



26 Haining Road, Kingston 5  
www.hearthechildrencryja.com  
Tel: 876-929-0431, 876-294-8123-5, 876-822-0483  
email: hearthechildrencry@yahoo.com

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**NEW YEAR'S MESSAGE FROM HEAR THE CHILDREN'S CRY:**

**A MESSAGE OF HOPE AND HELP FOR OUR CHILDREN;**

**CALL FOR COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR CHILD WELFARE**

- *Parents, children must not give up despite pandemic related fears, chaos*
- *Prime Minister urged to produce Comprehensive National Plan of Action for Child Welfare*
- *Deepening social crisis involving Jamaican children*
- *Youngsters on the streets, teens dropping out, hustling, gambling, living dangerously*

Hear The Children's Cry is sending a message of Hope, Love and Support for the children of Jamaica, and for all parents and guardians. As the organization's Founder, Children's Advocate Betty Ann Blaine emphasizes,

“We are a strong and resilient people, let us not lose hope in the face of this pandemic, neither let us be confused by the chaos which surrounds so much of the responses to its effects. As parents together, let us be clear about the love for our children, and our commitment to their safety and welfare. Let us support one another within our families and within our communities. And to all Jamaican children, be strong in the love we have for you; be strong when things are not going so well, and reach out for help. Never give up on your right to be cared for, to get a good education, and to be free from abuse and harm.”

Mrs Blaine continues,

“While we call on parents, communities and children not to lose hope, and we commit Hear The Children's Cry to continuing our support for children and families, we also declare the following:

Hear The Children's Cry calls on Prime Minister Andrew Holness to use the professional and material resources at the country's disposal to formulate a Comprehensive, National Plan of Action – an achievable dynamic Plan to deal with the worsening chaos and negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the nation's children. This needs to address not only health, but education, the emotional wellbeing of the children and the social and financial welfare of families.

## **DEEPENING SOCIAL CRISIS**

“Hear The Children's Cry is calling for this Comprehensive National Plan of Action as a matter of urgency in light of the deepening social crisis involving Jamaican children. Over the last two years our children, in every parish, have been very negatively affected by the pandemic and the related measures to contain its spread. Their education has been interrupted and in many cases curtailed; their safety has been cruelly compromised as child abusers have had almost unlimited access to innocent victims; their emotional state has suffered and their overall wellbeing greatly diminished.

“We are concerned about what has happened to children over the past two years, both what we DO know, and what we DON'T know. And what is of even greater concern is that we are heading into a new year with another COVID-19 variant spreading like wild fire and we don't know what is going to happen.

“Even though the country and the world community have been battling medical, logistical and economic crises with this pandemic, we cannot overlook the critical needs of the youngest victims. And it is vital that we get accurate information as to the nature and extent of the crisis as it relates specifically to children.

“We at Hear The Children's Cry have seen a significant increase in the calls coming in to us for assistance, mostly for material help for children and families. We are also concerned about other types of reports, in the media and otherwise, involving children.

“In May of 2020, Dr. Curtis Pryce of the Paediatric Association of Jamaica reported a 70 per cent increase in cases of child sex abuse in Jamaica since the COVID-19 pandemic – the first case of the virus in Jamaica was reported in March of that year. The following month a report out

of Clarendon revealed an increase in sexual abuse among children as young as two years old due to the COVID-19 lockdown, with some of the cases considered “very vicious”. Dr Bradley Edwards, senior medical officer at the May Pen Hospital, expressed concern about the growing number of minors believed to have been raped or sexually molested during the stay-at-home measures implemented to curb the spread of the virus.

“It is heartbreaking, but not surprising that some children have been taking their own lives, and others have been threatening to do so, in what suicide expert Dr. Donovan Thomas of Choose Life International believes is a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their lives.

“This year, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information reported that approximately 120,000 Jamaican children had been disengaged from learning since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Schools had had little or no regular contact with these students, who represent almost 25 per cent of the enrolment in public primary and secondary schools.

“Meanwhile, word from community leaders who work with Hear The Children’s Cry is extremely concerning. We are being told that many teenagers, far from keeping up with school work online (few have data access or can afford the necessary devices) have decided that they are finished with school. It is reported that they are hustling, seeking to earn money in whatever way possible, They are vending, working in wholesale shops and on construction sites, among other income-earning activities. Many young girls can be seen on the streets pregnant or with young babies. Gambling and drug use are said to be rampant among these youngsters.”

Mrs Blaine stresses,

“Our children are facing a worsening crisis that will bring unthinkable consequences to our country if not addressed with speed and with effective, comprehensive measures. We call upon the Prime Minister to act now to save Jamaica’s next generation before it is too late.”

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**CONTACT:** Betty Ann Blaine, Founder (876) 294-8125; (876) 929-0431

[bab2609@yahoo.com](mailto:bab2609@yahoo.com)