against a worker/employee due to his/her gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, age, ethnicity, disabilities.

At the strategic level, the Ministry is working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to develop the strategies that would give effect to expanding the range of opportunities to persons with disabilities. Naturally, this consultative process will result in the creation of a range of programmes and projects that will further strengthen Government's commitment and support for persons with disabilities.

In closing, let us reflect on the inspiring words of Franklin D. Roosevelt: **“We know that equality of individual ability has never existed and never will, but we do insist that equality of opportunity must still be sought.”**

I thank you, Madam President.