

JUSTICE MINISTRY COMMITS TO FRESH START PROGRAMME

The Ministry of Justice, in keeping with its commitment to play an active role in the Fresh Start Programme, has undertaken to step up human rights training for court staff, and seek to have plea bargaining introduced into the criminal justice system at the earliest possible date.

These strategies were outlined by the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Senator the Hon. Dorothy C. Lightbourne, to the Rev. Al Miller, who sits on the steering committee of the Fresh Start Programme, during a call on Minister Lightbourne and the permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Justice last Tuesday (May 27). The Fresh Start Programme, which is intended to consolidate the various social intervention and community development programmes in government and civil society, was announced by the Honourable Prime Minister on May 14 at Jamaica House.

The Justice Minister told Rev Miller that she would also explore the possibility of introducing the concept of 'bound over to keep the peace', a legal practice which allows the courts to order the parties in the dispute, especially of the same community and settle their differences amicably between themselves, in which case the matter would not be tried. Failure to do so then they return to court for the trial.

The establishment of Community Justice Tribunals is also to be rolled out, as training of Justices of the Peace and other community leaders is to commence shortly. Research is currently underway to determine the amendments to legislation that will be necessary.

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Minister Lightbourne also outlined the current initiative being taken by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions to examine old cases that cannot proceed in the courts, including those where there is a lack of evidence and bring the matter to an end. These matters, she stressed, would be on the basis of lack of evidence and/or a lack of witnesses.

The Justice Minister also spoke about the project to rehabilitate and furnish outstations, as they would be useful in the thrust for backlog reduction. She reiterated the reduction strategies to Rev. Miller which include expanding the number of courtrooms designated for criminal trials at the Supreme Court, and the commensurate relocation of civil matters to an alternate location; the planned increase in the number of High Court Judges, Masters and Resident Magistrates.

Other strategies include the proposed use of the Horizon Remand Centre to hear bail applications for both the Supreme Court and Corporate Area Criminal Resident Magistrates Court; the move to have "old cases" in the Civil Division of the Supreme Court be acted on or struck out, as provided for under the Civil Procedures Rules, 2002; and the streamlining of the jury selection process.

Rev. Miller asked the Justice Ministry to do all within its powers to help curb the trend of families of detainees from the inner-city frequently paying out sizeable amounts of money for legal services, only for it to be later declared that there is no clear case against the detainees. This practice, Rev. Miller said, was "institutionalising poverty" in the country.

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Rev. Miller told Minister Lightbourne that the Fresh Start programme was interested in a partnership approach and, as such, would give its support to public education efforts to change the way the people of Jamaica viewed the justice system. Further assistance would come by way of helping with accessing existing facilities, e. g. church halls and communities for the establishment of the Community Justice Tribunal, a key strategy in the Justice Transformation Programme.

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