

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

March 13, 2009

Dear Premier McGuinty,

Re. Put Food in the Budget

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 to urge your government to promote health and fight poverty by adding a Healthy Food Supplement to Ontario's social assistance payments to adults as part of the upcoming provincial budget.

We have argued for many years that fighting poverty is the best medicine money can buy. It has been very clearly demonstrated that income levels and health status rise and fall together. This is due to a number of factors and influences, but there is no disputing that good health is impossible without healthy food. We do our best to promote healthy choices and dietary habits, but without an adequate income, healthy food is a luxury that is out of reach for too many Ontarians. Good health is therefore also beyond their reach, putting them at increased risk of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and certain cancers.

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies is partnering with the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction in an Ontario-wide campaign to urge the Ontario government to add a \$100.00 Healthy Food Supplement to the Basic Needs Allowance as a down-payment on closing the gap between social assistance incomes and the cost of healthy eating.

Each of Ontario's 36 health units is required by the province to conduct the annual Cost of a Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey, which measures the basic cost of healthy eating in the areas that they serve. When these costs are added to average rents for the same area, it becomes clear that people on social assistance throughout the province are being forced to choose between paying rent and buying food. They are sending their children to school without breakfast or lunch and are relying on food banks for survival.

alPHA's 2009 Nutritious Food Basket survey indicates that in no part of Ontario can a single Ontario Works recipient afford the average rent and the cost of healthy eating at the same time. The average difference between the cost of rent and food and social assistance income for a single earner is over \$170.00. This is before accounting for other necessities such as transportation, utilities, toiletries, clothing and basic housewares.

Unless strategies are implemented to ensure that low-income Ontarians can afford to make healthy food choices, dietary interventions for the prevention and management of diseases and promotion of overall health will remain unavailable to those who are most at risk. Putting food in the budget will be a welcome and critical first step in changing that. It will also demonstrate the government's commitment to helping the most vulnerable citizens in these difficult economic times, to moving forward on its Poverty Reduction Strategy, to continuing progress on its Healthy Eating, Active Living Action Plan and to improve the success of its Diabetes Strategy.

I have attached alPHA's updated Nutritious Food Basket Survey for your information. We strongly believe that the case to promote health and fight poverty by putting food in the budget has been made. We hope you agree.

Sincerely,

ORIGINAL SIGNED

Linda Stewart,
Executive Director

Copy: Hon. Dwight Duncan, Minister of Finance
Hon. Margaret Best, Minister of Health Promotion
Hon. David Caplan, Minister of Health
Hon. Deb Matthews, Minister of Children and Youth Services
Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health (Acting)
Dr. Françoise Bouchard, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health – Health Promotion
Tracy Woloshyn, Chair, Ontario Public Health Association Food Security Workgroup



Nutritious Food Basket Survey

Update – February 2009

For more information contact:

Linda Stewart
Association of Local Public Health Agencies
502-425 University Avenue
Toronto, ON M5G 1T6
416-595-0006 x 22
linda@alphaweb.org

This report is an edited version of alPHA's 2007 Nutritious Food Basket Survey Final Report, which was distributed to alPHA members in October of 2007. Figures have been added for 2008, and the Report has been edited to inform advocacy efforts for the 2009 "Put Food in the Budget" campaign.

Introduction

The irrefutable association between low levels of income and poor health has been and continues to be clearly demonstrated throughout society, from the community to the global levels. While income 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 claw back.

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. Everyone has the right to enough nutritious food to eat. 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.

Survey Results

Public Health Units (PHUs) in Ontario calculate the cost of a nutritious food basket for their area on an annual basis. In the 2007 survey, all PHUs were asked to provide the cost of the nutritious food basket for the last 5 years for a family of four. At that time, 29 of the 36 health units had responded and all said that they would like to support provincial advocacy with local advocacy. Data from 2008 have been added to the original tables, along with an additional chart that includes NFB results and Ontario Works incomes for both the index family of four and a single male adult, along with average rents as reported by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. These figures clearly illustrate the challenge faced by recipients of social assistance to affording nutritious food and other basics, and were used to support advocacy for the "Put Food in the Budget" campaign.

The following chart summarizes the nutritious food basket cost information received for the index family of four (one adult of each gender, 25-49, a girl aged 7-9 and a boy aged 13-15) since 2003. It shows that the average weekly cost to feed a family of four a nutritious diet has increased steadily from \$122.50 in 2003 to \$139.10 in 2008 – an 11.36% increase over six years, including a 3.34% increase over the last year.

	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003
Algoma	\$143.54	\$135.95	\$129.06	\$126.85	\$122.72	\$124.65
Brant (2006)	\$142.15		\$142.16		\$132.14	\$131.56
Chatham-Kent (2007)	\$128.31	\$128.35	\$128.48	\$121.97	\$120.22	\$116.45
Durham	\$140.77	\$137.93	\$135.74	\$126.65	\$115.92	\$121.50
Eastern	\$143.54	\$136.28	\$132.20	\$130.61	\$126.00	\$128.00
Elgin-St. Thomas	\$139.15	\$134.66	\$125.48	\$124.84	\$124.39	\$122.75
Grey-Bruce	\$145.38					
Haldimand-Norfolk	\$126.69	\$126.76	\$126.53	\$119.30	\$120.91	\$120.73
HKPR	\$140.77	\$135.96	\$132.80	\$129.37	\$126.05	\$126.26
Halton	\$133.38	\$127.02	\$120.89	\$120.96	\$123.20	\$117.45
Hamilton	\$135.46	\$131.04	\$120.55	\$122.93	\$118.64	\$118.30
Hastings-Prince Edward	\$137.31					
Huron	\$137.08	\$137.11	\$130.98	\$123.64	\$124.62	\$123.80
Kingston	\$141.69					
Lambton (2007)	\$126.92	\$126.92	\$127.00	\$123.91	\$117.06	\$116.03
Leeds - Grenville	\$137.77	\$130.65	\$126.48	\$123.30	\$122.76	\$123.09
Middlesex - London	\$139.38					
Niagara	\$134.54	\$131.07	\$126.78	\$123.24	\$120.32	\$114.68
North Bay	\$130.62	\$130.65	\$131.41	\$123.82	\$121.91	\$122.71
Northwestern	\$176.08	\$161.00	\$154.72	\$159.63		
Ottawa	\$140.08		\$129.88	\$132.96	\$123.78	\$132.15
Oxford	\$135.92	\$130.24	\$125.50	\$122.00	\$126.00	\$123.00
Peel	\$122.31					
Perth	\$136.62					
Peterborough	\$145.15	\$136.62	\$129.91	\$130.54	\$124.64	\$121.36
Porcupine	\$156.92	\$147.57	\$137.09	\$137.20	\$128.45	\$126.22
Renfrew	\$128.54					
Simcoe - Muskoka	\$133.38	\$129.80	\$123.95	\$122.85	\$116.82	\$118.13
Sudbury	\$140.31	\$130.89	\$139.93	\$128.73	\$117.82	\$118.91
Thunder Bay	\$156.92	\$143.96	\$143.79	\$138.90	\$123.24	\$131.38
Timiskaming	\$137.54	\$137.62	\$132.19	\$127.89	\$123.01	\$131.43
Toronto	\$136.15	\$133.04	\$124.35	\$124.62	\$120.95	\$118.24
Waterloo	\$141.23	\$133.35	\$120.78	\$120.06	\$111.91	\$112.58
Wellington - Dufferin - Guelph	\$137.54	\$133.67	\$130.97	\$129.55	\$126.99	\$125.65
Windsor-Essex	\$135.23	\$131.99	\$125.76	\$125.46	\$124.50	\$118.81
York	\$143.08	\$134.09	\$127.38	\$129.11	\$123.04	\$124.11
AVG WEEKLY	\$139.10	\$134.60	\$130.44	\$127.53	\$122.43	\$122.50
Annual % increase:	3.34%	3.19%	2.28%	4.17%	-0.06%	
Increase over 6 years: 11.36%						

The following table contains data on the monthly cost of a nutritious food basket for an adult male (age 25-49) as well as the index family of four (one adult of each gender, 25-49, a girl aged 7-9 and a boy aged 13-15). These are in turn related to average rents and expected family incomes based on current Ontario Works rates.

