



TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Dr. Alexander Summers, Medical Officer of Health
Emily Williams, Chief Executive Officer

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MONITORING FOOD AFFORDABILITY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND ACTION (2023)

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health:

- 1) *Receive Report No. 69-23 re: “Monitoring Food Affordability and Implications for Public Policy and Action (2023)” for information; and*
- 2) *Forward Report No. 69-23 re: “Monitoring Food Affordability and Implications for Public Policy and Action (2023)” to Ontario Boards of Health, the City of London, Middlesex County, and appropriate community agencies.*

Key Points

- Local food affordability monitoring is a requirement of the [Ontario Public Health Standards](#).
- The 2023 Ontario Nutritious Food Basket survey results demonstrate a rise in food costs since 2022, and incomes when dependent on social assistance are not adequate for many Middlesex-London residents to afford basic needs.
- Food insecurity has a pervasive impact on health; and there is an ongoing need for income-based solutions.

Background

This report is a follow-up to [Report No. 25-23 “Monitoring Food Affordability and Implications for Public Policy and Action”](#) which included the results of food affordability monitoring from 2022.

Food insecurity, defined as inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints, is a key social determinant of health¹. In 2022, approximately one in six households in Middlesex-London were food insecure, which amounts to nearly 84,000 residents living in food insecure households^{2,3}. Food insecurity is associated with an increased risk of a wide range of physical and mental health challenges, including chronic conditions, non-communicable diseases, infections, depression, anxiety, and stress^{4,11} ([Appendix A](#)).

Routine monitoring of food affordability helps generate evidence-based recommendations for collective public health action to address food insecurity, which is often tied to income inadequacy. The [Ontario Public Health Standards](#) require monitoring local food affordability as mandated in the [Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol, 2018](#). The Ontario Nutritious Food Basket (ONFB) is a survey tool that measures the cost of eating as represented by current national nutrition recommendations and average food purchasing patterns.

The [Ontario Dietitians in Public Health](#) (ODPH), in collaboration with Public Health Ontario (PHO) develops, tests, and updates tools for monitoring food affordability for all Ontario public health units. The current ODPH costing tool uses a hybrid model of in-store and online data collection.

In May 2023, the estimated local monthly cost to feed a family of four was \$1,124 ([Appendix B](#)), an increase from \$1,084 in May 2022. Local monthly food and average rental costs are compared to a variety of household and income scenarios, including households receiving social assistance, minimum wage earners, and median incomes ([Appendix B](#)). The scenarios include food and rent only and are not inclusive of other needs (i.e., utilities, Internet, phone, transportation, household operations and supplies, personal care items, clothing etc.). Households with low incomes spend up to 47% of their after-tax income on food, whereas households with adequate incomes (family of 4) only spend approximately 12% of their after-tax income. The scenarios highlight that incomes and social assistance rates have not kept pace with the increased cost of living.

Half of food insecure households in Canada receive wages, salaries, or are self-employed¹. Living wages help to protect individuals against food insecurity. A living wage is the hourly wage a full-time worker needs to earn to afford basic expenses and participate in community life. In London and Middlesex County, the 2022 living wage was \$18.85 per hour¹², compared to the Ontario minimum wage of \$15.50. The data collected from the ONFB survey is used to calculate living wages for different regions across Ontario.

In April 2023, the Board of Health moved to forward [Report No. 25-23 “Monitoring Food Affordability and Implications for Public Policy and Action”](#) to Ontario Boards of Health, the City of London, Middlesex- County and appropriate community agencies. Additionally, the Board carried a motion that the Board of Health shall direct the chair to write a letter on behalf of the Board of Health to the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, and local members of Provincial parliament to advocate for an increase in social assistance payments in regards to the affordability of food.

In June 2023, a [resolution](#) presented by ODPH was passed at the Association of Local Public Health Association’s (ALPHA) conference. The resolution calls on the Province of Ontario to: 1) utilize food affordability monitoring results from public health units in determining the adequacy of social assistance rates to reflect the current costs of living; 2) index Ontario Works rates to inflation; and 3) legislate targets for reduction of food insecurity.

Continued work is needed at the MLHU to address food insecurity and the significant implications it has on health and well-being. Through ongoing surveillance, the MLHU can continue to highlight the need for upstream income-based solutions and programs that address both food affordability and access.

An infographic regarding food insecurity is appended as [Appendix C](#).

This report was submitted by the Healthy Living Division.



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