

May 4, 2020

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau  
Prime Minister of Canada  
[Justin.trudeau@parl.gc.ca](mailto:Justin.trudeau@parl.gc.ca)

Hon. Andrew Scheer, Leader of the Opposition  
and the Conservative Party  
[andrew.scheer@parl.gc.ca](mailto:andrew.scheer@parl.gc.ca)

Yves-François Blanchet, Leader of the Bloc  
Québécois [Yves-Francois.Blanchet@parl.gc.ca](mailto:Yves-Francois.Blanchet@parl.gc.ca)

Jagmeet Singh, Leader of the New Democratic  
Party [Jagmeet.Singh@parl.gc.ca](mailto:Jagmeet.Singh@parl.gc.ca)

Jo-Ann Roberts, Interim Leader of the Green  
Party [leader@greenparty.ca](mailto:leader@greenparty.ca)

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau, Mr. Scheer, M. Blanchet, Mr. Singh and Ms. Roberts:

[Ontario Dietitians in Public Health \(ODPH\)](http://www.odph.ca), the independent and official voice of Registered Dietitians (RDs) working in Ontario's public health system, is writing to you about a serious public health problem – household food insecurity (HFI). HFI is not having enough money for food. It is rooted in inadequate and insecure incomes. **This problem has unquestionably become worse with the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The number of Canadians who didn't have enough money to put food on their tables in 2017-2018 is estimated to be 4.4 million (12.7% of households) – higher than any previous national estimate.<sup>i</sup> In addition to deteriorated circumstances for many of these people, now even more Canadians are experiencing HFI resulting from widespread work stoppages and job losses associated with the pandemic. HFI is a highly sensitive indicator of an extreme level of material deprivation that negatively impacts people's physical, mental, and social well-being and life expectancy.

We commend the Canadian government for swiftly implementing income-based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS). These programs and other economic supports<sup>ii</sup> are offering relief from financial difficulties for many Canadians, allowing them to pay the rent and put food on the table. However, there are some groups that have been left highly vulnerable to HFI.

Canadians receiving social assistance represented about 15% of those experiencing HFI in 2017-2018.<sup>i</sup> Because their incomes are so low<sup>1</sup>, social assistance recipients are most likely to experience the most severe form of HFI – actually going without food because of a lack of money. With current disruptions in food accessibility due to the pandemic and increases to food prices<sup>iii</sup> forecasted before the pandemic without commensurate increases to benefit rates, a rise in the prevalence of severe HFI can be expected.

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<sup>1</sup> The maximum monthly Ontario Works benefit for a single person in Ontario is \$733 (\$390 maximum shelter allowance + \$343 basic allowance) and a single person qualifying for the CERB receives \$2000/month.

The largest segment of Canadians experiencing HFI in 2017-2018 (65%) reported employment as their primary source of income.<sup>i</sup> The high prevalence of HFI among those in the workforce is a function of precarious and low-paying jobs and multi-person households with a single income-earner. With the unprecedented loss of jobs due to COVID-19, many more people will be struggling with significantly less income. While the \$2000/month provided by CERB may be adequate for a single person sharing rent with others, for example, it is not enough to pay for monthly housing and food costs for a family of four with a single-income earner.

Food-based responses to HFI have also been rolled out during the pandemic, including a \$100M federal investment in food banks and other types of charitable food distribution systems.<sup>ii</sup> However, food charity has always been an inadequate and inefficient response to HFI. Before COVID-19, only about 25% of people experiencing HFI in Canada used food banks.<sup>iv</sup> Those struggling to afford enough to eat are also struggling to pay the rent and other expenses, so while being offered a few bags of food may help in the short-term, it does not solve long-term household financial constraints. HFI is not a food problem, it is an income problem.<sup>v</sup> Governments investing in charitable food systems to serve those who do not have money to access food in the most dignified means is morally, legally and politically unjust.<sup>vi</sup>

While it is hoped that the economic drain of the COVID-19 pandemic will be short-lived for many Canadian households, recovery will take longer for others. Many will be unable to make up lost income, and some will be pushed into permanent unemployment and bankruptcy. Persistent poverty is a significant problem in Canada and so too, is the economic insecurity of those who became poor on a moment's notice due to the pandemic. People without enough resources to meet modest needs with dignity require a secure, adequate and predictable income in the long-term – an insurance policy to protect against the risk of poverty and loss.<sup>vii</sup> **Now is the time for Canada to plan and deliver a robust basic income guarantee that protects working-age citizens from falling below an income floor that is adequate to meet basic needs.** "People who have money...have the opportunity to spend that money however they think best, and people always know better than bureaucrats or charities what their families need most."<sup>vii</sup>

In 2018, the Parliamentary Budget Officer estimated<sup>viii</sup> that a basic income for all Canadians, based on the Ontario Basic Income model, would cost approximately \$76B. However, when immediate cost savings are removed, such as social assistance costs and GST rebates, the net cost would be \$44B. This net cost is much less than the cost of poverty in Canada. A basic income guarantee for all would also align well with the pillars of Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy as it would help to foster dignity, opportunity and security for all recipients.

**We ask that you take immediate action to enact legislation for a basic income guarantee as an effective long-term response to the problem of persistent poverty and household food insecurity as well as shorter-term consequences of the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Sincerely,



Ellen Lakusiak, RD  
Co-Chair ODPH



Mary Ellen Prange, RD  
Co-Chair, ODPH Food Insecurity Workgroup

## References

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- <sup>i</sup> Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto, ON: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF); 2020 [cited 2020 April 25]. Available from: <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>.
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