

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Dr. Alexander Summers, Medical Officer of Health  
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## **MLHU'S SMART START FOR BABIES (SSFB) PROGRAM: IMPLEMENTATION UPDATE**

### ***Recommendation***

***It is recommended that the Board of Health receive Report No. 50-22, re: “MLHU’s Smart Start for Babies (SSFB) Program: Implementation Update” for information.***

### **Key Points**

- MLHU resumed Smart Start for Babies (SSFB) operations in November 2021.
- A hybrid virtual/in-person model of program delivery has been developed in response to barriers related to attendance and the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Four programs are currently being offered in community locations in London with plans to expand to six programs by the end of 2022.

### **Background**

Smart Start for Babies (SSFB) is a Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP) designed for pregnant individuals who are at risk for poor birth outcomes due to multiple factors including poverty, intimate partner violence, recent arrival in Canada, and adolescent pregnancies. SSFB is funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) at the current annual level of \$152,430 with in-kind staffing support from MLHU. In addition, the program receives in-kind space and personnel support (paid positions through the CPNP funding) from several community partners such as South London Neighborhood Resource Centre (SLNRC), LUSO Community Services (Family Centre Argyle), and YMCA of Southwestern Ontario (Family Centre Carling Thames).

The SSFB program provides access to healthy foods, prenatal and nutrition education, life skills development, and referrals to available community supports and resources. Sessions are facilitated by Public Health Nurses and Registered Dietitians. At each SSFB session, participants prepare a healthy snack or small meal in addition to participating in interactive health teaching. Participants in SSFB receive food vouchers and/or Harvest Bucks each week to promote access to healthy food, as well as bus tickets, prenatal vitamins, Vitamin D for infants who are being breastfed, and a variety of kitchen utensils and cookware to support the preparation of healthy meals at home.

### **March 2020 to September 2021**

By March 2020, the SSFB group sessions were suspended as part of MLHU’s COVID-19 pandemic response and ensuing organization-wide deployment of staff. Prior to the pandemic, MLHU’s SSFB’s program provided tailored programs to Arabic-speaking newcomers, youth, and families involved with child protective services in seven community locations.

**September 2021 - November 2021**

In the fall of 2021, MLHU commenced a gradual resumption of SSFB sessions following staff return from COVID-19 roles to the Healthy Start Division. This period focused on program planning, consultation with community partners and the development of a hybrid in-person/virtual delivery approach.

**November 2021 - April 2022**

In line with COVID-19 measures and policies, virtual and in-person SSFB classes were delivered by Public Health Nurses (PHNs) and Dietitians to Arabic-speaking newcomers. Virtual-only sessions were provided during the Omicron variant surge. Sessions were centered on prenatal and nutritional education, addressing priority issues of mental health, food literacy, food security, and injury prevention.

**May 2022 - September 2022**

SSFB resumed in-person sessions alongside a virtual option via Zoom. Each class is designed to host 12 registered participants per location. In partnership with community-based organizations, SSFB currently runs four programs as follows: SSFB South London, SSFB Carling Thames, SSFB Argyle, and SSFB for Arabic Speaking Newcomers.

**Next Steps: September 2022- January 2023**

Over the next couple of months, attention will be given to further expansion of the SSFB program; specifically, the resumption of programs targeting youth, Middlesex County residents, and residents in the Limberlost community will be prioritized. To this end, there is on-going exploration of new partnerships and locations such as the Grove at the Western Fairgrounds, the London Intercommunity Health Centre, the new Northwest London Resource Centre location, and Joan's Place/YOU.

**Conclusion**

The program continues to grow and evolve to provide excellent nutrition and prenatal education to pregnant individuals who experience various barriers in accessing healthy food, resulting in healthier birth outcomes. The Healthy Beginnings Visiting and Group Programs Team continues to play a critical role in optimum implementation of MLHU's SSFB's program.

This report was submitted by the Healthy Start Division.



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