



# Position Statement on Responses to Food Insecurity

November 2015

## Background

Food insecurity – inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints – is a serious social and public health problem in Ontario. In 2013, 624,200 Ontario households (12.5%) experienced food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> This translates into 1,598,200 people, of which 485,700 were under the age of 18 (Valerie Tarasuk, PhD, email communication, August 27, 2015).

The root cause of food insecurity is poverty.<sup>2</sup> The magnitude of poverty in the country contravenes Canada's commitment to ensure the basic human right to food for all citizens.<sup>3</sup> The majority (57.5%) of Ontario families struggling to put food on the table are part of the labour force but trapped in low-paying or unstable jobs.<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity affected 64.5% of Ontario households reliant on social assistance in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

It is the position of the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH) that food insecurity is an urgent human rights and social justice issue for local, provincial and federal public policy agendas. Food charity is an ineffective and counterproductive response to food insecurity because it does not address the root cause which is poverty. An income response is required to effectively address food insecurity.

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The Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH) is the independent and official voice of over 200 Registered Dietitians working in Ontario's public health system. OSNPPH provides leadership in public health nutrition by promoting and supporting member collaboration to improve the health of Ontario residents through the implementation of the Ontario Public Health Standards.

Adults in food insecure households have poorer self-rated health, poorer mental and physical health, poorer oral health, greater stress, and are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and anxiety.<sup>5</sup> Food insecurity also makes it difficult to manage chronic diseases and conditions through diet. Household food insecurity increases the risk of mental health problems in children and puts teenagers at greater risk of depression, social anxiety and suicide.<sup>6</sup> Being food insecure is strongly associated with becoming a high-cost user of health care.<sup>7,8</sup>

While the terms ‘food insecurity’ and ‘hunger’ may be used interchangeably, they are not the same thing. Food insecurity has been defined as, “household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food,” while hunger has been defined as, “an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity.”<sup>9</sup>

## The Food Charity Response

Food charity is not new, and in most cultures offering food to hungry people is considered the right thing to do. Currently, food charity in Canada includes a variety of ad-hoc community-based programs, including food banks and meal programs.

Food banks are the primary community response to household food insecurity. They were originally intended as temporary food relief operations necessitated by the recession in the early 1980s; however, demands for

charitable food assistance did not diminish as the economy improved and numbers using food banks continued to expand.<sup>10</sup> Over the past 30+ years, food banks have become a well-established part of the fabric of many communities across Ontario and Canada. Food banking has grown and evolved into an extensive charity-based secondary food distribution system specifically for impoverished people.

The growth of food charity has been linked to a reduction in social programs, as governments abandon previously held responsibilities for the well-being of citizens and rely on community-based charities to fill the gap.<sup>10,11,12</sup> People in need of food are routinely directed to charitable food programs by government websites, case workers and health care providers.

In March of 2014, Ontario food banks were visited by 374,698 adults and children.<sup>13</sup> The number of households accessing food banks for the very first time increased by 20%, from 14,206 in 2013 to 17,182 households in March 2014.<sup>13</sup> Although a considerable number of people go to food banks, they represent only a small proportion – about 25% – of those who experience food insecurity.<sup>14,15</sup> For this reason, food bank usage statistics are not a valid measure of food insecurity.<sup>16</sup>

Food banks operate under many constraints, relying on volunteers and inconsistent food and monetary donations from the public and corporate sponsors.<sup>10,17</sup> Demand for food always exceeds the supply. Balance between supply and demand is achieved only when the amount of food provided per visit and/or the frequency of visits is restricted.<sup>17</sup> Because of

supply limitations, food banks are typically not able to meet the preferences, religious restrictions, nutritional or health-related dietary needs of clients.<sup>10,15,18,19</sup> Access can be challenging with limited operating hours, long line-ups, and lack of transportation to get to a food bank.<sup>15</sup> Despite the best intentions of volunteers and staff, the experience of accessing food banks undermines people's dignity.<sup>11,15</sup> All of these limitations and challenges may explain, at least in part, why only a minority of people who experience food insecurity access food banks. In summary, food banks are an ineffective response to food insecurity.

The government plays a supportive role in the charitable food model by permitting and encouraging donations while absolving donors of liability for the safety of donated food.<sup>20</sup> Food Banks Canada has lobbied the federal government to provide tax credits to corporate donors but this proposal has not been adopted.<sup>11</sup> However, Ontario's Local Food Act, introduced in 2013, includes tax credits for farmers who donate agricultural produce to community food programs.<sup>21</sup>

