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PRESS RELEASE

The COVID-19 Unemployment Relief Program

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The co-chairs of the COVID-19 National Oversight Committee, the Rt Hon. Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, agreed on March 16, 2020, to establish the Economic Oversight Team (EOT) comprising Dr. Carla Barnett and Mr. Christopher Coye, to, among other things, oversee the establishment and operationalization of the Unemployment Relief Program.

The program will offer financial assistance to meet the needs of workers who, having been terminated or laid off, cannot earn all of their work income and are not eligible for another financial assistance program. The program is guided by the need to ensure transparency and fairness in operations and proper accountability mechanisms.

Furthermore, the program is being developed under guidelines approved by the co-chairs, and with the support and collaboration of the Ministry of Finance, the Social Security Board, the Belize Tourism Board, Government's Central Information Technology Office and the EOT, who have the following responsibilities:

Ministry of Finance

On behalf of the Government of Belize, the Ministry of Finance is responsible for providing the funds to the Program, which is being done through borrowing both locally through the Central Bank and internationally through relations with the International Financial Institutions (IFIs).

Social Security Board (SSB)

As the paying agent, the SSB is responsible for making the payments to individuals, who are approved to receive unemployment relief, on behalf of the Government of Belize. The SSB is **not** the approver and will not be making payments from its own funds but from the funds provided by the Government of Belize.

Belize Tourism Board (BTB)

The BTB will help to identify the persons who are employers and employees in the tourism industry so that they can be reached, verified for approval, and assisted as quickly as possible.

Central Information Technology Office (CITO)

CITO is designing and implementing the e-Gov portal which will be the system used to manage the Unemployment Relief Program from application to approval to payments to the individual.

Economic Oversight Team (EOT)

The EOT is overseeing the implementation of the Program, ensuring the collaboration among the agencies that are important to successful and quick implementation, and continuous oversight to prevent abuse by persons who are ineligible to receive payments from the Program.

Who can benefit from the COVID-19 Unemployment Relief Program?

The program offers financial relief to the following persons:

1. Employees and self-employed persons who have lost their jobs and income as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, particularly but not solely, the tourism sector will receive **\$150 every two weeks over a 12-week period**.
2. Persons who would have been unemployed prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and are now experiencing even more difficult circumstances, will receive **\$100 every two weeks over a 12-week period**. These persons will also be referred to the Ministry of Human Development for consideration for further assistance through the social programs operated by that ministry.

Individuals who can benefit from the COVID-19 Unemployment Relief Program include:

- Tour guides
- Office Staff
- Cleaners/Janitors/Room Attendants
- Kitchen and Dining Room Staff
- Bus/Van Drivers
- Store clerks
- Mechanics
- Construction workers connected to tourism-related projects
- Independent operators such as:
 - Freelance guides,
 - Vendors,
 - Hair braiders,
 - Entertainers
 - Fishermen
 - Taxi operators
- Border point and free zone workers
- Others which may be added

Excluded Persons

- Persons who are not Belizean nationals
- Persons laid off in March 2020 by the Belize Tourism Board
- Persons under 18 years of age
- Persons receiving benefits from other government or social security programs

How Long will the Relief payment be made and how?

- The temporary relief payments will be made every two weeks for a period of 12 weeks, unless the person becomes employed before the expiration of such period, at which time the payment would stop.
- Payment will be made by the Social Security Board, on behalf of the Government, directly into the bank account of the beneficiary or via a prepaid (or other pre-funded) card that can be topped up.

When does it start?

- The application form will be online by April 3, 2020. A public announcement will be made once the form is available;
- Once applications are received, the verification and approval process will immediately begin;

- Verification is being automated so it should be a quick process;
- Relief payments should commence in the week of April 6, 2020.

Steps for filing an application

1. Applicants will start by filling out the application form
 - You will be able to fill out the form online.
 - You will also be able to download a copy form to fill in by hand.
 - You will be able to pick up a hard copy at locations to be designated
2. All Applicants will be sent a notification by email or SMS that your application for financial assistance has been received.
 - If you ask for messages to be delivered by email, please make sure you input your email address correctly and check your spam folder if you do not see a reply in your inbox.
3. Once an application for Unemployment Relief is approved, payments will be made by direct deposit to your bank or credit union account or by a Top-Up Prepaid ATM Card.

Persons are strongly urged you to apply online as this method will result in the quickest response to your application. This is because your application will immediately enter the system for processing.

If, however, you do not have access to the internet, you can also apply by picking up a hard copy of the application form from the Labour Department or the Social Security Board offices in each district. As other locations are added, the public will be notified.

Kindly note that if you submit a hard copy of the application, the information will be entered manually into the processing system.

Furthermore, you will be asked to consent to your information being exchanged between ministries, agencies of the Government, your bank or credit union for verification and compliance purposes.

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