



# A Call to Action on Food Security:

## Key Messages and Backgrounder

### Key Messages

- **A key opportunity for health**  
Food security is the ability to secure safe, healthy, personally/culturally-acceptable food, and contributes to good health, lower risk of disease, and reduced healthcare costs.
- **Prosperity side-tracked**  
Decreasing food security is evidenced by a 28% increase in food bank use since 2008 and reflects the limitations faced by people living in poverty. The paths to food security and prosperity need opportunities, not food charity.
- **Low incomes don't measure-up**  
Nutritious Food Basket annual surveys have repeatedly shown that people with low-incomes don't have an adequate baseline to afford healthy eating after meeting other essentials such as housing.
- **A short-term solution**  
Food security could be jump-started by implementing a monthly \$100 Healthy Food Supplement for social assistance recipients.
- **Real incentives**  
The most progress on food security will come from improving policies for social programs and working incomes, community planning and the agri-food system, and environments for healthy food and eating. Achieving this can be coordinated through developing a comprehensive Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy.

### BACKGROUND ON FOOD SECURITY

#### Context

Food security exists when everyone has sufficient access to safe, healthy, personally/culturally-acceptable food. It makes healthy eating (e.g. the foods and patterns recommended in Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide<sup>1</sup>) possible. Lack of food security leads to increased vulnerability to nutritional inadequacies<sup>2</sup>, increased risk of infectious and chronic diseases and difficulties in managing these<sup>3</sup>, and health problems such as low birth weight. These diseases and conditions cost more to treat and manage than would be needed to prevent them through food security. Initiatives to promote food security can contribute to cost savings in the health care system<sup>4</sup>.

#### Causes

Poverty is the most common reason for lack of food security<sup>5</sup>, and together these are double-jeopardy to productivity and prosperity. Food bank use in Ontario has grown by as much as 28% since 2008<sup>6</sup>. Recipients of social assistance (Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program) are particularly vulnerable, with 60% reporting a lack of food security. However, 55% of all Ontarians who reported being food insecure had employment income<sup>2</sup>. Economic downturn and reduction in workplace opportunities deepen the issues

because, "...the overall level of income in the economy is reduced. And the ability of people to go out and buy goods is reduced."<sup>7</sup>

#### Measurement

##### Nutritious Food Basket (NFB)

The NFB food costing survey tool is used to monitor and estimate the local cost of basic healthy eating. The NFB scenario tool can be used to determine the adequacy of different sources of income to allow singles or families to purchase basic necessities. Public health units across Ontario annually conduct the NFB survey. Repeatedly, findings have illustrated that social assistance rates and low-wage incomes are insufficient to meet even basic costs for living, particularly adequate housing and healthy food.

##### Do The Math (DTM)

(dothemath.thestop.org)

This is an on-line budgeting tool hosted on The Stop Community Food Centre's website. It illustrates that social assistance rates often don't allow for healthy eating after factoring-in necessities like housing, let alone other budgetary items often taken for granted – or necessary for employment. DTM supports advocacy for a monthly \$100 Healthy Food Supplement to help reduce the gap to meet even basic needs.



### Strategies

Strategies that promote food security exist along a continuum, ranging from short-term relief strategies, through capacity-building strategies, to long-term system and policy changes:

- Short-term relief strategies follow a food charity model, including food banks, soup kitchens and meal programs. Food charity represents an emergency response to dire need rather than a solution, doing little to mitigate underlying problems.<sup>8</sup>
  - Capacity-building strategies address public awareness (e.g. food costing surveys, advocacy networks, food charters), as well as food access, education, and skill levels of individuals/small groups (e.g. food shopping and cooking sessions, collective kitchens, community gardens, buying clubs, food councils). These strategies can be useful, but are unlikely to address broader issues, particularly income insufficiency.
  - Long-term system and policy changes address the conditions and environments that improve access for people of all population groups and communities to safe, healthy, acceptable and affordable food. Examples include expansion of opportunities to climb-out of poverty, and development of an Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy (which has been advocated as integral to “making Ontario the healthiest province”).
- Legislation for subsidies and tax incentives to support the agri-food sector.
  - A healthy food supply promoted through policies for land use and planning that are favourable to urban agriculture, farming, food processing, food marketing and retailing, etc.
  - Policies that enhance the ability of the built environment to support healthy eating, particularly in low-income and under-served communities; e.g. grants and loans to help open new fresh food outlets (supermarkets, farmers’ markets, and expanded convenience stores) in “food deserts”.
  - Regulations for supportive environments in schools, workplaces, and recreation settings that increase access to healthy food choices and decrease access to foods of minimum health value.
  - Policies supportive of adequate income levels for all Ontarians to afford basic necessities including adequate housing and healthy eating; e.g. improved social assistance levels and minimum wage increases consistent with rises in the costs of living, and expanded incentives and tax cuts for the working poor.
  - A comprehensive Ontario Food and

### FOOD SECURITY SOLUTIONS

For the short term, implementation of a \$100 per month Healthy Food Supplement for social assistance recipients<sup>10</sup> is recommended.

Longer term, broad-based strategies are vitally needed. Our recommendations include:

Nutrition Strategy, with multi-sectoral development, implementation, and coordination, which addresses both the sustainability of a healthy food supply and the needs of all Ontarians but particularly those with low socio-economic status.

### References

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- <sup>3</sup> Mikkonen, J. & Raphael, D. (2010). Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts. Toronto, ON: York University School of Health Policy and Management.
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- <sup>6</sup> Maxwell, J. (2011, March). Running on Empty: A Decade of Hunger in Ontario. Ontario Association of Food Banks. <http://www.oafb.ca/assets/pdfs/HungerReport2010.pdf>
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- <sup>9</sup> Ontario Collaborative Group on Healthy Eating and Physical Activity. (2010, September). A Collaborative Inter-ministerial Approach to Development of an Ontario Food and Nutrition Action Plan for Population Health, Discussion Paper.
- <sup>10</sup> Haugh, L. & Sterling, V. (2011, March 28). OPHA and alPHA letter to Premier McGuinty, Attachment: OPHA 2011 Provincial Election. Attachment retrieved May 27, 2011 from [http://www.opha.on.ca/resources/docs/OPHA\\_Key\\_Election\\_Issues-2011.pdf](http://www.opha.on.ca/resources/docs/OPHA_Key_Election_Issues-2011.pdf)