

## MINISTRY OF LABOUR

### Ministerial Response to the Findings and Recommendations of the Fourteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an inquiry into the challenges of prisoner re-entry into society and prisoner reintegration services in Trinidad and Tobago

**Objective 2: To assess the services and facilities available to support the re-integration of former prisoners into society.**

**Findings: Pages 51-53**

**viii. The critical services that ex-prisoners require immediately upon release are housing, employment and the validation of identification documents.**

#### Response:

The Ministry of Labour recognises that employment is a critical need of ex-prisoners upon their release and the Ministry remains committed to ensuring that all citizens have equal access to opportunities for employment. At present, the Ministry of Labour, through its National Employment Service (NES) provides a free employment service to all job seekers, including ex-prisoners. Any citizen is eligible to access this service at any one of the network of NES offices located throughout Trinidad and Tobago. The NES assists job seekers at all stages of their career, who register for the service, in finding employment by matching employer vacancies with qualified applicants. It should be noted that, while the NES refers persons to employers, the employer is ultimately responsible for the decision of whether or not to hire persons who have been referred.

The Ministry of Labour is also responsible for the On-the-Job Training Programme (OJTP) which is a two (2) year pre-employment programme which offers participants between the ages of 16-35 an induction into the world of work and focuses on their acquisition of practical occupational skills and experience within organisations in both the public and private sectors. The programme affords participants a "foothold" in the labour market through quality and structured, work based training.

It should also be noted that entrepreneurship represents a viable option to ex-prisoners seeking sustainable employment. The establishment of small businesses or Co-operatives can be lucrative paths to economic security for this vulnerable group.

A Co-operative is a group-based and member-owned business and can be formed for economic and social development in any sector. The International Co-operative Alliance defines a Co-operative as: "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise." This business model, which is based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, can enable persons to pool skills and resources towards the achievement of common goals, allowing persons to achieve objectives which may not have been possible as an individual. The Co-operative business model has

demonstrated large potential in creating employment opportunities, in affording voice and representation, in empowering people, providing social protection and alleviating poverty. In this regard, the Ministry wishes to note that the Co-operative Development Division, which was previously under the purview of the Ministry, provides support to persons and groups wishing to establish Co-operatives. The Ministry is therefore keenly aware of the importance of Co-operatives as a tool for promoting inclusion, reducing unemployment and empowering vulnerable groups. The Co-operative business model has also been particularly relevant in countries seeking to promote economic diversification and reduce widening gaps between disadvantaged and other economic groups and therefore can be an opportunity for ex-prisoners to explore.

In addition to Co-operatives, small business development can be a viable option to ex-prisoners. The National Entrepreneurship Development Company Limited (NEDCO), which was also previously under the purview of the Ministry of Labour, provides a number of services geared towards educating, building the capacity of potential entrepreneurs, guiding and advising on the procedures and requirements for establishing small businesses and also providing financing to eligible persons for the establishment of small businesses. This can also represent an opportunity for ex-prisoners who have viable business ideas.

The Co-operative Development Division and NEDCO are now both under the purview of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. There is therefore significant opportunity for that Ministry to encourage all persons seeking employment, including ex-prisoners to utilise the Co-operative business model and other small business models to create sustainable income through self-employment.

It is also important to note that, while employment is a critical need of ex-prisoners upon their release, it is only one aspect of a compendium of needs which must be addressed as they re-integrate into society. The provision of equal access to employment opportunities is also only one step in the process of ex-prisoners being employed. Some key factors to consider will be education and skill level, mental health considerations, willingness of employers to accept ex-offenders, enabling legal and policy frameworks and societal views and attitudes. This matter is therefore beyond the scope of any one Ministry and will require research on existing models locally and internationally, as well as a “whole of government” and “whole of society approach” if it is to be addressed in a meaningful way. The Ministry of Labour would be willing to work with all relevant stakeholders to discuss the development of a comprehensive way forward to address this socioeconomic issue.

**xi. Increased State support is needed to address the employment needs of ex-prisoners. In this regard, it was noted that Vision on Mission tried unsuccessfully to establish a partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development to assist with its job placement efforts.**

The Ministry of Labour is unable to confirm the receipt of any request from Vision on Mission to establish a partnership to assist with job placement efforts, however, the Ministry remains committed to engaging in discussions with all relevant stakeholders to ensure that every citizen has equal access to employment opportunities as the Ministry pursues its Vision of “*Decent Work, Industrial Peace and Opportunity for All.*”

**xix. There are no existing arrangements that guarantee employment of prisoners who have received vocational training upon their release.**

The Ministry of Labour does not guarantee employment of any job-seeker including prisoners who have received vocational training upon their release. The Ministry's role is to assist all job-seekers by facilitating links to employers who are seeking to fill vacancies. It is also responsible for the administration of the On-the-Job Training Programme which seeks to promote training and experience in the world of work for persons 16-35 years old.

**Recommendations: Pages 53-55**

**J. The MNS and MOLSED should conduct consultations with the relevant stakeholders (inclusive of reformed ex-prisoners involved with prisoner re-integration) to develop and implement a State certified Skills Register for ex-offenders. This register can be made accessible to potential employers and if feasible, the public.**

The Ministry of Labour continues to be willing to engage in discussions with all relevant stakeholders in addressing the needs of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. In this regard, the Ministry supports the recommendation to collaborate with the Ministry of National Security to conduct consultations on the matter of a State certified Skills Register for ex-offenders.

The development of a State certified Skills Register for ex-offenders can be a useful tool in identifying the skills that exist in the population of ex-prisoners and assist in directing qualified persons to sectors where their skills are sought. This can potentially increase the probability of an ex-prisoner gaining employment.

Despite the potential benefits of such a register, the Government must be mindful of the security and management of the information contained therein. There is a possibility that the register developed to assist in the employment of ex-prisoners, can be used to malign those same individuals. There may, therefore, be a need to integrate this skills register into a National Skills Register to prevent discrimination. Consideration must also be given to the potential liability that may be borne by the State in referring ex-prisoners to employers in the event of any incidents.

The Ministry of Labour therefore reiterates the need for this matter to be carefully considered through meaningful social dialogue in order to develop a comprehensive way forward.