



TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
FROM: Christopher Mackie, Medical Officer of Health
DATE: 2013 September 19

2013 NUTRITIOUS FOOD BASKET SURVEY RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT PUBLIC POLICY

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Board of Health:

1. *Recommend through the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy consultation process that the provincial government:*
 - a. *Set social assistance rates based on evidence, and reflecting evidence about health impact.*
 - b. *Continue the Special Diet Allowance program, with any review or revisions developed in collaboration with Registered Dietitians.*
 - c. *Sign a housing agreement with the federal government that will commit funds for cost-sharing the five year extension of the federal Investment in Affordable Housing Program.*
2. *Forward Report No. 099-13 re “2013 Nutritious Food Basket Survey Results” to the City of London, Middlesex County, Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA), social service agencies and local Members of Provincial Parliament for information.*

Key Points

- The Nutritious Food Basket survey is conducted annually by all public health units in Ontario to measure the cost of basic healthy eating. It has shown repeatedly that people with low incomes do not have adequate funds to afford healthy eating, after meeting other essential needs for basic living.
- Social determinants of health such as food access, income, housing and employment help explain the wide health inequalities existing within and across societies. They are strongly determined by government public policy decisions.
- The Ontario government is embarking on a consultation process for its next five-year Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy. The Board of Health has an opportunity to contribute to the development of evidence-based social assistance policy.

Background

Annually during the month of May, all Ontario public health units conduct the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey in accordance with the requirements under the Ontario Public Health Standards. The survey provides a measure of the cost of basic healthy eating taking into consideration current nutrition recommendations and average food purchasing patterns of Canadians. The NFB results can be used to: estimate the basic cost for an individual or household to eat healthy; compare the basic cost of healthy eating with income and other basic living expenses; plan programs that promote access to nutritious, safe and personally acceptable foods; and inform policy decisions.

A Public Health Dietitian on the Chronic Disease Prevention and Tobacco Control Team oversees the Nutritious Food Basket survey to provide a measure of the cost of food available to residents in Middlesex-London. In 2013, 12 Middlesex-London grocery stores were surveyed, including areas of variable economic status.

Survey Results

In May 2013, the estimated local monthly cost to feed a family of four was \$786.50. This is a \$14.46 or 1.9% increase from the estimated cost in May 2012. Appendix A, “The Real Cost of Eating Well in Middlesex-London”, provides more detailed information on the 2013 Nutritious Food Basket survey.

Table 1 highlights some real life situations for Middlesex-London residents utilizing 2013 income, rental costs and food costs. The NFB annual survey repeatedly demonstrates that people with low incomes do not have adequate funds to afford healthy eating, after meeting other essential needs for basic living. Poor nutrition can lead to increased risk for chronic and infectious diseases, pregnancy outcomes with greater risk for low birth weight and negative impacts on the growth and development of children.

Table 1 – Monthly Income and Cost of Living Scenarios

	Family of 4 Minimum Wage Earner	Family of 4 Medium Income After tax	Single Mother Family of 3 on Ontario Works (OW)	Single Man on OW	Single Man on Ontario Disability Support Program	Single Woman over 70 - Old Age Security / Guaranteed Income Security
Monthly Income (Including Benefits and Credits)	\$2711	\$6852	\$1927	\$688	\$1167	\$1499
Estimated Monthly Rent	\$1082	\$1082	\$920	\$582	\$743	\$743
Food (Nutritious Food Basket)	\$786.50	\$786.50	\$566.32	\$220.18	\$220.18	\$160.82
WHAT'S LEFT?*	\$842.50	\$4983.50	\$440.68	-\$114.18	\$203.82	\$595.18
% Income Required for Rent	40%	16%	48%	85%	64%	50%
% Income Required for Nutritious Food	29%	11%	29%	32%	19%	11%

* 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.

Notes: Rental estimates are from *Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Rental Market Report – Ontario Highlights, Spring 2013*. Utility costs may or may not be included in the rental estimates and vary considerably based on age and condition of housing, type of heating, range of appliances, air conditioning or cooling and household size.

Opportunities for Action

Social determinants of health such as food access, income, housing and employment help explain the wide health inequalities existing within and across societies. They are strongly determined by government public policy decisions. Currently, the Ontario government is leading a consultation process on the development of a second Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy. Changing social assistance rates to reflect evidence about living costs (Appendix B) and access to affordable housing (Appendix C) would improve the health of some of Middlesex and London’s most vulnerable residents. It is recommended that, through the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy consultation process, the Board of Health advocate that the provincial government set social assistance rates based on evidence, and reflecting evidence about health impact.

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



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This report addresses the following requirements of the Ontario Public Health Standards (2008): Foundational Standard 3, 5, 8, 9, 10; Chronic Disease Prevention 2, 7, 11, 12