

4/12/2007

Hon. Dalton McGuinty
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Bldg
Rm 281
Queen's Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Honourable Minister,

Re. *alPHA Resolution A05-18, Adequate Nutrition for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program Participants and Low Wage Earners*

On behalf of member Medical Officers of Health, Boards of Health and Affiliate organizations of the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA), I am writing today to re-introduce Resolution A05-18, *Adequate Nutrition for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program Participants and Low Wage Earners* (attached).

The irrefutable association between poverty and poor health has been and continues to be clearly demonstrated throughout society, from the community to the global levels. While poverty is but one of a roster of social and economic determinants of health, it is one for which relatively clear government policy interventions can have a direct and immediate impact.

alPHA as an association and its individual members have been continually advocating for such interventions, including immediate increases to the minimum wage, disability and social assistance payments, and ending the National Child Benefit Supplement clawback. It was therefore with great anticipation that our members awaited the content of your government's most recent budget, having heard that it was to include significant measures to address poverty.

While we are supportive of the steps taken in the March 2007 Ontario Budget (increases to the minimum wage, restructuring of the child benefits system, supports for the Best Start and Healthy Babies, Healthy Children programs), we are not satisfied that they go far enough fast enough.

In 2001, alPHA passed a resolution calling on the Government of Ontario to review and ensure that the Basic Allowance portion of social assistance payments allowed for adequate nutrition. In 2005, alPHA further resolved to urge that the adequacy of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program rates and the minimum wage be reviewed from a health perspective and that allowances for basic needs and shelter be based on actual current representative costs.

The adequacy of a living wage and social assistance rates must be measured against the costs of adequate nutrition (as determined by boards of health through the provincial Cost of a Nutritious Food Basket protocol), shelter, transportation, clothing, personal care and other basics. To be unable to meet these costs is to live in poverty, which many argue is the most significant barrier to good health.

While the term "poverty" is difficult to define, the most readily available set of data to measure it in terms of available income is Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut Off (LICO) levels. These reflect the income

required for material survival (not general welfare) for a range of family sizes in a range of community types.

In Toronto for example, the annual income of a single, full-time minimum wage earner fell short of the 2005 before-tax LICO by approximately 18%. For a couple with two children receiving social assistance, the gap was almost 60% ¹. It is quite clear that the gradual and modest increases to the minimum wage and to social assistance rates proposed in the 2007 Ontario budget are positive steps that will benefit some Ontarians, but fall well short of what will ultimately be required to ensure that all Ontarians are able to meet basic needs not only to survive, but also to be healthy.

We therefore are urging you to carefully review the attached Resolution as you consider further measures to decrease the unacceptably high number of Ontarians living in poverty, thereby reducing a major factor of poor health. We look forward to working with you further on this, among other strategies required to achieve your government's stated goal of making Ontarians the healthiest Canadians.

Yours truly,

ORIGINAL SIGNED

Linda Stewart,
Executive Director

Copy: Dr. George Pasut, Chief Medical Officer of Health (Acting)
Hon. George Smitherman, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care
Hon. Jim Watson, Minister of Health Promotion
Hon. Madeleine Meilleur, Minister of Community and Social Services
Hon. Mary Anne Chambers, Minister of Children and Youth Services

Encl.

¹ Toronto Social Services (2005), *The Continuing Erosion of Ontario Works Benefit Rates*, Report to Community Services Committee, November 8, 2005.

2005 aPHa Resolution A05-18

TITLE Adequate Nutrition for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program Participants and Low Wage Earners

SPONSOR: Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health

WHEREAS the 2001 aPHa RESOLUTION NO. A01-19 - Ontario Works Allowances and Adequate Nutrition endorses that “the Government of Ontario be urged to review and ensure that the Basic Allowance portion of Ontario Works Financial Assistance allows for adequate nutrition”;

WHEREAS The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care recommends that information about the cost of a Nutritious Food Basket be used on an ongoing basis to promote and support policy development to increase access to nutritious food;

WHEREAS in 1995, Ontario Works (OW) allowances were reduced by 21.6%, Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) allowances were frozen, and both have since been increased by only 3%;

WHEREAS these reductions to social assistance rates, combined with a 20% increase in inflation since 1995, have resulted in a decrease of 35% in the purchasing power of OW participants;

WHEREAS a family of four receiving OW benefits is eligible to receive a maximum allowance of \$1,215.00 per month to cover all expenses including food, rent, utilities, clothing and other necessities;

WHEREAS the maximum minimum wage paid to an experienced adult worker in Ontario is \$7.45 per hour and this rate is only expected to increase to \$8.00 per hour in 2007. A full-time worker (40 hrs/week) can be expected to earn \$1,222.00 per month to cover all expenses including health care costs in the absence of employer-provided health benefits;

WHEREAS in 2004, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Ontario represents a substantial portion of these monthly earnings (e.g. \$655.00 per month in the City of Greater Sudbury and \$1,052.00 in the City of Toronto);

WHEREAS Nutritious Food Basket measures continue to indicate that the Basic Allowance portion of OW and ODSP payments is unlikely to provide for adequate nutrition for individuals and families after shelter costs are taken into account. For the province of Ontario, it cost an average of \$122.83 per week in 2004 to feed a reference family of four, an increase of over 10.5% since 2000;

WHEREAS 322,911 individuals visited Ontario food banks in 2004, representing a 5% increase in food bank use since 2003, and it is known that 54% of Canadians who visited food banks reported social assistance as their primary source of income;

WHEREAS recent grassroots efforts supported by many health care providers to exploit the Special Diet Supplement for OW and ODSP participants represents a desperate measure that illustrates the depth of concern over the adequacy of social assistance levels for basic nutritional requirements;

WHEREAS adequate nutrition is essential for proper growth and development as well as a significant factor in preventing many chronic diseases including cancer;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Government of Ontario be further urged to review the adequacy of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program rates from a health perspective and that allowances for basic needs and shelter be based on actual current representative costs;

AND FURTHER THAT the Government of Ontario be urged to review the current minimum wage from a health perspective and establish a living wage for all Ontario workers;

AND FURTHER THAT the Premier of Ontario, the Ministers of Community and Social Services, Health and Long-Term Care, and Health Promotion and the Chief Medical Officer of Health are so advised.