

March 20, 2020

Hon. Todd Smith  
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services  
[prso@ontario.ca](mailto:prso@ontario.ca)

Dear Minister Smith;

[Ontario Dietitians in Public Health \(ODPH\)](#), the independent and official voice of Registered Dietitians (RDs) working in Ontario's public health system, is writing to provide input as part of the consultation process for, "Developing a New Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario."

ODPH provides leadership in public health nutrition by promoting and supporting member collaboration to improve the health of Ontario residents through the implementation of the Ontario Public Health Standards. Public health dietitians work to improve Ontarians' food environments, food literacy, and access to healthy food.

Food insecurity is not a food problem; it is an income problem. In order to effectively address food insecurity, policies that improve incomes of vulnerable households are required.

Below is the list of recommendations that we would like to put forth:

1. Establish provincial targets for the reduction of household food insecurity in Ontario, as measured by the Canadian Community Health Survey.
2. Increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour.
3. Increase social assistance rates based on the cost of living for basic necessities in defined regions across Ontario.

**1. ODPH recommends establishing provincial targets for the reduction of household food insecurity in Ontario, as measured by the Canadian Community Health Survey.**

As RDs, we are deeply concerned about the problem of household food insecurity (HFI) – inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. HFI is a highly sensitive measure of material deprivation that is strongly associated with health outcomes and health care utilization. HFI should be tracked at the provincial, regional, and local levels to enable organizations, such as local public health agencies, to identify and prioritize programming based on social determinants of health data.

[Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy](#) has included food insecurity in the proposed indicators of progress towards poverty reduction targets, noting that because this module is optional it has not always been collected by all provinces and territories. Alignment of provincial and federal tracking and targets will ensure that Ontario's progress in poverty reduction is captured in measurable outcomes. Alignment of indicators would allow for meaningful comparison and ensure ongoing collection and dissemination of relevant data.

Between April 2018 and March 2019, Ontario's food banks who report to Feed Ontario, were visited by 510,438 people, including 169,167 children.<sup>1</sup> Although a considerable number of people go to food banks, they represent only a small proportion – about 20% - of those who experience food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Food bank usage numbers are not a valid measure of food insecurity. Furthermore, of those who go to food banks, studies have shown that using these services is not effective at reducing their food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> Although there may be instances when people need emergency food relief in the short term, people should not have to access food banks on a regular basis to alleviate hunger.

## **2. ODPH recommends increasing the minimum wage to \$15 per hour.**

When Ontarians are not able to meet their basic needs, they cannot achieve the physical, mental and social well-being needed for long-term employment. A liveable wage is critical for poverty reduction in Ontario. While the calculated living wage ranges between \$15.84 and \$22.08 for Ontario Communities, increasing minimum wage to \$15 per hour would be an important step towards providing adequate incomes to working families in Ontario.

Policies that increase incomes for primarily low- and moderate-income families, are associated with local economic benefits. This is exemplified through the impact of the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) on Canada's GDP: the economic activity generated by CCB payments was nearly double

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<sup>1</sup> King A, Quan A. Hunger Report 2019; Ontario's changing employment landscape and its impact on food bank use. Feed Ontario. Toronto, ON: Feed Ontario; 2019 [cited 2020 Jan 7]. Available from: <https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Hunger-Report-2019-Food-Bank-Digital.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Power, E. (2005). *Individual and household food insecurity in Canada: position of Dietitians of Canada*. Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research, 66(1), 43.; Food Insecurity Policy Research (PROOF) (n.d.). *Relationship Between Food Banks and Food Insecurity in Canada*. Toronto: PROOF. Retrieved from: [https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PROOF\\_FACTSHEET\\_Foodbanks-112019.pdf](https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PROOF_FACTSHEET_Foodbanks-112019.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Loopstra R, Tarasuk V. *The relationship between food banks and household food insecurity among low-income Toronto families*. Can Pub Policy. 2012; 38(4): 497-514. Available from: <https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/full/10.3138/CPP.38.4.497>; Food Insecurity Policy Research (PROOF) (n.d.). *Relationship Between Food Banks and Food Insecurity in Canada*. Toronto: PROOF. Retrieved from: [https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PROOF\\_FACTSHEET\\_Foodbanks-112019.pdf](https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PROOF_FACTSHEET_Foodbanks-112019.pdf)

the amount of the income distributed, and for every \$1 provided to Canadian families, there was \$1.97 contributed to Canada's GDP through direct, indirect and induced effects.

