

Board of Health Briefing Note

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
Date: March 6, 2024
Topic: **Endorsement of Public Health Sudbury & Districts Letter on Household Food Insecurity**
Submitted by: Dr. Glenn Corneil, Acting Medical Officer of Health/CEO
Prepared by: Cristina Benea, Public Health Dietitian
Reviewed by: Erin Cowan, Director of Health Promotion; Amanda Mongeon, Program Manager

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended THAT the Timiskaming Board of Health endorse the Public Health Sudbury and Districts calls for the provincial government to incorporate local food affordability data in determining adequacy of social assistance rates to reflect the current costs of living and to index to inflation going forward as summarized by multiple Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alpha) resolutions: [A05-18](#) (Adequate Nutrition for Ontario Works and Living Wage), [A18-02](#) (Minimum Wage that is Living Wage), [A15-04](#) (Basic Income Guarantee), and [A23-05](#) (Monitoring Food Affordability in Ontario and the Inadequacy of Social Assistance Rates) and to continue prioritizing monitoring food affordability as part of population health and surveillance efforts.

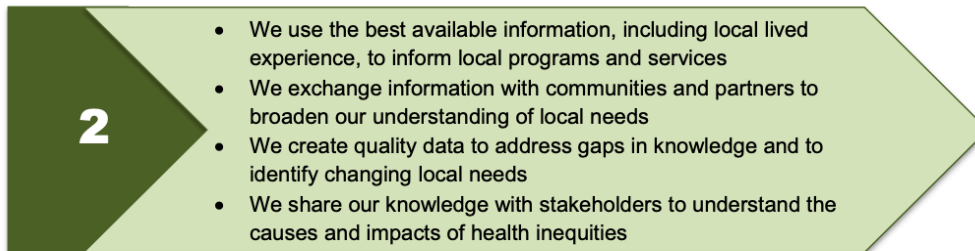
Overview

Household food insecurity (HFI) is a pressing public health issue with profound implications for individuals' health and well-being. The recent resolution #06-24 passed by the Board of Health for Public Health Sudbury & Districts highlights the urgency of addressing this issue (Appendix A). It calls upon the provincial government to take concrete steps towards ensuring adequate social assistance rates that reflect the current cost of living and to prioritize monitoring food affordability. This policy brief aims to support and demonstrate local relevance of these recommendations, outlining the critical importance of addressing household food insecurity and proposing actionable steps to mitigate its impact.

Ontario Public Health Standards (2018) and Timiskaming Health Unit Strategic Plan 2019-2023 Links

This work directly contributes to meeting the requirements and expected outcomes in the Ontario Public Health Standards (2018) and supports THU 2019-2023 the following strategic directions 2 and 3.

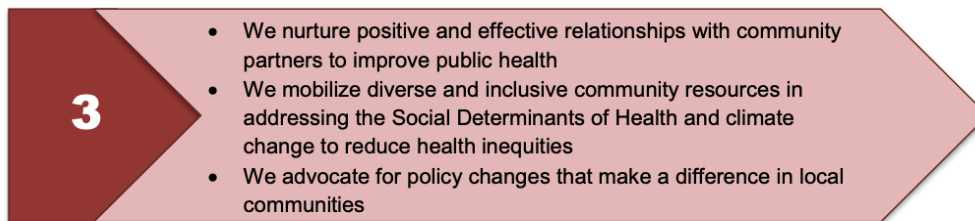
We create, share and exchange knowledge



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- We use the best available information, including local lived experience, to inform local programs and services
- We exchange information with communities and partners to broaden our understanding of local needs
- We create quality data to address gaps in knowledge and to identify changing local needs
- We share our knowledge with stakeholders to understand the causes and impacts of health inequities

We collaborate with partners to make a difference in our communities



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- We nurture positive and effective relationships with community partners to improve public health
- We mobilize diverse and inclusive community resources in addressing the Social Determinants of Health and climate change to reduce health inequities
- We advocate for policy changes that make a difference in local communities

