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April/May 2013

HEAR THE CHILDREN'S CRY PROVIDING DYNAMIC ADVOCACY,  
PRACTICAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES, YOUTH

Hear The Children's Cry is Jamaica's most vocal advocacy and support group, and is committed to the wellbeing and welfare of Jamaica's children. It is a voluntary organization operating with a very overextended but dedicated skeleton staff, and facing stiff financial challenges. Its vision is of a Jamaica in which all children are protected from physical, sexual, mental and spiritual abuse, by the promoting, preserving and defending of their wellbeing and wholesome family life, through Christ centred principles.

The organization was launched in 2002, in direct response to a heartbreaking and alarming complex of crises which continue to face Jamaican children. As Chairman, human resource development specialist Gillian Rowlands declares, "Children are the main casualties in our socio-economic failure and decline." Thousands of Jamaican youngsters continue to be the victims of violent crimes, to be traumatized by witnessing murder and other violent acts in their homes and communities. They continue to be abused in many homes, and to suffer from neglect, abandonment, homelessness and exploitation by criminals, from abuse by uncaring and/or uninformed care givers, and from injustices resulting from inadequate and often inept essential national services.

The particular atrocity which precipitated the establishment of Hear The Children's Cry by Founder child advocate Betty Ann Blaine and her associates was the shooting up of a children's birthday party in the violence prone community of Kingston's Greenwich Town. The innocent victims of hostilities between rival gangs, the young children were sprayed with bullets at what

should have been a joyful occasion. One child was killed and a number were wounded, one very seriously.

## DYNAMIC NETWORK OF PRACTICAL PROGRAMMES

Over the past 11 years Hear The Children's Cry has diversified to launch a network of related programmes providing dynamic practical support for children, families and youth, in addition to its relentless advocacy and public education. It has also staged a number of national events alerting Jamaicans to the atrocities being suffered by a large number of the country's children, sensitizing those working with youngsters to special needs such as those of youngsters at risk of human trafficking, and educating both children and parents about child rights and positive parenting.

Its programmes include ongoing Advocacy, islandwide Parenting Education and School Safety Outreaches; a Prevent A Drop Out Programme piloted for schools and endorsed by the Ministry of Education; a National Mini-Summit on Sexual Violence Against Children; Stakeholders Special Training for over 200 police officers, school guidance counselors and others serving children around the island, and the National Youth Help Project which combines environmental education with grooming youth for the world of work.

Hear The Children's Cry is also a strong advocate against injustices meted out to children by the Government itself. Its active networking among others serving children has therefore included joining human rights and other groups to protest vociferously the prevailing illegal practice of holding children in adult lock ups.

## ADDRESSING THE MISSING CHILDREN CRISIS

A major challenge in Jamaica today is the horrendous rate at which children continue to - disappear from their homes. With support from Jamaica Yellow Pages, Hear The Children's Cry launched its unique Missing Children's Support Programme in 2009. It provides counseling and practical support for the traumatized families of missing children, and for formerly missing children who have returned home, many having suffered terrible ordeals. The Programme also conducts research and analysis of the missing children phenomenon, working with the police and

the Ministry of Justice, issues daily updates to the media on youngsters who have disappeared, and focuses high profile advocacy work on this national crisis.

The same year that the Missing Children's Support Programme was launched, Hear The Children's Cry played a lead role in the case of missing 11 year old Ananda Dean, a protégé of the team. The organization recommended to the Government that it undertake a Rapid Response programme named in memory of Ananda, who was discovered murdered. The Government now operates the Ananda Alert, to assist in the recovery of missing children.

In addition to support from Jamaica Yellow Pages, main sponsor of the Missing Children's Support Programme, Hear The Children's Cry is grateful to a number of other supporters who have assisted its projects over the years. These include the Kiwanis Club, LASCO Group, RBTT Bank Jamaica; the British High Commission, the German Embassy, Canada Local Funding Initiative Project and the Environmental Foundation of Jamaica. The organization is also appreciative of the ongoing support of the Jamaican media.

The Missing Children's Support Programme is the only organization in Jamaica, public or private, providing support for families of missing children and practical outreaches specific to this crisis. According to Hear The Children's Acting Executive Director Maxine Taylor Cooper, 2,122 children were reported missing in 2011, and 2,059 last year. Between 2008 and 2012, a total of 1,200 of the children reported missing have not returned home.

Hear The Children's Cry Chairman Gillian Rowlands notes, "Many of our children are running away from abuse. Many find themselves in conflict with the law; this often leads to incarceration – even in cases where children are seeking care and protection from the State. Approximately 50% of the children in remand and correctional institutions are there for non-violent offences, many running away from mental and sexual abuse, or deemed 'uncontrollable' due to behavioural disorders. There are a number of reasons for the latter, including parental neglect, experience of violence, sexual molestation, beatings at home and punitive, poor conditions while under State care."