The Ontario Child Benefit is also a critical component of poverty reduction. For example, Ontario families who received the Ontario Child Benefit in 2009-2019 and 2011-2012 experienced a significant reduction in food insecurity in comparison to 2005.

Having a job is not enough to keep people healthy (physically, mentally, and socially) and living above poverty. In 2017–2018, 65% of food-insecure households in Canada reported employment as their primary source of income.<sup>4</sup> The high prevalence of household food insecurity among those in the workforce is a function of precarious and low-paying jobs and multi-person households with a single-income earner.<sup>5</sup> The results of a study of food insecurity in the Canadian labour force showed that working households experiencing food insecurity are more likely to include earners reporting multiple jobs and higher job stress.<sup>6</sup>

**3. ODPH recommends increasing social assistance rates based on the cost of living for basic necessities in defined regions across Ontario.** Establishment of a Social Assistance Research Commission, as proposed in [Bill 60, Ministry of Community and Social Services Amendment Act](#), could help to achieve this.

When social assistance rates are not based on the actual cost of living, they do not provide Ontarians with an adequate income to prevent cascading health and social costs<sup>7</sup>.

When Ontarians are not able to meet their basic needs, they cannot achieve the physical, mental and social well-being needed for long-term employment. Social assistance recipients across Canada are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.<sup>8</sup> In 2017-2018, 59% of Ontario households reliant on social assistance—Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support

<sup>4</sup> Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020) *Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18*. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>

<sup>5</sup> Tarasuk, V. (2017). *Implications of a basic income guarantee for household food insecurity*. Thunder Bay: Northern Policy Institute.

<sup>6</sup> McIntyre, L., Bartoo, A. C., & Emery, J. H. (2014). *When working is not enough: food insecurity in the Canadian labour force*. Public health nutrition, 17(1), 49-57.

<sup>7</sup> Siddiqi A, Sod-Erdene O, Shahidi FV, Ramraj C, Hildebrand V. (2018) *Do Government Social Assistance Programs Protect the Health of Society's Most Income-Insecure? An examination of Ontario and Comparable Jurisdictions in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom*. Toronto: Converge3. Retrieved from: <https://converge3.ca/publication/evidence-social-assistance-programs-for-income-insecure>.

<sup>8</sup> Food Insecurity Policy Research (PROOF) (n.d.). *The Impact of Food Insecurity on Health*. Toronto: PROOF. Retrieved from: <https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/health-impact-factsheet.pdf>

Program (ODSP)—were food insecure.<sup>9</sup> This indicates that OW and ODSP rates are insufficient to enable recipients to meet their basic needs. Analysis of food affordability monitoring conducted by Ontario public health units clearly demonstrates the insufficiency of OW and ODSP rates, particularly for single people without children.

The gap between OW and ODSP rates and the cost of basic needs has increased over time as social assistance rates have not kept pace with inflation and the varying local cost of basic needs across Ontario. The annual recommendation of social assistance rates based on local cost of basic needs, as included in Bill 60, could improve incomes for people on social assistance, which would substantially improve health and reduce health care costs.

Thank you for your consideration of our recommendations.

Sincerely,



Ellen Lakusiak, RD  
Co-Chair ODPH



Kim Loupos, RD  
Co-Chair ODPH Food Insecurity Workgroup

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<sup>9</sup> Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>