



Signing of Memorandum of Understanding between Sagicor and the Healthy Caribbean Coalition for the establishment and conduct of a Secretariat, 2012 – 2015.

Deborah Chen, Director, Healthy Caribbean Coalition.

Madame Chair, other members of the Head table, distinguished guests, members of the media.

Firstly, I bring you greetings from the Heart Foundation of Jamaica which is this year celebrating 41 years since it was established, and I take this opportunity to express my own thanks and appreciation and convey that of the HFJ, The Inter American Heart Foundation and that of the World Heart Federation to Sagicor for its significant contribution to the improvement of the health of the Caribbean which is being recognised today in this Signing Ceremony. I also wish to congratulate all those who have made arrangements for this splendid event and wish as a Director of the HCC to place on record thanks and appreciation to those who have in any way contributed to making it possible.

As has been mentioned earlier, this is indeed a historic occasion for us in the Caribbean. The non communicable disease (NCD) epidemic that we face as a region; and the objectives and role of the HCC in this regard have been outlined. Sagicor has demonstrated, through this partnership that it recognises these challenges and is willing to step up and show commitment to regional development. There has been a lot of discussion recently in our region about the value of working together under the auspices of CARICOM. I am a firm believer that we will make far more progress if we focus on areas of common interest, such as health, and work together to tackle the challenges that face us. The HCC is an example of successful regional collaboration. The value of the HCC may be best explained if I use the organisation I represent as an example.

The Heart Foundation of Jamaica (HFJ) has been a member of the HCC from its inception and we in Jamaica have a serious challenge as it relates to tobacco control. There are several risk factors for NCD's. The most preventable of which is tobacco smoking. All countries in our region are faced with tobacco industry interference as we seek to comply with the World Health Organisation (WHO) Treaty – the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control to which all our governments are signatories. This is an evidence based treaty in response to the global tobacco epidemic. Tobacco industry interference in Jamaica is chronic. The leading tobacco company in Jamaica makes public donations to members of parliament and government institutions on a

regular basis in breach of the treaty which specifically seeks to “**protect public health policies with respect to tobacco control from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry**”. In view of these monetary donations it is not surprising that important tobacco legislation continues to languish in the Attorney General’s department where it has been for the past several years. Is it any wonder that this is so with the level of “donations” to the government of successive administrations? So what connection does this issue have to the HCC?

The HCC acts as a central repository of all health related news and information from NGO’s throughout the region. Members can go on the website/facebook/twitter and find out what is happening in other NGO’s in the region. NGO’s can contact other members directly if they need advice or further information on an issue that may be relevant to their own organisation. Along with other NGO’s, the HFJ regularly sends news releases and updates to the HCC for posting and for dissemination to all members electronically. The HCC has been instrumental in alerting NGO’s regionally about the tobacco control situation in Jamaica and garnering support regionally and locally for our cause. This has put some pressure on our government representatives because, when they have discussions or meet with their Caribbean counterparts, this issue is raised as they have been alerted by their own local NGO. Through the HCC, other countries in the Region are alerted to be on the lookout for similar breaches of the FCTC as are occurring in Jamaica. The HCC of course also provides a forum such as this for us to alert the local and regional media about a major area of health concern.

The work of the HCC is undertaken aimed at slowing the epidemic of NCD’s which is facing our region. The NCDs of heart disease and stroke, diabetes, cancer, and chronic lung disease, share the common risk factors of exposure to tobacco smoke, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and abuse of alcohol. A heart disease specific foundation in Jamaica has much in common with let us say a diabetes organization in Barbados or a cancer society in Trinidad and Tobago, and it is this shared interest that the HCC seeks to support in the prevention of NCDs even as these disease specific organizations continue to carry out their excellent work. A change will not occur overnight as the solution is a long term one. And success will only be possible when the various sectors of the society realise that we ALL have a role to play. This is a national development issue – not just a health issue. And so in closing let me once again express how very pleased we are that Sagikor has taken the initiative to play a leading role in the Caribbean toward us reducing the burden of the NCDs. As a Director of HCC I look forward to the relationship between the HCC and Sagikor being mutually beneficial with many positive outcomes.