

March 3, 2023

The Honourable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building, Room 281
Queens Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

The Honourable Sylvia Jones
Minister of Health / Deputy Premier
777 Bay Street, College Park, 5th Floor
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

The Honourable Merrilee Fullerton
438 University Avenue, 7th Floor
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

Dear Premier Ford, Minister Jones, and Minister Fullerton:

RE: Food Insecurity in Ontario

On behalf of the Board of Health (Board) and staff of the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit (Health Unit), we are expressing our concerns about the high rates of food insecurity in Ontario. Most recent estimates show that one in six households experience food insecurity, and one in five children live in a food insecure household. This is not acceptable. The magnitude of the problem, paired with the severe health consequences associated with experiencing food insecurity, make this an important and pressing public health issue that requires attention from all levels of government.

Food insecurity means a household has inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. Not being able to afford food has profound adverse effects on people's [physical and mental health](#), and their ability to lead productive lives. The health consequences of food insecurity are also a large burden on our healthcare system.

As per the Ontario Public Health Standards, health units are required to monitor food affordability. We recently released our local [2022 Cost of Eating Well report](#), which draws attention to the inadequacy of current social assistance rates. It highlights that households with social assistance as their main income do not have enough money for the costs of living, including food. An excerpt from the [report](#) is included as **Appendix A**. It is important to note the scenarios presented include very modest estimates of both food costs and rent. Local data from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation is used for rent estimates which may or may not include utilities. Food costs are based on the [Nutritious Food Basket](#) (NFB). Grocery stores are surveyed locally to determine the cost of the NFB, which provides an estimate of the cost of following Canada's Food Guide. Examining food costs and rent rates alongside household income scenarios determines if food is affordable. For those receiving social assistance, it is clear they do not have enough money for the costs of living.

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As record high food inflation rates persist, there is no doubt the financial situation is increasingly dire for these households. While the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) was increased by 5% in 2022 and will be indexed to inflation going forward, the current rates are not based on the costs of living. Further, Ontario Works (OW) has not been increased since 2018 and is not indexed to inflation.

Last week, our Board passed a series of motions demonstrating collective support from Health Unit staff, leadership, and Board members, to call on the province for income-based policy action to reduce food insecurity. The complete list of resolutions and motions are attached as **Appendix B**. To summarize, our Board is urging the Province of Ontario to:

- Legislate targets for the reduction of food insecurity as part of the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy.
- Increase social assistance rates to reflect the costs of living, and to index Ontario Works rates to inflation going forward.
- Resume investigating the feasibility of creating a guaranteed living wage (basic income) in the Province of Ontario.

Income is an important social determinant of health (SDOH) that greatly impacts other SDOHs, including food security. Income support programs are recognized globally as important and effective population health interventions, meaning they can impact the health of the whole population. Ensuring low-income households have enough money to meet their basic needs is essential for health.

Food insecurity in Canada is a persistent and highly prevalent problem that has not improved since systematic monitoring began in 2005. Our Health Unit has been vocal in the past about the importance of adequate income to reduce food insecurity. Most recently, we called on the federal government to consider the importance of a [basic income program for all](#) in light of COVID-19 pandemic response benefits, and we called on the province to establish a [Social Assistance Research Commission](#) to advise on strengthening social assistance in Ontario. We will continue to monitor food affordability and follow the evidence on this issue, as health units are required to ‘assess and report on the health of local populations describing the existence and impact of health inequities and identifying effective strategies that decrease health inequities.’

The Province of Ontario holds the power to reduce food insecurity and extreme poverty among households receiving social assistance. From a public health perspective, our Board urges you to take action. Please consider the motions our Board passed on this important issue and thank you for reviewing this information.

Sincerely yours,

Original Signed by Rick Champagne

Rick Champagne
Chairperson, Board of Health

Original Signed by Dr. Chirico

James Chirico, H.BSc., M.D., F.R.C.P. (C), MPH
Medical Officer of Health/Executive Officer

Original Signed by Dr. Zimbalatti

Carol Zimbalatti, M.D., CCFP, MPH
Associate Medical Officer of Health

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Enclosures (2) – Appendix A and B

Copy to:

Vic Fedeli, MPP, Nipissing
Graydon Smith, MPP, Parry Sound-Muskoka
John Vanthof, MPP, Timiskaming-Cochrane
Hon. Anthony Rota, MP, Nipissing-Timiskaming
Hon. Scott Aitchison, MP, Parry Sound-Muskoka
Hon. Marc Serre, MP, Nickel Belt
Ontario Boards of Health
Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA)
Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)
Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM)
Health Unit Member Municipalities

References:

Tarasuk V, Li T, Fafard St-Germain AA. *Household food insecurity in Canada, 2021*. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). 2022. Retrieved from: <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>

North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit. *2022 Cost of Eating Well: Monitoring food affordability in the North Bay Parry Sound District*. 2023. Retrieved from: [https://www.myhealthunit.ca/en/health-topics/HU_FoodInsecurity_Report22-\(1\).pdf](https://www.myhealthunit.ca/en/health-topics/HU_FoodInsecurity_Report22-(1).pdf)

Ministry of Health. *Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for programs, services and accountability*. 2021. Retrieved from: https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/oph_standards/docs/protocols_guidelines/Ontario_Public_Health_Standards_2021.pdf

World Health Organization. *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health*. Geneva: WHO. 2008. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-IER-CSDH-08.1>



Single man receiving Ontario Works

This person does not have enough money to cover rent and food in a month, or their other costs of living. Current social assistance rates in Ontario are not based on the real costs of living. There are few income supports in place for working aged adults without children, leaving them in extreme poverty should they be unemployed.

**Income is based on OW basic allowance and maximum shelter allowance, GST/HST credit, Ontario Trillium Benefit, and the Ontario Climate Action Incentive Payment.*

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Monthly income:*	\$876
Rent (bachelor apartment):	\$650
Food:	\$404
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-\$178



Single woman with 2 kids receiving Ontario Works

It is highly unlikely that the \$688 remaining after paying for rent and food will be enough to cover this family's monthly expenses. Parents in Canada are eligible for the Canada/Ontario Child Benefit (CCB), which provides a seemingly significant amount of money monthly for low-income households. Yet, 1 in 5 children in Ontario live in a food insecure household, suggesting the CCB does not provide enough money to protect against food insecurity.

**Income is based on Ontario Works basic allowance for one recipient and two dependents and maximum shelter allowance for a family size of three, Canada and Ontario Child Benefit, GST/HST credit, Ontario Trillium Benefit, and the Climate Action Incentive Payment.*

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Monthly income:*	\$2548
Rent (2 bedroom apartment):	\$1032
Food:	\$828
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\$688

Appendix B

Board of Health Motion: **#BOH/2023/02/04** – February 22, 2023

Moved by: Marianne Stickland

Seconded by: Jamie McGarvey

Whereas, the Ontario Public Health Standards require public health units to monitor food affordability, as well as assess and report on the health of local populations, describing the existence and impact of health inequities;

Whereas, it is well documented that food insecurity has a detrimental impact on physical and mental health;

Whereas, adequate income is an important social determinant of health that greatly impacts food security;

Whereas, 67% of households in Ontario with social assistance as their main source of income experience food insecurity;

Whereas, the 2022 Nutritious Food Basket Survey results show that households reliant on social assistance do not have enough money for the costs of living, including food;

Therefore Be It Resolved, That the Board of Health for the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit continue to support the efforts of staff and community stakeholders to raise awareness about, and work to reduce, health inequities, including food insecurity; and

Furthermore Be It Resolved, That the Board of Health call on the Province of Ontario to legislate targets for the reduction of food insecurity as part of the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy; and

Furthermore Be It Resolved, That the Board of Health call on the Province of Ontario to increase social assistance rates to reflect the costs of living, and to index Ontario Works rates to inflation going forward; and

Furthermore Be It Resolved, That the Board of Health urge the province to resume investigating the feasibility of creating a guaranteed living wage (basic income) in the Province of Ontario; and

Furthermore Be It Resolved, That the Board of Health provide correspondence of these resolutions to district municipalities, Ontario Boards of Health, Victor Fedeli, MPP (Nipissing), Graydon Smith, MPP (Parry Sound-Muskoka), John Vanthof, MPP (Timiskaming-Cochrane), the Honourable Doug Ford (Premier), the Honourable Merrilee Fullerton (Minister of Children, Community and Social Services), the Honourable Sylvia Jones (Minister of Health) and the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (ALPHA), MP Anthony Rota, MP Scott Aitchison, MP Marc Serre, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM).