



MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

TO THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

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MINISTER OF HEALTH

“32 MONTHS AGO”

2 December 2022

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members, 32 months ago a State of Emergency was put in place in Bermuda on 1 April 2020. This followed the arrival in Bermuda of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 on 18 March 2022. The Government deemed it necessary to stop commercial flights to the island on 20 March, and a few days earlier, the US CDC had issued a “No Sail Order” which put an end to cruise sailings.

In Bermuda the Government took immediate steps to ensure our health system – including the island’s only acute care hospital – would be capable of coping with the anticipated high levels of sick individuals and hospital admissions.

Our safety measures included 'stay at home' orders, remote learning and remote working, curfews, restrictions on group activities and border controls.

As all of us in this House know – and as I have previously stated – health systems around the world struggled with millions of severely ill patients often leading to particularly sad deaths, as family members could not spend precious last moments with loved ones suffering from COVID-19. Health systems were forced to withstand the pressure brought on by the original 'wild type' virus, and, also, by successive waves of variants such as Alpha, Beta, Delta and, most recently, Omicron.

Fortunately for us here in Bermuda, **Mr. Speaker**, it was only a year before vaccines such as Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca were approved for use.

From January 2021 until June 2022, the Ministry of Health, working with many public sector and private sector partners, operationalised a mass vaccination campaign using the Pfizer vaccine supplied free of charge by the UK Government.

Mr. Speaker, as the public health emergency is now at an end, I want to take some time to reflect on our 32-month journey.

Honourable Members and the public may not remember those first few months of the pandemic when the Government shifted into high gear immediately.

For the Ministry of Health it was a time of many unknowns but some things we did know: we needed personal protective equipment (PPE) and we needed reliable and swift testing.

Supplies were purchased on the basis of ensuring Bermuda was cared for as a whole, and procurement proceeded in that principle.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to testing, the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), located in Trinidad, was engaged for this important task but was limited to 20 tests per week, and the results were received in approximately five working days. So the Ministry engaged Helix Genetic and Scientific Solutions, under the directorship of Dr Desiree Spriggs, which produced results within 24-48 hours – a great feat at the time.

The Cabinet Office stood up the Molecular Diagnostics Lab and Bermuda established comprehensive community, traveller and student testing, supported by a contact tracing and case management programme. These proved to be the tools we needed to counteract the novel coronavirus until and while our mass vaccination campaign got underway.

Mr Speaker, back in April 2020, the Emergency Measures Organisation, including representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, all Quangos and non-profit organisations, met regularly at the Police Recreation Club to execute on the Government's plan to manage our way through the pandemic.

The Government was committed to keeping the public well informed and as such held regular live weekly press conferences.

Mr Speaker, you will recall that little was known about COVID-19 initially, so we exercised considerable caution.

In those early days, while the community stayed at home – except for ‘alphabet shopping’! – and got to grips with remote learning and remote working, I would like to remind everyone of all those workers who could not stay at home but, instead, continued to interact with the public.

Mr. Speaker, this included those working in healthcare; at grocery stores, gas stations and pharmacies; in services such as Corrections, the Police, the Regiment and waste collection and disposal; third sector workers; and public transportation operators.

As we opened to the outside world, I would add airport operations, Customs and Immigration staff to this list. We tested regularly and instituted the “Travellers’ First 14 Days” for residents and visitors alike, arriving L. F. Wade International Airport.

Mr. Speaker, with more movement in and around Bermuda, social activities began again, albeit in smaller groups. Restaurants spaced their tables apart and several spilled out onto the sidewalk and street – a great decision which endures to this day.

I know many in our community did their best to order take out regularly, so that we could support the waiters, chefs, pot washers and business owners feeling the reduction in dining out and catering. Similarly, event planners moved everything outdoors under tents – an option which we were lucky to have.

Mr. Speaker, one of the highlights during my tenure was the introduction of Covid vaccines. Our vaccination programme went tremendously well. Bermuda's Covid-19 vaccination programme surpassed the World Health Organisation's goal of 70 per cent immunization of a population ahead of the June 30, 2022 target.

We knew, based on the science, that the Coronavirus vaccine would be key to us living safely with COVID-19 as it reduces the severity of COVID19 if you get infected, and it reduces hospitalizations and deaths.

The Ministry of Health recognises that this pandemic would have been worse if not for the level of vaccination in the community. We know that vaccines work and have the data to prove it.

Mr. Speaker, you would remember that a lot of work went into our vaccination awareness programme. A hard push was implemented through our Close to Home mobile vaccination programme in neighbourhoods island wide. With a free minibus service, this programme ensured that transportation to a vaccination centre was not a barrier to getting the vaccine. **Mr Speaker,** the Close to Home Programme, which was superbly operationalized and managed by the Bermuda Health Council, was also an ideal opportunity to learn more for those people who wanted to hear about the COVID-19 vaccine from a trusted source. I am pleased and proud to say that 75.2% of our population is fully immunised against COVID-19.

There are lots of action the Government and, particularly, the Ministry of Health took to keep us all safe.

Mr. Speaker, we worked hard to -

- put protections in place for our vulnerable seniors in care homes,
- set up free testing centers throughout the island,
- establish a comprehensive community, traveller and student testing regime, supported by a massive contact tracing and case management programme,

- implement technological solutions with the resQwest application to assist in pandemic management and Go.Data for case investigation, contact follow-up, and visualisation of chains of transmission, and,
- we also stood up a Call Centre and Hotline to answer every question from “Is today my shopping day?” to “What are the Covid symptoms?” and “How can I get vaccinated?”

And we were not alone, **Mr. Speaker**.

The Ministry of National Security managed the quarantine hotel in the summer of 2021. The Ministry of Education first implemented remote learning and then managed the transition back to in-person classes.

The Ministry of Public Works introduced the Short Term Economic Stimulus Programme that was launched to address an urgent need to provide stimulus to the local economy.

Mr. Speaker, this initiative helped to retain and boost employment numbers in the wake of the economic downturn sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

And the Ministries of Finance and Economy and Labour provided for temporary tax relief for businesses affected by the economic impact of Covid as well as employees who faced a similar fate.

In fact, **Mr. Speaker**, the Government implemented the Unemployment Benefits Programme to assist those Bermudians who, through no fault of their own, found themselves without a job due to the pandemic.

The team of dedicated individuals at the Ministry of Finance worked tirelessly to provide benefits to persons on four occasions throughout the pandemic. This Government demonstrated its strong commitment to sustaining our people and our economy through these challenging times.

But **Mr. Speaker**, I must say, throughout it all, the Ministry of Health staff members have been stalwarts. Just true unwavering soldiers. Working day and night, weekends and holidays, to fight this highly contagious virus. Their conscientiousness and diligence was and is a bright light in the island's pandemic response.

Also, responding to the calls for help put out by the Ministry, there were numerous nurses, doctors, dentists, EMTs, pharmacists, volunteers, laboratory technologists, local and international businesses, hotels, non-profits and organisations such as the Caribbean Public Health Agency and Public Health England (now the UK Health & Safety Agency) who came together in this time of enormous community need.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot name just some people for fear of missing too many, so I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of these people for their persistent dedication, tremendous hard work, and unswerving commitment to keeping Bermuda safe.

Finally, **Mr. Speaker**, I would like to thank the Bermuda community. Safely navigating this ‘once in a lifetime’ pandemic would not have been possible without our collective decision to put the community first and ourselves second. Thank you.

The public health emergency has ended for Bermuda, but the global pandemic continues. The public is encouraged to continue to follow public health advice, as with all infectious diseases such as the flu, to minimise the chance of catching Covid and help protect family and friends. This includes by letting fresh air in when meeting indoors, wearing a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces where you come into contact with people you don’t normally meet, and washing your hands.

The Bermuda community has been incredibly resilient throughout this global pandemic, so please Bermuda, be careful and be safe, for yourself and our community, because after all, we are still our brothers’ keepers.

Thank you, **Mr Speaker**.