Background

HFI is a pressing issue defined by inadequate access to food due to financial constraints.¹ In Timiskaming, where 15% of the population faces low income,² one in five households experiences food insecurity,³ affecting nearly 18% of children (interpret these data with caution due to sample size limitations).⁴ Households most at risk include those living in low-income, lone-parent (particularly female lone parents), those working precariously, and those relying on social assistance programs like Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program.⁵

The consequences of HFI are severe, impacting physical and mental health by increasing the risk of chronic diseases like diabetes,⁶ heart disease, high blood pressure, arthritis,⁷ and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.^{8,9} Food-insecure individuals impact healthcare costs, which are 121% higher for adults living in severely food-insecure households compared to food-secure ones.¹⁰

In Canada, having a job or social assistance isn't always enough to avoid HFI. Over half of those facing food insecurity rely on employment income, as minimum wage hasn't kept pace with inflation, which places households dependent on minimum wage income at an elevated risk of HFI.² Ontario, for instance, falls short of mandating a living wage, exacerbating financial struggles.¹¹ Increasing household income, whether through a Basic Income Guarantee or/and raising social assistance rates, is crucial to tackling HFI.¹² The Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey in Ontario is conducted by Public Health Units (PHUs) to monitor food affordability, which involves measuring and monitoring the cost of foods that reflect healthy eating recommendations to ensure access to nutritious, safe, and acceptable foods.¹³

Implementing basic income has shown promise in reducing HFI. Studies indicate a 50% drop in food insecurity among low-income seniors due to income support programs like Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement.¹⁴ Pilot studies in Ontario and Newfoundland and Labrador also demonstrate the efficacy of income-based interventions in reducing HFI rates and encouraging healthier food choices. For instance, Newfoundland and Labrador policy reforms prioritized strengthening social

assistance by having them indexed to inflation yearly and increasing the special diet allowance for social assistance recipients.¹⁴ The province found that HFI prevalence for those receiving income from social assistance dropped from 59.9% in 2007 to 33.5% in 2012 due to a cascade of policy reforms.¹⁴ Thus, income-based solutions indexed to inflation, along with affordable housing, childcare, and ensuring local jobs pay a living wage that reflect the true costs of living offering benefits and employment stability, are effective strategies to address poverty, the root cause of HFI.

Local Public Health Action Related to HFI

THU staff continue to implement multiple initiatives to address HFI, which include monitoring food affordability, advocating for income-based solutions, raising public awareness, knowledge translation, and collaborating with local partners such as the Community Food Action Network to support policies and programs to promote income security, food literacy, and social well-being.

Timiskaming BOH History Related to HFI and/or Income Solutions to Address Poverty:

- **May 2023:** Motion #21R-2023. Addressing Household Food Insecurity in Ontario.
- **March 2021:** Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity
- **June 2020:** Motion #26R-2020 Basic Income Food Income Security during Covid-19 Pandemic and Beyond
- **April 2020:** Motion #18R-2020 response to the Ontario Government as part of their consultation on Poverty Reduction Strategy.
- **March 2020:** Receive 2019 Nutritious Food basket Costing Results and Household Food Insecurity Action and motion #8R-2002 to support KFLA January 28, 2002 motion *Monitoring of food insecurity and food affordability*.
- **April 2019:** Motion #23R-2019. Northern Fruit & Vegetable Program Funding Letter.
- September 2019: Motion #44R-2019 Federal Election Campaign.
- **April 2019:** Motion #23R-2019 Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program.
- Q3 Report 2018: Letter to Government of Ontario advocating for reconsideration of basic income pilot cancellation, maintaining the planned social assistance rate increases, and act on the recommendations from the Income Security Roadmap.
- **April 2018:** Information re. 2017 Nutritious Food Basket Results and Addressing Household Food Insecurity, and THU's participation in the Cent\$less campaign.
- **September 2018:** Presentation re. Public Health Policy Priorities for Consideration – 2018 Municipal Election.
- **September 2015:** Resolution #01-2015: Support for a Basic Income Guarantee.
- **January 2012:** Resolution #01-2012. Social assistance funding freeze.
- **December 2008:** Resolution #09-2008. Nutritious Food Basket and Poverty Reduction Strategy.

