

STATEMENT ON CHILD ABUSE FEBRUARY 2012

Help & Shelter invites the Ministers of Education and Human Services to inform the Guyanese people what they are doing and propose to do about the rape, sexual abuse and sexual harassment of students by teachers, including those at private religious institutions.

The Sexual Offence Act is very clear on this matter, defining abuse of trust as when the “the accused looks after persons who are receiving education at an educational institution (whether in the role of teacher or in another role)” and “the accused is a social worker, probation officer, coach, instructor, minister of religion, babysitter, child-minder or has a welfare position in relation to the complainant, and has regular unsupervised contact with the complainant.”

It is clear that investigation, background checks and oversight of teachers and others who are in positions of trust in relation to children are non-existent or inadequate, resulting in children, especially those who are vulnerable and at risk, being subjected to sexual abuse including rape.

Section 35 of the Protection of Children Act provides that “The Director of the Childcare & Protection Agency is to compile a list and the Minister of Human Services is to keep a list of persons who are considered unsuitable to work with children upon receipt of confirmation of that person’s conviction for an offence against a child.”

We call upon the Director of the CPA and Minister of Human Services to take immediate steps to ensure that this list is compiled, kept updated and made publicly available to ensure that paedophiles and other sexual offenders are prevented from having contact with children, particularly in situations where they are in a position of trust.

The abuse of children at the Turkeyen Masjid makes it imperative that a full investigation be conducted at this institution, which should include students, teachers and other caregivers. Guyanese society looks to its religious institutions for spiritual and moral guidance and to religious leaders as role models.

Rape and other forms of child abuse must never be condoned or hidden under a cloak of religious immunity or privilege. We at Help & Shelter have viewed with alarm the persistent attempts for bail to be granted to accused Nezaam Ali.

Research has clearly established that children seldom lie or make up stories about sexual abuse. Paedophiles are serial offenders and leave in their wake a large number of physically and psychologically damaged children. We support the call for a review and overhaul of the present system of child protection. Our children must be better cared for and protected.

13 February 2012