



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
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WORK MATTERS

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COLUMN

THE ELDERS, OLD AGED PENSION AND FRIENDLY SOCIETY

For a half-century, the elderly has been increasing exponentially in Trinidad and Tobago. The Trinidad and Tobago government has in place social services programs to assist the 65-years and older population in their plight of economic vulnerability. Most elderly people have to depend on their children, and in some cases grandchildren, to assist them to make ends meet and maintain their livelihoods. This has phenomenon has been exacerbated in recent times with the advent of digitalization.

Today, especially among the working-class elderly, the stresses of economic insecurity are ever present, and increasing at an unprecedented rate. Along with this situation is the realities of dealing with issues related to health, such as heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension.

As such, one can therefore appreciate the importance of health care services to the chronic health needs of the elderly in our society. The Trinidad and Tobago government with the collaboration of non-government agencies have in place a rigorous program to assist the elderly, such as old aged pension program. Trinidad and Tobago's pension system is based on an income that guaranteed to the retired population, and contributes to the achievement of the social protection floor for older persons in our society. Old-age pensions follow a rights-based approach and are included in national laws, additionally the intention was for free universal healthcare access to be available to the population, and as one can imagine, this facility is constantly utilized by elderly members of our population.

To be sure, additional synergies between contributory and non-contributory schemes could improve efficiency and rationalize the use of resources, especially in times of emergency, such as has been presented by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

One also has to be cognizant of the fact that fiscal constraints may affect the level of protection provided. It is also important to note that consideration has to be made to ensure that the most vulnerable

have access to the national safety net. This would include the extension of the coverage of contributory old-age pensions to workers in the informal economy; as well as explore the diversification of financing sources to ensure long-term sustainability.

The vulnerability of the elderly in the public domain continues to persist, and indeed one may say, even increases daily, as they have to contend with a stagnant pension while the prices of food products, utilities and services increase at a regular pace. To add to the malady, it is clear that the elderly has become special targets for criminals in our country.

It is also evident that there has been a decline of the Friendly Societies Movement in Trinidad and Tobago. This movement arose as early as the pre-Emancipation 1830s, wherever sufficiently large concentrations of 'free' Blacks were found. The lodge is the basic unit of the friendly society and refers to a support group of persons who met regularly in a specific location and agreed to follow certain procedures. The Order describes an aggregation of lodges that have shared beliefs and procedures which are, however, distinct from those identifying beliefs and procedures of another Order. Friendly Societies trumpeted fraternity – the philosophy of the primacy of brotherhood/sisterhood as a basic tenet. Thus, Friendly Societies improve the lives of the members and promote harmonious interaction between all sectors of humanity by codifying and managing 'individual and mass behavior'. It is the belief of this author, that such movements and organizations can help improve the plight of the elderly as we seek to find better more efficient ways to offer them protection and higher standards of living on this trying times.

I believe that a strategic revitalization of the Friendly Societies Movement is critical in these times of economic uncertainty for our vulnerable groups. A social solidarity awakening within the ranks and files of the Labour Movements, the formal and informal economic businesses must be solidified in the aim of addressing

the needs of the elderly and provide the necessary support to guarantee not only their economic survival, but also avenues of release from the stresses of daily life.

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