

Community Dispatch

An InfoFax of Community Development Halton

March 2009

Vol. 14, No. 2

Poverty Reduction Series:

Put Food in the Budget: Promote Health and Fight Poverty

I share with you an immediate measure, a \$100 healthy food supplement, which protects the vulnerable in society. It grows out of the advice received in 30 community consultations held across the province in the late fall of 2008. Halton was one of the participating communities. As a result the healthy food supplement is one of the recommendations in the Blueprint for Economic Stimulus and Poverty Reduction in Ontario. The food supplement is not only an action that will diminish hunger, provide access to healthier food and lessen chronic diseases but also will stimulate local economies.

Joey Edwardh

INTRODUCTION

Everyone has the right to enough nutritious food to eat. Eating well in Halton and in Ontario is mostly about having income to purchase nutritious food. Achieving income adequacy is a fundamental component of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. Current incomes for people on social assistance have fallen dangerously below poverty levels. Ontario Works (OW) rates were cut by almost 22 percent in the mid-1990s and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) rates were frozen. Only modest increases have been seen since 2004.

Research on the social determinants of health continues to demonstrate the negative health effects of poverty. A recent report, *Poverty is Making Us Sick*, says: "low income almost inevitably ensures poor health and significant health inequity in Canada." The same report indicates that households in the bottom 20 percent of the income spectrum have a significantly higher incidence of a wide range of illnesses. It demonstrates that an annual increase of only \$1,000 in income for the poorest 20 percent of Canadians would lead to almost 10,000 fewer

chronic conditions and 6,600 fewer disability days every two weeks.

Household food insufficiency is clearly linked with poorer health, including higher odds of restricted activity, multiple chronic conditions, major depression, heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and food allergies.

For the last 10 years the Ontario government has mandated the province's 36 local health units to collect and report the annual cost of a Nutritious Food Basket in their areas. These reports consistently show a vast gap between the level of benefits received by people on social assistance and their ability to meet their basic food requirements along with other necessities of life. The recent Halton Region Health Department publication, *The Price of Eating Well in Halton 2008*, concurs and states: "In reality, people usually choose to pay their rent and other fixed expenses e.g., heat, hydro, and transportation. Food becomes a 'discretionary' expense, resulting in a diet of poor nutritional value."

There is no current formula for establishing social assistance benefit levels and the basic needs allowance is set far below actual market costs. The Government of Ontario's promised Social Assistance Review offers an opportunity to seriously study the true cost of these basic necessities in communities across Ontario in order to establish a benchmark for income adequacy for use in setting benefit rates. But something needs to be done now, in the interim, because Ontarians and their children are going hungry and getting sick. The costs of preventable sickness are picked up in the social and health care systems later. Therefore, the Blueprint for Economic Stimulus

and Poverty Reduction in Ontario recommended that the Government in their budget:

- Introduce a \$100 monthly Healthy Food Supplement to begin to address serious deficiencies in the Basic Needs Allowance of all adults receiving OW or ODSP.

Major national and international studies agree that low-income and food insecurity create health inequities. Therefore, the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction, the Social Planning Network of Ontario and the Association of Local Public Health Agencies are actively supporting an Ontario-wide campaign for a **Healthy Food Supplement**. The supplement will serve as a down payment in closing the monthly gap of food deficiency while reducing the negative health effects of poverty.

The healthy food supplement will also stimulate spending in our local economies. As a recent Globe and Mail editorial stated, the idea of putting money in the hand of low-income people who will spend it in their communities “is an idea with remarkably wide consensus... In these times, putting money in the hands of those who need it is good policy.”

For information on the \$100 **healthy food supplement** see www.povertywatchontario.ca.

Sign the petition on this site and indicate to Government that it is time to Put Food in The Budget by introducing a \$100 **healthy food supplement**.



Produced by Community Development Halton
860 Harrington Court
Burlington, Ontario L7N 3N4
(905) 632-1975, (905) 878-0955; Fax: (905) 632-0778;
E-mail: office@cdhalton.ca
Web site: www.cdhalton.ca
www.volunteerhalton.ca

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