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January 24, 2024

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

The Honourable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building, Queen's Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Dear Recipient:

Re: Household Food Insecurity

At its meeting on January 18, 2024, the Board of Health carried the following resolution #06-24:

WHEREAS food security is a chronic and worsening health issue as documented by annual local data on food affordability and as recognized by multiple Association of Local Public Health Agencies (ALPHA) resolutions: [AO5-18](#) (Adequate Nutrition for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program), [A18-02](#) (Minimum Wage that is a Living Wage), [A15-04](#) (Basic Income Guarantee), and [A23-05](#) (Monitoring Food Affordability in Ontario and the Inadequacy of Social Assistance Rates)

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Board of Health for Public Health Sudbury & Districts call on the provincial government to incorporate local food affordability findings in determining adequacy of social assistance rates to reflect the current costs of living and to index Ontario Works rates to inflation going forward; and

THAT in the context of the Public Health Strengthening roles and responsibilities deliberations, the Board of Health urge all health system partners to remain committed to population health assessment and surveillance as it relates to monitoring food environments and, specifically, to monitoring food affordability; and share this motion broadly with local and provincial stakeholders.

Sudbury

1300 rue Paris Street
Sudbury ON P3E 3A3
t: 705.522.9200
f: 705.522.5182

Elm Place

10 rue Elm Street
Unit / Unité 130
Sudbury ON P3C 5N3
t: 705.522.9200
f: 705.677.9611

Sudbury East / Sudbury-Est

1 rue King Street
Box / Boîte 58
St.-Charles ON P0M 2W0
t: 705.222.9201
f: 705.867.0474

Espanola

800 rue Centre Street
Unit / Unité 100 C
Espanola ON P5E 1J3
t: 705.222.9202
f: 705.869.5583

Île Manitoulin Island

6163 Highway / Route 542
Box / Boîte 87
Mindemoya ON P0P 1S0
t: 705.370.9200
f: 705.377.5580

Chapleau

34 rue Birch Street
Box / Boîte 485
Chapleau ON P0M 1K0
t: 705.860.9200
f: 705.864.0820

toll-free / sans frais

1.866.522.9200

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Household food insecurity is one of the strongest predictors of poor health, making it a serious public health issue (PROOF, 2023). Individuals who are food insecure are at higher risk of diet-related diseases like diabetes and are at higher risk for a wide range of chronic conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders, arthritis, and chronic pain. Household food insecurity leaves an indelible mark on children's health and well-being (PROOF, 2023). The experience of food insecurity in childhood is associated with mental health concerns throughout childhood and into early adulthood (PROOF, 2023). In Ontario, the healthcare costs of individuals who are the most food insecure can be more than double that of individuals who are food secure (PROOF, 2023, Tarasuk et al., 2015).

Thank you for your attention to this important issue – the solutions for which will not only help many Ontarians in need but also protect the sustainability of our critical health and social services resources.

Sincerely,



Penny Sutcliffe, MD, MHSc, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health and Chief Executive Officer

cc: Honourable Michael Parsa, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services
Honourable Peter Bthlenfalvy, Ministry of Finance
Honourable Paul Calandra, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing
Honourable Sylvia Jones, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
France Gélinas, Member of Provincial Parliament, Nickel Belt
Jamie West, Member of Provincial Parliament, Sudbury
Michael Mantha, Member of Provincial Parliament, Algoma-Manitoulin
Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health
Jacqueline Edwards and Jennifer Babin-Fenske, Co-chairs, Greater Sudbury Food Policy Council
Richard Lathwell, Local Food Manitoulin
Colleen Hill, Executive Director, Manitoulin Family Resources
All Ontario Boards of Health
Association of Local Public Health Agencies

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