

Freedom of Information Act proving ineffective

by Patricia Campbell

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Nearly two months after the announcement of her appointment under the Freedom of Information Act, Millicent David is yet to receive her instruments of appointment as the country's first Information Commissioner.

Parliamentary approval for the appointment of Millicent David to the position of Information Commissioner was given since the middle of July, but David is unable to assume the relevant duties and function in that position until she is given the requisite instrument.

The Information Commissioner is a critical element in the operation of the freedom of information legislation.

At the Antigua & Barbuda Media Congress' journalism workshop on Monday, Minister of State with responsibility for Information Senator Edmond Mansoor drew the attention of regional and international media professionals to this legislation.

"This administration is particularly cognisant that freedom of the press is the greatest guarantee of all the other freedoms. That is why we are giving the public unprecedented access to government information and records.

"The landmark Freedom of Information Act gives full effect to provisions of the Antigua & Barbuda constitution, conferring the right to receive and disseminate information," Dr. Mansoor said.

He added the legislation "facilitates the right of the public to have access to information held by public authorities in order to further the public interest by promoting informed discussion of public affairs and greater accountability of public authorities.

"The legislation itself, however, requires the commissioner to function in order to aid the effective application of the act.

For example, the act requires that the commissioner "shall, as soon as practicable, compile a clear and simple guide containing practical information to facilitate the effective exercise of rights pursuant to this Act, and shall disseminate the guide widely in an accessible form.

"If the government is taking credit for the appointment of an information commissioner, it should go to the next level and make sure that the information

commissioner is in office as soon as possible," Colin James, president of the Antigua & Barbuda Media Congress said.

James also pointed out the value of the Information Commissioner to the local media, since the law makes the provision that where there is a problem accessing information, the commissioner will be able to assist journalists or members of the general public in obtaining that information.

International Right to Information Day, otherwise known as "Right to Know" day, is being marked by many countries today.