

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Christopher Mackie, Medical Officer of Health / CEO

DATE: 2018 September 20

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## 2018 NUTRITIOUS FOOD BASKET SURVEY RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT PUBLIC POLICY AND ACTION

### **Recommendations**

*It is recommended that the Board of Health:*

- 1) *Request that the federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development commit additional funding for poverty reduction in Budget 2019, and report the marginal food insecurity category separately from the food secure category within the Canadian Community Health Survey Household Food Security Survey Module;*
- 2) *Request that the Ontario Minister of Children, Community and Social Services consider reinstating the Ontario Basic Income Pilot study to support completion of the evaluation, and to increase social assistance rates to reflect the cost of nutritious food and safe housing; and,*
- 3) *Forward Report No. 053-18 re: “2018 Nutritious Food Basket Survey Results and Implications for Government Public Policy and Action” to Ontario boards of health, the City of London, Middlesex County, and appropriate community agencies.*

### **Key Points**

- The Nutritious Food Basket survey results for 2018 demonstrate that incomes are not adequate for many Middlesex-London residents to afford basic needs.
- Food insecurity has a pervasive impact on health, and there is a need for income-based solutions.
- Action to address food insecurity and poverty is needed at all levels of government, including the implementation of [Opportunity for All – Canada’s First Poverty Reduction Strategy](#), Ontario’s Basic Income Pilot, and announced social assistance reform and community programs, such as the [Community Volunteer Income Tax Program](#).

### **Background and Survey Results**

Food insecurity is the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. It impacts one in eight households in Middlesex-London, with negative effects on physical and mental health. Adults who are severely food-insecure cost our healthcare system 2.5 times more than food-secure adults. Food insecurity disproportionately affects certain populations, including Indigenous peoples, lone-parent families, and low-income households.

This year, thirty-one Ontario public health units completed the Nutritious Food Basket survey to monitor food affordability as per the Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol, 2018, comparing the local cost of food basket and rental costs in various income scenarios.

In May 2018, the estimated local monthly cost to feed a family of four was \$851.80. Estimated food costs are a snapshot of prices at the time of data collection. Year-to-year changes may or may not be significant, especially in the context of 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 a median income

spends only about 11% of their after-tax income on food. Households with low incomes spend up to 35% of their income on food, not because food costs too much but because their incomes are too low.

[Appendix A](#) highlights scenarios for Middlesex-London residents using 2018 income rates, rental costs, and food costs, demonstrating that people with low incomes cannot afford to eat healthily after meeting other essential needs for basic living.

Although Middlesex-London residents are not participants in the [Ontario Basic Income Pilot](#) (OBIP), two OBIP scenarios were included to demonstrate the positive financial impact for participants. Anecdotally, OBIP participants in other jurisdictions reported many positive outcomes, including being able to afford basic needs, paying bills, finding work, improved mental health, planning for the future (e.g., saving money, further education), and contributing to the local community ([Appendix B](#)). [Appendix C](#) provides an overview of local food insecurity, income inadequacy, and opportunities for community action.

### **Opportunities for Action**

While community food programs that address poor food skills, nutrition knowledge, or retail food access are important, they do not address the root cause of food insecurity, which is poverty. The Government of Canada recently released “[Opportunity for All – Canada’s First Poverty Reduction Strategy](#)”; [Appendix D](#) provides a summary. The Strategy establishes an Official Poverty Line and includes annual measuring and reporting of targets and indicators, including food security, as measured by the Canadian Community Health Survey Household Food Security Survey Module. The Strategy also includes poverty reduction efforts announced in previous budgets. It is recommended that the Board of Health request the Government of Canada to commit to additional resources for poverty reduction in Budget 2019 ([Appendix E](#)).

Statistics Canada currently combines the categories of food security and marginal food insecurity (i.e., worrying about running out of food and/or limited food selection due to a lack of money for food). However, research shows that all individuals who experience some level of food insecurity are at greater risk of physical and mental health concerns. It is methodologically flawed to consider such individuals to be food secure.

The current income support system in Ontario is inadequate for households to cover basic needs. On July 31, 2018, the Ontario government announced they will develop and announce a sustainable social assistance program within one hundred days. The changes to income security programs proposed by the previous government have been replaced by an intermediate 1.5% increase to Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. A wind-down of the OBIP was also announced. The Board of Health has a history of supporting social assistance reform and basic income (see reports [060-17](#), [007-17](#), [063-16](#), and [050-15](#)). It is recommended that the Board of Health request that the Ontario government consider reinstatement of the OBIP study to support completion of the evaluation, and increase social assistance rates to reflect the cost of nutritious food and safe housing ([Appendices F](#) and [G](#)). The report [Income Security: A Roadmap for Change](#) includes valuable information to inform the government’s review.

Millions of dollars of tax credits and benefits due to households go unclaimed each year. Lower-income households are less likely to file and claim such credits. Community organizations host free tax preparation clinics with support from Revenue Canada through the [Community Volunteer Income Tax Program](#). In collaboration with community partners, Health Unit staff will explore options for increasing community capacity for such clinics.

This report was prepared by the Healthy Living Division.



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