

BAHAMAS

Statement

by

Senator the Honourable Geneva Rutherford
Vice President of the Senate

at the
Second World Assembly on Ageing

Madrid, Spain
8th April 2002

Mr./Madam President, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mr./Madam President, May I take this opportunity to congratulate you and the other members of the Bureau on your election to guide the work of this august assembly. My Government has every confidence in your leadership.

It is indeed my pleasure and privilege to address the Second World Assembly on Ageing on behalf of, the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. I bring you greetings from the Governor General, the Prime Minister and all of the people of our Commonwealth. We are delighted to be numbered among the nations present at this assembly and we are committed to building a society for all ages, one in-which older persons lead lives of grace, dignity and sufficiency. The convening of this assembly is very timely, as it seeks to build upon previous commitments and create a blueprint for future international action to ensure the well being of all older persons.

Mr./Madam President,

The Bahamas is a small developing archipelagic nation, consisting of some 700 islands and cays extending over 80,000 sq. miles in the Atlantic Ocean. The 2000 Census of Population pegged the population of The Bahamas at just under three hundred and five thousand (305,000). Approximately seventy percent (70%) of our people reside in the capital city of Nassau, which is located on the Island of New Providence. The remaining thirty percent (30%) reside on one of the other twenty-one (21) inhabited Family Islands. The archipelagic

make up of the country presents significant challenges for the provision of services; however, the Government is committed to the provision of essential services to all citizens regardless of location.

Mr./Madam President,

In addition to being a small nation, The Bahamas is also a young nation. Presently some 29.4% of our population is under fifteen years while our population aged 60 years and over is just under eight percent. It is projected however that by the year 2025, the sixty years and older group will increase to over 17.6% of the population.

Adequate health care is accessible to and affordable for all and today we are a healthier Bahamas which is evident from the life expectancy rates which are currently 70.7 years and 77.3 years for males and females respectively.

While we will continue to be a youthful nation in the immediate future, with a steadily growing number of older persons, there is a need to focus attention on both ends of the spectrum as they pertain to the life cycle. We are in a unique position to now develop policies and programmes for addressing issues of concern to older persons while this segment of our population is still relatively small.

Mr./Madam President,

In 1999, The Commonwealth of The Bahamas joined other nations throughout the world in the celebration of the International Year on Older Persons. A distinguished cross section of persons from both public and private sector organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations formed the National Council to coordinate and implement the activities for the year.

A most significant outcome was the Preparation of a National Policy for Older Persons in 2000, the first for The Bahamas. This report is now widely accepted as the blueprint for addressing issues of concern to our older persons. This policy quite naturally takes into account the International Plan on Ageing adopted by the First World Assembly on Ageing in 1982.

We acknowledge that the implementation of this plan calls for specific action over a sustained period and, while much still remains to be done, we are nonetheless pleased with the progress made to date within the context of our limited resources and I wish in particular to speak to some of these.

There is universal access to health care for all persons 60 years and over and all government clinics provide medications free of charge to persons over the age of sixty-five. Several private pharmacies provide senior discounts on medications. Other public health services available to older persons include home health care provided through District Nursing Services, Gerontology Clinics and the Geriatric Hospital, which provides care for older persons who are too ill to be cared for at home or whose relatives are unable to afford adequate medical home care.

In 2000, The Ministry of Health implemented a five-year national plan to address the health

of the nation, which includes a section designed to achieve a healthy ageing population. An integral part of this plan is a national education and awareness programme on healthy ageing, targeting individuals 40 years and older and, by 2003, the inclusion of a weekly geriatric community clinic in all polyclinics in New Providence and Grand Bahama, the two islands where the bulk of our population reside.

Income security and employment are two major concerns of older persons. Under the National Insurance Act of 1972, a retirement benefit is awarded to all insured persons of 65 years who have retired from gainful employment. Amendments to the Regulations made in 1984 also made provisions for an insured person to retire early between the ages of sixty and sixty-four years and receive a retirement benefit at a reduced rate of 75% of the total benefit.

In January 1999, all benefits and assistance under the National Insurance Board Scheme were increased including contributory pensions. The non-contributory old-age pension, which is provided for those persons who do not qualify for the contributory pension because of insufficient contributions to the Scheme was increased in January 1999 and again in July 2001.

In January 2002, the Government amended the legislation that mandated the retirement of public officers at the age of sixty, and such persons may now, if they so desire, continue in their employment to age sixty-five. The government recognized the tremendous storehouse of knowledge of the vast number of competent, dedicated public officers and was of the view that the retention of their services would be of tremendous benefit to the nation while allowing such persons to continue enjoying security of employment and all of the benefits this permits.

In the not too distant past, older persons who were unable to maintain independent living were readily and willingly cared for within the family setting however, for a variety of reasons, this is no longer the case in many instances, hence housing needs, particularly of the indigent elderly, have become a matter of concern.

In an effort to meet this need, both the public and private sectors have within the past ten years established a variety of residential care facilities for older persons including independent and assisted living facilities. The proliferation of privately operated facilities, and the quality of care provided by some of these, have resulted in the Government moving to enact legislation to Regulate Residential Care Facilities to ensure that they are operated by suitably qualified persons and meet basic standards to ensure the well-being of residents. I am pleased to advise that this legislation has been drafted and approved and is now ready for presentation to Parliament.

While the Government has the primary responsibility for the provision of services for its people, a number of partnerships have been forged within the past five years, with non-governmental organizations, particularly religious institutions, for the provision of services for older persons. We are particularly enthused with the response to the concept of intergenerational Centres. These Centres, located in residential communities in New Providence, constructed by the Government and operated by churches, combine residential care for older persons with day care services for infants and toddlers. The positive interaction

between the two groups and the surrounding community clearly indicates that this concept is a workable one worthy of replicating.

Mr./Madam President,

I am pleased to advise that a conscious decision was taken at the close of the International Year of Older Persons to retain the National Council. This Council, which is attached to the Ministry of Housing & Social Development, is co-chaired by two distinguished older persons and has become a most vocal advocate for older persons. Indeed, a Council representative is included in our delegation to this Assembly.

Mr./Madam President,

It is my Government's intention to help all of our citizens to lead safe, healthy, happy and meaningful lives. All efforts will be made to ensure that The Bahamas is better prepared and better positioned to meet the challenges which the coming years will bring for our growing older population.

In conclusion, I wish to commend the organizers of this assembly and the Government of Spain for the excellent arrangements and the courtesies extended.

Thank you.