Mrs. Rowlands continues, “Some of these illegally incarcerated children have ended up with more serious criminal records after a long history of abuse, drug addiction, psychological trauma and exposure in adult correctional facilities to harsh conditions and hardened criminals. Some have been raped while in State care and many who sought care and protection, found only retribution, punishment, further victimization and even death.

#### NEED FOR URGENT ACTION

“When we take the time to reflect on these statistics,” Mrs. Rowlands points out, “it is not enough for us to feel disturbed or to acknowledge that our children, families, communities and State are in a crisis. Instead we must be moved to find a better way to care, protect and develop our children and we must act with urgency, along with strong advocacy, to help them. We must do so in the awareness that each child that is missing, victimized by the system, or marginalised by our society, is a valuable human being wasted or lost: each one is a promise unfulfilled and a life locked away, when he or she could have been lifted up.”

Hear The Children’s Cry continues to seek urgently needed support to establish an adequately staffed and equipped Research Unit to carry out investigative procedures regarding those children who remain missing year after year. There is also a critical need for a Mobile Counseling Unit to assist in counseling for children and families in deep rural districts in all 14 parishes.

#### PROPOSED ACTION PLAN

Hear the Children’s Cry has been advocating for some time for a vital national plan of action, which would address both the immediate crises facing Jamaican children, and a complex of underlying causes. As the organization’s Chairman puts it, “Let us stop the talk and start the solutions!” Hear The Children’s Cry, she declares, is calling on all Jamaicans to take immediate action on the following:

- Immediate interagency and multidisciplinary collaboration supported by Government to tackle the problem of child welfare and child rights nationwide.
- Mobilization of more social workers, counselors and child protection officers islandwide.

- Provision of effective, realistic special assistance to families in crisis.
- Strengthening of our main institutions of socialization, the family, the school, the church and our community centres through training, sensitization and support.
- Creation of a police unit specifically dedicated to missing children.
- Expedition of the newly created sex offenders registry, so we will know who the offenders are and be able to prevent them repeating their offences in communities and families, schools and institutions, which should be protecting rather than harming our children.
- Expedition of implementation of Mandatory DNA testing for sex offenders. The acts have been passed in Parliament to start this, but a delay in gazetting has delayed implementation.
- Creation of stop orders at the ports of exit to combat trafficking.
- Launch of a massive public education campaign, not only reporting abuses and atrocities affecting children, but providing instruction on how citizens can tackle and prevent these.
- Mandatory identification cards and photographs for all children, since many who go missing cannot be identified for lack of these.
- Strengthening and providing adequate resources to operate the Ananda Alert for missing children, to increase its effectiveness.

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Hear The Children's Cry offers the following safety tips:

### **SAFETY TIPS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

1. Take 5 minutes every morning and every night to pray with your child/children, hug them every day and say 'I love you.'
2. Know where your child is at all times.
3. Know who your child's friends are and encourage them to 'hang out' at places you know are safe.
4. Encourage your child to walk in a group and not alone.
5. Accompany your child to and from school if possible.
6. Tell your child not to stop for conversations with strangers.

7. Tell your child not to allow any stranger to touch him/her.
8. Tell your child not to resist a robber or gunman. Your child's life is worth more than money or goods.
9. Keep an eye out for the children in your community.
10. Put Police Emergency #119 as a 'one-touch' on your cell phone.

## **SAFETY TIPS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS**

***- Don't let a trafficker lure or capture you.***

**Young people should be very careful when strangers, or even people they know, come to them with unusually attractive sounding propositions.** The following are all signs that a human trafficker may be trying to lure you into a life of exploitation, prostitution, forced labour, and maybe even death.

- Does a job offer or some other opportunity seem too good to be true?
- Are you being promised lots of money, a great life, and lots of material goods?
- Are you being chosen because you are young, good looking, or of a particular gender?
- Are you being told that it does not matter that you have no skills or qualifications?
- Is somebody offering to pay your travel expenses, saying you can repay them once you start working?
- Will someone get travel and/or identification documents for you?
- Are these documents legal or fake (illegal)?
- If you have a passport, have you been told to give it to somebody who will "keep it safe" for you?
- If you are to go abroad, will you be illegal in the other country?
- Are you unable to give your family and friends exact information about who is taking you, where you will be working and how to get in touch with you?
- Are you being told what to say to officials at airports or sea ports?
- Are you being urged to lie?
- Will the journey be dangerous? Will you have to hide or travel only at night?
- Is there fear of the police?

**If the answer to any of these questions is "YES", get away from the person making you such offers, stay far from them, and report your suspicions to the police.**

Remember, you CAN get ahead in life, but it takes hard work. Don't trust offers that sound too good.

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