

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Christopher Mackie, Medical Officer of Health and CEO

DATE: 2016 November 17

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## 2016 NUTRITIOUS FOOD BASKET SURVEY RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT PUBLIC POLICY

### Recommendations

*It is recommended that the Board of Health:*

- 1. Write to the Premier of Ontario and the Ontario Minister responsible for the Poverty Reduction Strategy and also direct staff to prepare a written submission to the [Ontario Government's Basic Income Pilot Consultation](#) recognizing the Government's commitment to a basic income pilot and urging that it be funded at a sufficient level to ensure adequate benefits and strong study design.*
- 2. Write to the Minister of Community and Social Services and local MPP's in support of Bill 6, [Ministry of Community Social Services Amendment Act \(Social Assistance Research Commission\)](#).*
- 3. Write to the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care supporting the inclusion of the Nutritious Food Basket standard in the modernized Ontario Public Health Standards with updates to the [Nutritious Food Basket Guidance Document](#) based on input from public health staff.*
- 4. Forward Report No. 063-16 re "2016 Nutritious Food Basket Survey Results and Implications for Government Public Policy" to Ontario Boards of Health, the City of London, Middlesex County & appropriate community agencies.*

### Key Points

- The Nutritious Food Basket survey, conducted annually by all public health units in Ontario to monitor food affordability for various individual and family income scenarios, repeatedly demonstrates that incomes are not adequate for many Middlesex-London residents to afford basic needs.
- Social determinants of health (e.g., food access, income, housing and employment) explain part of the health inequities that exist within and across societies and are strongly influenced by public policy.

### Background

Each year in May, Ontario public health units conduct the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey in accordance with the Ontario Public Health Standards. The survey provides a measure of the cost of basic healthy eating. The NFB results are used to monitor food affordability by comparing the local cost of the food basket and rental costs to various individual and family income scenarios. Poor nutrition increases the risk of chronic and infectious diseases, and negatively impacts the growth and development of children.

### Survey Results

In May 2016, the estimated local monthly cost to feed a family of four was \$862.32. This is a \$1.65 or 0.2% increase from the estimated cost in May 2015. Estimated food costs are a snapshot of the prices at the time. Any increase or decrease year to year may or may not represent a significant change, especially in context with other changes (e.g., utilities and housing costs, incomes). In general, food is affordable for Middlesex-London residents with adequate incomes. A family of four with average income spends only about 12% of their income after-tax on food. Individuals and families with low incomes spend up to 40% of their income on food, not because food costs too much, but because their incomes are too low.

Table 1 highlights scenarios for Middlesex-London residents, utilizing 2016 income rates, rental costs and food costs. This survey again shows that people with low incomes cannot afford to eat healthy after

meeting other essential needs for basic living. [Appendix A](#), “*Food Security in Middlesex-London (2016)*”, provides an overview of local food security, income adequacy and opportunities for community action.

**Table 1 – Monthly Income and Cost of Living Scenarios for 2016**

	Single Man Ontario Works	Single Man ODSP	Single Woman over 70 Old Age Security /Guaranteed Income Security	Family of 4 Ontario Works	Family of 4 Minimum Wage Earner	Family of 4 Average Income (after tax)
Income (Including Benefits & Credits)	\$768	\$1206	\$1563	\$2227	\$2940	\$7448
Estimated Rent**	\$603	\$781	\$781	\$1058	\$1058	\$1058
Food (Nutritious Food Basket)	289.73	289.73	\$210.44	\$862.32	\$862.32	\$862.32
<b>WHAT’S LEFT?*</b>	<b>-\$124.73</b>	<b>\$135.27</b>	<b>\$571.56</b>	<b>\$306.68</b>	<b>\$1019.68</b>	<b>\$5527.68</b>

\* People still need funds for utilities, phone, transportation, cleaning supplies, personal care items, clothing, gifts, entertainment, internet, school supplies, medical and dental costs and other costs.

\*\*Rental estimates are from *Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation Rental Market Statistics, Fall 2015*. Utility costs may or may not be included in the rental estimates.

### Opportunities for Action

The social determinants of health, such as food access, income, housing and employment, are strongly influenced by government public policy decisions. Annually the Board of Health utilizes the NFB data and income scenarios to advocate for public policies that positively impact these determinants of health.

In 2015, the Board of Health supported basic income ([Report 50-15](#)). The Ontario government announced a basic income pilot in the 2016 budget and is seeking [public input](#). This requires a strong research design and sufficient funding to ensure an appropriate sample size, an adequate benefit level for participants and an adequate pilot duration to effectively inform future policy decisions. Data collection requires sufficient details about changes in participants’ behaviours and quality of life.

The Board of Health has repeatedly urged the province to increase social assistance rates to reflect the rising cost of food and housing ([Report 50-15](#), [Report 53-14](#)). Bill 6, [Ministry of Community Social Services Amendment Act \(Social Assistance Research Commission\)](#), would establish an advisory group that annually recommends regional Ontario social assistance rates based on actual costs, including food, shelter, transportation. The Bill unanimously passed second reading in September and was referred to committee. Bill 6 could improve incomes for people on social assistance, which would substantially improve health.

In November 2015, the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care announced a review of the [Ontario Public Health Standards](#) (OPHS). Monitoring food affordability helps generate evidence-based recommendations for adequate incomes and should be included in the modernized OPHS; however, the [Nutrition Food Basket Guidance Document](#) requires revision, with input from public health dietitians, due to the changing nature of food products over time and Canadian consumption patterns.

This report was prepared by Kim Loupos, Registered Dietitian, and Linda Stobo, Manager, Chronic Disease Prevention & Tobacco Control Team.



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