Corporations exert significant control and influence over charitable food programs in many ways, while reaping the benefits of participating in corporate social responsibility initiatives. Corporations participate as board members for food charity organizations at the provincial and national levels<sup>22,23</sup> and provide significant food and monetary donations.<sup>19,22,24</sup> Corporations directly benefit from supporting food charity, as market research has shown that companies who contribute to a good cause build brand loyalty, attract new customers, drive

word of mouth advertising and grow revenue.<sup>25</sup> They also benefit from donating unsaleable food by avoiding landfill disposal fees.<sup>24</sup> Corporate self-promotion of their food charity efforts and associated media coverage further promote the public perception that food charity is an acceptable and appropriate response to food insecurity.<sup>12,22</sup>

The media perpetuate a positive illusion of the benefits of food charity.<sup>12,22</sup> Actively drawing attention to fund-raising and food drive efforts enables people to 'feel good' when they contribute. However, the media rarely acknowledge the inadequacies of food charity or that the underlying problem of persistent poverty is the root cause of food insecurity. Well-intentioned people are persuaded to believe that those who don't have enough food are in the good hands of charity.<sup>22</sup>

By contributing to the institutionalization of food charity and feeding the public perception that food insecurity is a matter for charity, the media and corporations have become a major obstacle in advancing public policy to address poverty and food insecurity.<sup>22</sup> The current charitable food model absolves governments of their responsibility to ensure the basic right to food security for all.<sup>12</sup>

## The Income Response

Current evidence indicates the need for targeted and sustainable approaches to address the root causes of food insecurity.<sup>26</sup> Implementation of a basic income guarantee (also known as guaranteed annual income) would ensure income at an adequate level to meet basic needs and for people to live with dignity, regardless of work status.<sup>27</sup>

A basic income guarantee has the potential to eliminate poverty and spending on its consequences. The Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), a form of guaranteed income for Canadians 65 years and older, has resulted in a substantial decline in seniors living below the poverty line and one of the lowest rates of elder poverty in the world.<sup>26</sup> The rate of Canadians experiencing food insecurity has been found to be fifty percent less among low income people aged 65 to 69 compared to those aged 60 to 64, and self-reported rates of physical and mental health improved significantly after moving from low-wage, insecure employment to a guaranteed income at the age of 65.<sup>28</sup> Implementing a guaranteed income program for those of working age would reduce steep income inequalities and contribute to better health and fewer societal problems, leading to long-term savings in health care and other public services.<sup>29</sup>

Guaranteed income is a simpler and more transparent approach to social assistance than the current system. Furthermore, it would extend protection to those who are currently not covered or poorly covered by social assistance programs.<sup>30</sup>

The cost of implementing a basic income program would involve substantial government spending.<sup>31</sup> However, even conservative estimates of the indirect costs of poverty (e.g., health care, remedial education, crime, and social assistance programs) are far higher than the costs of actually lifting people out of poverty.<sup>32</sup>

## Position

It is the position of the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH) that food insecurity is an urgent human rights and social justice issue for local, provincial and federal public policy agendas. Food charity is an ineffective and counterproductive response to food insecurity because it does not address the root cause which is poverty. An income response is required to effectively address food insecurity.



## OSNPPH calls on:

- Ontario Public Health Units to promote and support implementation of the “Income Security - the effective response to food insecurity” campaign.
- Ontario Boards of Health to officially endorse OSNPPH’s Position Statement on Responses to Food Insecurity
- Municipal governments to urge provincial and federal governments to prioritize and investigate a basic income guarantee.
- Individuals to contact or meet with local politicians at all levels about their concerns with the food charity response to food insecurity and the potential benefits of a basic income guarantee.
- Schools, faith-based organizations, emergency services, local businesses, and community organizations to become aware of and promote income security as the effective response to food insecurity.
- Media to support campaigns for adequate income security, affordable social housing and child care, enhanced mental health services, together with an integrated national food policy, instead of food drives.
- Federal and provincial governments to consider and investigate a basic income guarantee as a policy option for reducing poverty and income insecurity and for providing opportunities for people with a low income.

### Additional Information

“Food insecurity is a serious public health problem” infographic <http://www.osnpph.on.ca/>

Income-Related Policy Recommendations to Address Food Insecurity. Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health, September 2015. <http://www.osnpph.on.ca/>

Public Health Support for a Basic Income Guarantee. Association of Local Public Health Agencies Resolutions, June 2015. [http://www.alphaweb.org/?page=ALPHA\\_Resolutions](http://www.alphaweb.org/?page=ALPHA_Resolutions) click on: [Resolutions passed at the most recent AGM](#)

Hyndman B and Simon L. Basic Income Guarantee: Backgrounder. August 2015 [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.alphaweb.org/resource/collection/822EC60D-0D03-413E-B590-AFE1AA8620A9/ALPHA-OPHA\\_HEWG\\_Basic\\_Income\\_Backgrounder\\_Final\\_Sept\\_2015.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.alphaweb.org/resource/collection/822EC60D-0D03-413E-B590-AFE1AA8620A9/ALPHA-OPHA_HEWG_Basic_Income_Backgrounder_Final_Sept_2015.pdf)

Basic Income Canada Network <http://www.basicincomecanada.org/>

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