

**Remarks by  
Hon Robert Montague, Minister of National Security  
at Launch of  
WE TRANSFORM Youth Empowerment and Reintegration  
Programme**

**“Save a Child, Change a Nation”**

- [Salutations]
  
- It is my pleasure to be here with you today to celebrate the launch of the **WE TRANSFORM Youth Empowerment and Reintegration Programme**, which reflects our commitment to the rehabilitation of juveniles who have gone astray. I want to congratulate all the persons involved in moving this programme from a mere concept, to implementation.
  
- WE TRANSFORM is being implemented under the theme “**Save a Child, Change a Nation**” and targets some 242 children ages twelve to seventeen years, who are on remand or serving a sentence within the four juvenile centres operated by the Department of Correctional Services.
  
- This programme is one of the out-of-the-box strategies which we know will contribute to the reduction in youth offending/reoffending and by extension crime and violence within our society. It is anticipated that participants will be able to build their self esteem and establish a sense of purpose, belonging and hope and make them productive members of our society by equipping them with the requisite skill sets to make a contribution upon their release.

- The truth is, in our society, as in any society, we do have young people who have run-ins with the law. But, offenders confined in correctional institutions are confronted by a range of challenges that tend to become obstacles to a crime-free lifestyle.
- Some of these challenges are a result of past experiences and others are more directly associated with the consequences of incarceration and the difficult transition back to the community.
- Several of these young offenders also have a history of social marginalization, physical or emotional abuse, and involvement in a criminal lifestyle and gangs that began at an early age. Many are challenged by skills deficits that make it difficult for them to compete and succeed in the community: poor inter-personal skills, low levels of formal education,
- My Ministry believes that each of these youth deserve a second chance. And we are committed to helping young offenders get back on the right side of the law and remain so.
- This programme falls squarely within the Ministry's **5 pillar crime strategy** which speaks to **Reducing Reoffending** as the fifth crucial pillar, and aims at improving community reintegration for offenders .
- If we are honest with ourselves, we will realize that even from an enlightened self-interest perspective, since most of our inmates will be released within three years, it certainly makes no sense to dehumanize these young men, for that period of time...before releasing them back into society. We have to show those in conflict with the law that there are alternatives to a life of criminality. The foremost aim is therefore to reform and rehabilitate offenders and so reduce the risks of re-offending.

- So the We TRANSFORM is being implemented in two phases, with phase one to start immediately and will include youth engaged in innovative training in academics, vocational education, and employability and life skills; a Mentorship and Internship/Job Placement an Annual Competition and Exposition where youth can showcase and publicize their talents and a segment on healthy lifestyle where the youth offenders will be engaged in life skills training in substance abuse, reproductive health and other health related matters..
- A rehabilitation and reintegration programme is not something the Ministry or the youth can do on our own. When we work with young offenders, we are guided by the principle that rehabilitation should involve the family and the community.
- The programme seeks to create public awareness and engender wide scale societal participation and support in the rehabilitation and reintegration process and this is why the second phase of the programme will involve Parent Engagement and Training to include parenting workshops as well as Staff Capacity Building, training and recognition.
- I am pleased to see that directly after the launch there will be a Competition & Exposition on July 20 and Mentorship Days for Boys and Girls in November to include a Football tournament for the boys and a pageant for the girls.
- It is becoming increasingly clear that successful interventions are those which begin while the offender is confined in the correctional institution and continue throughout the his or her transition to, and stabilization in, the community; as well as those that offer assistance in an integrated and comprehensive manner and address the many inter-related challenges faced by offenders. This is why we place such hope in this programme.

- Sweden has reached the stage where they are closing prisons and substantially reducing their prison population. According to Nils Oberg, Director-General of Sweden's Prison and Probation Service, "*The role of the prison service is not to punish. The punishment is the prison sentence: they have been deprived of their freedom. The punishment is that they are with us*" Of course Swedish prisoner numbers have fallen from over 5,800 to 4,500 out of a population of 9.5 million, and last year four of the country's 56 prisons were closed. This has been attributed to their effective rehabilitation programmes. This is what we ought to aspire to.
- The truth is we can punish criminals all we like.....we can punish young offenders all we like.....but if we don't tackle the causes of crime we'll never have a safer society. Ultimately it's not the government alone which is going to stop crime. It is everybody...every law-abiding, well-thinking person in this country. That is why we need a whole of society approach to encourage good behaviour and reward it and welcome those who run afoul of the law. The fact is, custody should represent an opportunity for changing lives for the better.
- The success of the WE TRANSFORM programme will therefore depend on the involvement of a broad cross-section of partners with a commitment to building a safer society and provides a unique platform for purposeful partnership between the Government and external stakeholders....private sector, churches, police, justice sector, civil society, community members. Each group will have a significant role to play in shaping our young people to a positive future for Jamaica.