	Monthly NFB (Adult Male 25-49)	Average Rent (Bachelor) (From CMHC Rental Market Reports - Fall 2008)	Income (\$580) Less Rent & NFB	Monthly NFB 2008 (Family of 4)	AVERAGE RENT (3 Bed) (From CMHC Rental Market Reports - Fall 2008)	Income (\$1782) less Rent & NFB
Algoma	\$216.00	\$412.00	-\$48.00	\$622.00	\$726.00	\$434.00
Brant (2006)	\$229.00	\$557.00	-\$206.00	\$616.00	\$880.00	\$286.00
Chatham- Kent (2007)	\$209.00	\$451.00	-\$80.00	\$556.00	\$633.00	\$593.00
Durham	\$185.00	\$615.00	-\$220.00	\$610.00	\$1,030.00	\$142.00
Eastern		\$475.00		\$622.00	\$703.00	\$457.00
Elgin-St. Thomas	\$183.00	\$433.00	-\$36.00	\$603.00	\$772.00	\$407.00
Grey-Bruce	\$219.00	\$486.00	-\$125.00	\$630.00	\$770.00	\$382.00
Haldimand- Norfolk	\$202.00	\$664.00	-\$286.00	\$549.00	\$750.00	\$483.00
HKPR	\$212.00	\$568.00	-\$200.00	\$610.00	\$958.00	\$214.00
Halton	\$209.00	\$721.00	-\$350.00	\$578.00	\$1,224.00	-\$20.00
Hamilton	\$212.00	\$501.00	-\$133.00	\$587.00	\$907.00	\$288.00
Hastings- Prince Edward	\$208.00	\$468.00	-\$96.00	\$595.00	\$1,105.00	\$82.00
Huron	\$208.00	\$524.00	-\$152.00	\$594.00	\$842.00	\$346.00
Kingston	\$216.00	\$558.00	-\$194.00	\$614.00	\$1,327.00	-\$159.00
Lambton (2007)		\$514.00		\$550.00	\$948.00	\$284.00
Leeds - Grenville	\$208.00	\$481.00	-\$109.00	\$597.00	\$724.00	\$461.00
Middlesex - London	\$210.00	\$525.00	-\$155.00	\$604.00	\$967.00	\$211.00
Niagara	\$176.00	\$505.00	-\$101.00	\$583.00	\$869.00	\$330.00
North Bay	\$198.00	\$485.00	-\$103.00	\$566.00	\$871.00	\$345.00
Northwestern	\$ 264.00	\$428.00	-\$112.00	\$763.00	\$740.00	\$279.00
Ottawa	\$213.00	\$671.00	-\$304.00	\$607.00	\$1,227.00	-\$52.00
Oxford	\$204.00	\$485.00	-\$109.00	\$589.00	\$717.00	\$476.00
Peel	\$196.00	\$710.00	-\$326.00	\$530.00	\$1,147.00	\$105.00
Perth	\$205.00	\$474.00	-\$99.00	\$592.00	\$840.00	\$350.00
Peterborough	\$221.00	\$568.00	-\$209.00	\$629.00	\$1,235.00	-\$82.00
Porcupine	\$237.00	\$430.00	-\$87.00	\$680.00	\$816.00	\$286.00
Renfrew	\$195.00	\$515.00	-\$130.00	\$557.00	\$708.00	\$517.00
Simcoe - Muskoka	\$201.00	\$627.00	-\$248.00	\$578.00	\$1,051.00	\$153.00
Sudbury	\$211.00	\$469.00	-\$100.00	\$608.00	\$863.00	\$311.00

	Monthly NFB (Adult Male 25-49)	Average Rent (Bachelor) (From CMHC Rental Market Reports - Fall 2008)	Income (\$580) Less Rent & NFB	Monthly NFB 2008 (Family of 4)	AVERAGE RENT (3 Bed) (From CMHC Rental Market Reports - Fall 2008)	Income (\$1782) less Rent & NFB
Thunder Bay	\$237.00	\$455.00	-\$112.00	\$680.00	\$844.00	\$258.00
Timiskaming	\$208.00	\$411.00	-\$39.00	\$596.00	\$670.00	\$516.00
Toronto	\$205.00	\$764.00	-\$389.00	\$590.00	\$1,293.00	-\$101.00
Waterloo	\$212.00	\$562.00	-\$194.00	\$612.00	\$1,010.00	\$160.00
Wellington – Dufferin - Guelph	\$226.00	\$615.00	-\$261.00	\$596.00	\$1,112.00	\$74.00
Windsor- Essex	\$205.00	\$502.00	-\$127.00	\$586.00	\$879.00	\$317.00
York	\$218.00	\$750.00	-\$388.00	\$620.00	\$1,242.00	-\$80.00
AVERAGES	\$209.55	\$538.31	-\$171.41	\$602.75	\$927.78	\$251.47

Notes: Average Rents are in most cases averages for the identified health unit as a whole, but where these were unavailable, statistics for the municipality where the health unit's central office is located are given.

Monthly NFB amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

Monthly NFB amounts for the Adult Male include a 15% adjustment to account for excess costs related to living alone.

These data clearly illustrate that in no part of the province does a single adult recipient of Ontario Works social assistance have the means to afford healthy food and basic shelter requirements at the same time. These combined costs are in excess of the amount they can be expected to receive in all cases, from a minimum of \$39 in Timiskaming to a maximum of \$389 in Toronto. The average deficit between Ontario Works Payments and average costs of nutritious food and basic shelter is over \$170.

It may be tempting to conclude that families are slightly better off in this scenario, as the numbers above show that in most cases, they have money left over after paying for food and shelter from their monthly Ontario Works allowances. What is important to note however, is that these data do not include any other basic necessities such as utilities, transport, clothing, toiletries, or any other items that most of us consider the basics for living.

Conclusion

Health inequalities are strongly related to social and economic ones, such as poverty, food insecurity, discrimination, inadequate housing and a host of others. They are the root causes of poor health, and addressing them will reduce preventable illness and premature death.

alPHa's members collect data on the cost of healthy eating throughout the province, under a mandate to promote access to sufficient, safe, nutritious and personally acceptable food in order to prevent chronic diseases, particularly within "priority populations" (defined within the Ontario Public Health Standards as "populations that are at risk and for whom public health interventions may be reasonably considered to have a substantial impact at the population level") to focus public health action.

The most effective action in this regard will be to ensure that the living wage and social assistance rates

are more reflective of the true costs of adequate nutrition, 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.

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa) is a non-profit organization that provides leadership to the 36 Boards of Health and Public Health Units in Ontario. Our members include board of health members, medical and associate medical officers of health, and senior public health managers in each of the public health disciplines – nursing, inspections, nutrition, dentistry, health promotion, epidemiology and business administration.