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Jamaicans Encouraged to Be Compassionate Toward Mentally Ill Persons

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JAMAICA — Jamaican Government Senator, Dr. Sapphire Longmore, is encouraging Jamaicans to be more compassionate towards mentally ill persons, by trying to help them rather than mistreating or shunning, the government has announced.

“Mental health and the care of the mental capacity of our people are paramount,” she said during her contribution to the State of the Nation Debate in the Senate on Thursday (February 6).

Emphasizing that “there is no good health without good mental health,” Dr. Longmore, who is a psychiatrist, related her recent encounters with two mentally challenged individuals.

Against the backdrop of a pictorial display, she recounted seeing an individual, in what she described as a “confused state”, wandering in Hope Pastures, St. Andrew.

Dr. Longmore said that with the help of a psychiatric aide, she took the person to the Bellevue Hospital in Kingston for treatment.

The senator said she also assisted another person in Norbrook, St. Andrew, who she was told was tied to a fence along the roadside by his father. In interacting with her, the man revealed that “mi sick inna mi head, and mi a get off”.

Dr. Longmore said his father, with whom she spoke, explained that his son had been trying to attack family members with a machete, and was threatening his mother, hence the decision to restrain him in the manner in which he was found.

The senator said, however, that she advised him that his response was not the appropriate approach to handling the situation, and redirected him accordingly.

“This is the image we usually have of [someone with] mental illness. We see it every day and we just accept it; and the only time [that person] comes on our radar, is if [he or she] aggressively assaults someone,” she added.

Dr. Longmore said the unfortunate reality is that persons living with mental illnesses are often the victims, rather than the perpetrators of violence.

She noted that these and other situations highlight the need to bolster mental healthcare delivery by, among other things, providing the adequate requisite resources.

Dr. Longmore noted that many persons are diagnosed with and suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which are mental health issues that are pervasive in the society, adding there is no specific programme targeting these.

She, therefore, suggested the implementation of strategic plans for mental health which were initially presented in 1997, and came up again in 2006.

These propose an increase in the number of community health aides and mental health officers.

“It could make a world of difference in the dynamics within our communities [and] our families if we know that there is a community health aide, and there is a mental health officer who [can assist with] issues of crisis management and conflict resolution. The plans have been here for decades... we need to revise them [and] put them into effect,” Dr. Longmore said.