

Statement By Honourable Vincent O. Wheatley Minister For Health And Social Development For Child Abuse Prevention And Awareness Month And Autism Awareness Month

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Month**

APRIL 2025

I am Honourable Vincent O. Wheatley, Minister for Health and Social Development.

As we observe **Child Abuse Prevention and Awareness Month**, we are reminded to reflect on our shared responsibility to protect the most vulnerable among us – our children.

This year's theme, "**Collective Action to Strengthen Prevention**," is a powerful reminder that safeguarding our children is not a task for one person, or one agency

alone – it requires all of us!

Families, neighbours, educators, faith-based organisations, service providers, and policymakers must come together to create safe, nurturing spaces where every child can grow, dream and thrive.

Child abuse – whether physical, emotional, sexual, or through neglect— leaves deep and lasting scars. Its effects can echo throughout a person's life, shaping their mental and physical health, their relationships, and their futures. But – the good news is this: **prevention is possible!**

We have the power to break this cycle! With education, compassion, and strong support networks, we can interrupt the cycle of abuse and build a future where every child feels valued, protected, and loved.

Here in The Virgin Islands, we must remain ever watchful – knowing the signs of abuse, taking action without hesitation, and ensuring that no child slips through the cracks. That means not only strengthening and reinforcing our child protection systems, but also addressing the root causes through supporting policies and programmes that empower families, alleviate stressors and build resilience in our communities.

In addition, it is equally important to foster a culture where children feel heard, valued, and safe, to speak up.

The Ministry of Health and Social Development is committed to this mission. One of our critical efforts in this regard is the advancement of the **Sexual Offences Bill**.

This landmark legislation proposes a gender-sensitive legal framework to address sexual crimes, prioritise the well-being of survivors and hold offenders accountable. It will introduce trauma-informed practices for survivors, mentorship initiatives, and implement tracking systems for sexual offenders following their reintegration into society.

In addition, the Bill will enable the creation of a Sexual Offenders Registry in the Territory – so that survivors are supported and communities are safer.

But let me be clear and emphasise once more – **keeping our children safe is a collective effort**. It is not the responsibility of one group! It calls on all of us to remain vigilant, to listen when children speak, and to stand firm against any form of abuse or neglect. It calls for all of us to create a safer environment for our children, ensuring they grow up in a community that prioritises their well-being and security!

I encourage all residents to wear blue on 25th April - to show a visible sign of our united front against child abuse. Let it serve as a beacon of your support for child protection efforts and your commitment to preventing abuse and neglect. Let it serve as a beacon of our collective resolve to build a world where every child is safe, seen and supported.

As we reflect on protecting our children, we must also consider how we uplift and embrace every child – including those with diverse abilities. This April, we also observe **Autism Awareness Month**, under the theme "**Celebrate Differences**".

Autism is not a limitation – it is a different way of experiencing the world. And in recognising this, we are reminded that inclusion is not just about accommodating differences – it is about **valuing** them.

Children and adults on the autism spectrum have incredible gifts to share. It is our role as a society to ensure that they are understood, accepted and supported to reach their full potential.

Here in The Virgin Islands, the Social Development Department's Disabilities Unit plays a vital role in this work. Through specialised care, awareness programmes and direct support to families, they are championing a community that values inclusion and fosters acceptance and belonging for all.

Protecting children and embracing those with autism are not separate causes - they are united by a common purpose: the creation of a more compassionate and inclusive society. A society where every person – regardless of their background, ability, or circumstance – is seen, supported and empowered to flourish.

Together, let us raise our voices, lift our hearts, and commit to building a Virgin Islands where no child is harmed, no difference is feared, and everyone has the chance to live with dignity, safety, and to reach their full potential.

Remember, we have the power to break the cycle!