

Statement to House of Parliament

Re: Swim Free Programme

By: Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly, Minister for Education

Date: 9th June, 2022

Mr. Speaker,

I rise to offer a statement about an extremely important programme that can help save the lives of our children.

Mr. Speaker, Swim Free is a public and private partnership programme that is fully endorsed by the Caucus and Cabinet and supported by three prominent Caymanian families; the Flowers, Fosters and Mr. Don Seymour's.

Swim Free is a curriculum-based programme that mandates life-saving water skills for all children in Reception through Year 2 in the Cayman Islands Government education system.

Mr. Speaker, this programme is unique in that it addresses the lack of access to public swimming facilities for students in our Government primary schools.

We support this programme, Mr. Speaker, because there are statistical and critical assumptions that drive our decision.

Mr. Speaker, drowning is a leading cause of accidental death for children younger than five years old and it is proven that most drownings occur within a short distance of 10 feet of safety.

It has also been proven that organised swim lessons reduce the likelihood of a child drowning by 88 percent.

Mr. Speaker, it is most unfortunate that Government primary schools are unable to offer comprehensive swimming instruction as part of the Reception to Year 2 curriculum because of logistics and limited facilities, especially in the outer districts.

As I said before Mr. Speaker, this programme is a public and private partnership between the Government and the Cayman Islands YMCA with initial financial backing by the Flowers Sea Swim Group and other private sponsors.

A portable pool would be provided and transported by trailer to each government school campus for one month. The pool, which is defined as an Independent Swimming Apparatus or ISA, is a state-of-the art mobile swimming pool that is housed within a 40-

foot shipping container. It is customised built by a manufacturer in the United States and features temperature control, ultraviolet light filtration and self-cleaning pumps along with a retractable cover to prevent unauthorised access when not in use.

Mr. Speaker, the unit would be enclosed by safety rails with a maximum depth of four feet. Construction of the pool will take about six months from a deposit being provided.

Mr. Speaker, I will now outline the programme.

- For one month, each Government primary school will have the ISA on campus to be used during scheduled physical education lessons.
- Instruction will be provided by a qualified learn-to-swim coach.
- It is proposed that there will be a focused approach of eight to nine lessons for every Reception through Year 2 student.

- The goal will be to teach the children to swim to 10 feet because, as said earlier, most drownings happen within 10 feet from the edge of a pool, canal, dock or capsized vessel.
- Initial dryland instruction will focus on comfort, familiarisation, respect for and balance in the water.

Mr. Speaker, the curriculum will be a collaboration between the Department of Education Services and Swim Free advisors, which includes a former Cayman Islands National Swim Coach who has worked with the United States Olympic Team.

This programme has been adapted from the successful K-Swim early childhood programme in the United States.

Mr. Speaker, we are blessed in that the Swim Free advisors will donate their time and expertise free of charge. They are also offering to assist the Department of Education Services staff with printed and online materials or live assembly presentations for parents, teachers and students to familiarize them with the programme and ensure a smooth implementation. For that, Mr. Speaker, I am truly grateful.

Fortunately, Mr. Speaker, the first round of private funding has been secured with enough money pledged to order the pool and facilitate the programme for one year. Because it is a new initiative, Government had not budgeted for the programme; however, there does need to be adequate buy-in from both sides.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, it is proposed that when a new budget is drafted for 2024, the non-staff recurring costs estimated at \$30,000 a year will be transferred to the Government.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that is a small price to pay for the lives of our children.

By that time the estimated figures for maintenance, teaching tools and shipping to Cayman Brac would be firmly established. The coaching salary costs will remain with Swim Free, subject to future negotiations with the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Swim Free stakeholders will continue to be involved in an advisory capacity and provide discretionary financial support as needed to maintain the standards or advance the programme.

Mr. Speaker, in closing I would say that this is a fantastic programme that will help build resiliency and help build confidence in our young people and I am sure in time, it can be extended to teach adults who are very afraid of water because they can't swim.

At the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, this is a programme that can help save lives as well; both of those who are taught to swim as well as those that they may be able to help who may get themselves in difficulties.

We've all grown up with different examples of people perishing in the water, Mr. Speaker. I firmly believe that this programme will be of great benefit to our children and their families and will help save the lives of precious souls.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.