Call to Action to end the placement of children under the age of three in residential care endorsed at 35th CARICOM Heads of Government conference

- Thousands of children below the age of three in the Caribbean region are living in residential care institutions.

ST. JOHN’S, Antigua and Barbuda / PANAMA CITY, Panama, 7 July 2014 – The Prime Minister of Grenada, Honorable Dr. Keith Mitchell, presented last week the Call to Action during the 35th CARICOM Conference of Heads of Government held in Antigua, and urged the Heads of State of the Caribbean region to commit to ending the placement of children under three years of age in residential care institutions.

In line with the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care, the Call to Action urges Governments in Latin America and the Caribbean to reaffirm their commitment to the protection of children without parental care, and in particular, to end the placement of children under three years old in institutions.

As the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child approaches, most countries in the region continue to rely disproportionately on institutionalization as a child protection strategy, despite the fact that this measure should only be used in exceptional circumstances, and for the shortest possible time.

Research suggests that low-quality institutional care can have serious negative consequences, especially for children under three years old. Studies also show that girls and boys who have been placed in family-based care or foster families have better physical and cognitive development as well as academic performance and social integration, compared to those who have grown up in institutions.

It is therefore critical to prevent the placement of boys and girls under the age of three in residential care institutions, and accelerate the reintegration of those living in institutions into a family environment as a matter of priority.

In his statement to the Heads of Government, the Prime Minister of Grenada stressed that “It is our responsibility at this time to ensure that we take action to end the residential institutionalization of children in the 0-3 year cohort. It is imperative that we take the necessary reform measures which aim to prevent further institutionalized care, and the onus is on us to work assiduously to return children within that age group from residential care to the family or family –based environments.”

Although little data is available about children under the age of three, in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is estimated that more than 240,000 children and adolescents are living in residential care institutions.
Speaking on the issue, Nadine Perrault, UNICEF Regional Child Protection Advisor, said “there is no reason that young children should continue growing up in residential care institutions in our region, we must make a shift; the solution is in our hands.”

It is hoped that as a result of the Call to Action, all countries in the region will begin to develop and implement policies for family strengthening, family reunification and alternative care.

“The many existing foster care and family support programs in the region, provide us the evidence that there is an alternative way to act that is more beneficial to children, their families, and the societies they live in” says Matilde Luna, Director of RELAF.

A similar Call to Action was launched for the Latin American countries during the Ibero-American Summit of Heads of States celebrated in Panama in October 2013.

The Call to action to end the placement of children under three years old in residential care is driven by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Global Movement for Children – Latin America and the Caribbean (MMI-CLAC), the Latin American Network of Foster Care (RELAF), the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General on Violence against Children, UNICEF, and now CARICOM.

The #speakupforme campaign

In parallel to the Call to Action, UNICEF and its partners launched the communication campaign (#speakupforme) to mobilize public support, calling for people to raise their voices on behalf of young children in residential care.

The campaign additionally intends to raise awareness about the serious impact of institutionalization on children under the age of three, including for their mental health, physical and cognitive development.

To virtually join this cause, or to find more information, please visit the website: www.speakupforme.org

About UNICEF

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