

HURST REPORTS ON CABINET OF WEDNESDAY February 3 2021

The Cabinet of Antigua and Barbuda met for many hours today, both face-to-face and virtually; seven members met in the Cabinet Room and six joined virtually.

1. The Gaston Browne-led Cabinet instituted a policy of inviting experts and other government officials to its weekly meetings, in order to enhance decision-making. Today, the Cabinet invited nine officials to its meeting in order to properly examine the issue of closure of schools. Following that meeting, the Cabinet held a separate meeting with several of the medical officials on additional measures which could possibly be taken to halt the spread of the Covid-19 disease, beyond the learning institutions.

i. **The Chief Medical Officer, the Director of Education, the Head of the Teachers Union, the Principal of the Princess Margaret School, the Consultant Pathologist/ Head of the Laboratory at the Mount St. John Medical Center, the Representative of Private Schools, the Nurse/Epidemiologist, the Epidemiologist/Statistician and one other official were all invited to Cabinet to address the management of increased daily infections from Covid-19.** Very intense and informed discussions followed, concerning the conditions and decisions which could lead to a reduction of the probability of the spread of the disease in schools.

a. The panel examined the impact which closure of schools would have on single-parent households, on families, on the teachers, the cleaning staff, the communities in which the students live, and other unintended consequences of closure. Then, a decision was rendered. **The Cabinet decided to close all schools for a two-week period commencing tomorrow Thursday, February 4, 2021, until Monday, February 22, 2021** when classes are likely to resume.

b. **While the school compounds are to be closed, exceptions for entry will be made for teachers (and administrators) who have a need for use of the school's devices and Internet services, in order to conduct on-line learning. Exceptions will also be granted to students** who may have the need to complete SBAs and do not have the required infrastructure at their homes, in order to complete those necessary assignments. The Cabinet reminded the education officials that customs duties and ABST have been waived on the importation of computers and required devices for educational purposes. More than 5,000 laptops have been ordered by the state and will arrive as soon as supplies become available.

ii. Following the departure of the Ministry of Education officials, **a separate meeting was held with the medical team/officials who examined further methods to reduce the likelihood of increased infections across Antigua and Barbuda. A Press Statement was issued by the Cabinet immediately following, listing the eight new decisions rendered.** (A copy is attached).

a. **The existing curfew hours remain the same (8:00 pm to 5:00 am with a few exceptions), and the behaviours that reduce the probability of infections are still lawfully required.** Cabinet encouraged all citizens and residents to continue to wear their masks and to do so whenever they venture out of their safe homes and into the public space; to continue to practice social-distancing; and to continue to sanitize hands and surfaces regularly in order to limit the spread of the disease.

b. **The officials surmise that the increase in infections grew out of laxity, especially during the Christmas and New Year holidays, when many engaged in reckless**

abandon. There was clear evidence to support the claim that deliberate gatherings, and not just casual interaction only, is primarily responsible for the rise in infections. Cabinet reminds that no-one is invincible and that each of us in the population is vulnerable to Covid-19, even after vaccines are administered.

c. The Cabinet is especially concerned with infections at institutions where many are housed. Her Majesty's Prison is of special concern since the inmates are under the charge of the state; so too are the residents of the Fiennes Institute and the Clarevue Hospital. **The Cabinet noted that all 17 beds at the Infectious Disease Center (IDC) at the refurbished Margetson Ward, of the old Holberton Hospital, are now taken** as patients are moved from the MSJMC to this IDC. The dashboard of the previous night indicates that 63 active cases of Covid-19 are being treated in Antigua and Barbuda.

d. The Cabinet also decided that those persons who would normally be detained for curfew violations are to be issued tickets rather than be confined to small spaces at the Police Stations. Visitations at the prison are discontinued during the remaining period of the declared emergency, or until February 19, 2021, in order to limit the transfer of the virus to vulnerable inmates. Visitation at MSJMC have been severely restricted. At the ABDF Camps, restrictions have also been instituted. The Cabinet noted the closure of one branch of a local bank. Other businesses have been compelled to restrict contact between customers and employees. Those travelers arriving at the V.C. Bird International Airport are compelled to take taxicabs to their destinations, driven by trained taxi-drivers; picking up by family and friends at the airport cannot be allowed at this time.

e. The number of tourists visiting Antigua has slowed to a trickle as the source markets institute measures to curb the importation of Covid-19 infections from those returning from outside of their borders. The impact on government revenues is severe, as fewer guests check into hotels. The Cabinet agreed that widespread vaccination in the USA, the UK, Europe and Canada are the only means to arrest further decline in travel. All persons arriving in Antigua are required to have a Covid--negative certificate which is to be displayed to the Health Officials upon arrival. Those citizens of Antigua and Barbuda who have dual nationality are not exempt from the requirement to have a valid PCR Negative Test Certificate. Revenues at the airport have fallen as the number of arriving tourists has also declined.

f. Antigua and Barbuda is likely to begin receiving a supply of vaccines within weeks, although the PAHO/WHO Covax Program cannot give a specific date for the delivery of 20,000 doses for which payment has already been made. Assistance from several states is being sought by the Antigua and Barbuda Government, and promises of assistance have been given.

g. The Cricket Super-50 games will take place as planned; 137 players and officials are expected to begin arriving Antigua within days. They have been all tested and are to be isolated in a bubble during their stay. No spectators are to be allowed into the Sir Viv Richards Stadium or the Coolidge Cricket Field during the games. The economy of Antigua and Barbuda is not to be closed, but many defensive measures are to be instituted to stop the spread of the disease.

h. The message of compliance with the protocols is intended to reach every adult and youth throughout the state in order to achieve very low numbers of infection,

as in the ten months preceding. Breaking the train of transmission remains the ultimate goal. The unwarranted criticism by several known personalities who blasted the administration when the numbers were very low, as a result of the policies promulgated, cannot now be heard, the Cabinet remarked.

2. The Minister responsible for the Antigua and Barbuda Transport Board (ABTB) reported that an agreement has been made with the Buses Associations, ending the industrial action taken by those owners/drivers of the buses. The inconvenience caused by the withholding of the service is regrettable, the Cabinet noted, since every good faith effort had been made to forestall such an action.

3. The Minister with responsibility for APUA urged customers to make payments to the Utilities Authority in order to prevent disconnection of services. The APUA encourages all customers with arrears to make arrangements for the payment of accumulated debt to the Authority.

4. The St. John's Rural South Representative reported that a daily soup kitchen is to begin operation in the constituency shortly. The elected representative is of the view that unemployed men and women, and those who have encountered hardship as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in the constituency, are to be helped along through charitable provisions.

5. The Official Funeral for former Senator Robin Bascus takes place at the Ebenezer Methodist Church on Thursday, February 4, 2021, commencing at 10:00 am. Although exceptions for state and official funerals have been included in the Emergency Regulations, the Cabinet presence will be severely limited. The funeral will be broadcast live on ABS-TV for those who wish to participate virtually.