The government of St Vincent and the Grenadines is receiving high marks for formally launching the Early Childhood Health Outreach (ECHO) programme, designed to provide disadvantaged families with increased and improved health care services at the community level.

At the official ceremony of the “Institutionalisation of ECHO” Consultant Director of the Foundation for the Development of Caribbean Children (FDCC), Susan Branker, said, “the convergence of health and early childhood development has been deemed by the international research community to be one of the most cost-effective and effective means of reaching young children and their caregivers.”

She told the gathering that the ECHO programme has broken new ground in the region and will serve as a model for replication and adaptation, as already, a similar approach is being planned for piloting in St Lucia later this year.

**Background**

Subsequent to a review of the Roving Caregivers Programme (RCP) conducted in 2006, it was proposed to explore the options for consolidation of RCP concepts and methodologies (using the “High Scope 0-3 manual) and to converge and extend its reach in a national context.

It was felt that the health system and the Maternal and Child Health Services in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) is in a strategic position to take the charge to lead and establish more comprehensive programmes and better equip workers to facilitate this process. In addition institutionalisation of RCP concepts and methodologies through the Ministry of Health will enhance effectiveness, provide the necessary funding and provide sustained leadership thus ensuring the longevity of the programme.

The Foundation for the Development of Caribbean Children’s (FDCC) predecessor the Caribbean Child Support Initiative (CCSI); UNICEF; PAHO; with support from Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF) and the Ministry of Health, Wellness & the Environment, joined in partnership to institute the Early Childhood Health Outreach (ECHO) concepts into the Primary Health Care system for “at risk” children 0-3 years, as a two years pilot project in the Calliaqua health district, with a view to institutionalise the programme.

**ECHO Pilot**

ECHO pilot project, is an initiative to test the feasibility of institutionalising the RCP early stimulation methodology within the maternal and child health services of the Ministry of Health. The basic premise
of the ECHO pilot is that the early stimulation services can be incorporated into the job responsibilities of the Community Health Aides (CHAs) in the maternal and child health services who already provide home visiting services to all communities in SVG.

ECHO was launched as a pilot project in June 2010. Its objective was to integrate the processes and procedures of the RCP with that of the CHAs so that a holistic package of developmental services can be delivered to children and their families at their homes and at the health centers.

Seven (7) Community Health Aides were assigned to one hundred and eighty two (182) families (28 families to each of 6 CHAs and 14 families to 1 CHA) using the child health register, the criteria for at risk and the parents socio-economic status. The Calliaqua health district was identified due to the following factors:

- A high level of poverty, according to the final report of SVG Country Poverty Assessment 2007/2008; high migrant activities of persons from the lower economic strata as a consequence of volcanic eruption
- The RCP does not exist in this community
- The un-availability of Day Care Centers in the district

The results of the project to date indicate that CHAs can successfully deliver stimulation services to children as an ongoing part of their job functions.

**Pillars of ECHO**

ECHO builds on existing resources and networks. The programme revolves around the creation and maintenance of collaborative relationships between multiple interest groups, such as families, communities and services providers. Given the overlap in underlying determinants, the health care system is often the most cost-effective platform and most universal point of contact. The health care system is also, in most instances the first point of contact and serves as a gateway to other early childhood services.

In many instances, health care providers like ECHO’s community health aides (CHAs) are the only health professionals whom families come into contact with in the early years of the child’s life; they thus reach the majority of children in a community. CHAs can be highly effective in promoting ECD when ECD programmes and services are added to the delivery of established health care services.
ECHO through the health care system also serves as a platform for information and support to parents around ECD and does so for relatively small marginal costs (e.g. by integrating ECD into existing programmes such as nutrition and growth monitoring and promotion, a woman’s health programme or reproductive health programme: children and families are therefore linked to existing community based ECD services.

Conclusion

The Early Childhood Health Outreach (ECHO) programme (derived from the Roving Caregiver Programme model) in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is one example of FDCC’s approach to integrated policy and programming for the zero to three cohorts. This has provided us with the experience and confirmation that efforts to create building blocks for an integrated approach to early childhood development (ECD), points to the need for a framework of collaboration across sectors within countries. This overall framework must however, be grounded in the science of ECD and both public and private sectors must be engaged.