

Peterborough Food Action Network

April 9, 2020

The Honourable Todd Smith
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services
Sent via email: prso@ontario.ca

Dear Minister Smith,

Re: Developing a new Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation regarding a provincial poverty reduction strategy. I am writing on behalf of the Peterborough Food Action Network (PFAN), a broad community network focused on addressing food insecurity in Peterborough City and County. We find this consultation to be particularly timely since poverty and food insecurity in Ontario will likely worsen as COVID-19 and measures to curb it will continue to impact health, community supports, care responsibilities, jobs, and in turn, incomes and food access.¹

In 2017-18, 1.7 million Ontarians lived in food-insecure households. Food insecurity results from low income and therefore must be addressed with income solutions. Indeed, we know that levels of food insecurity drop steeply as household incomes rise above \$30,000.² Charitable interventions such as food banks are *not* a solution to food insecurity, but rather they are a symptom of poverty. Only about a fifth of food-insecure households in our nation use food banks and even then, they do so primarily as a desperate act. Even among those who are severely food insecure, more people will ask for money from friends and family, miss bill payments, ask organizations for help, and miss rent or mortgage payments, than ask for assistance from a food bank.³ Food banks are clearly not addressing in any broad or sustainable way the needs of those living with extreme material deprivation.

As you may know, Peterborough experiences a number of acute challenges related to poverty and food insecurity.

- One half of single mothers in Peterborough cannot afford adequate food to feed their families.⁴
- Over half of Peterborough renters are housing insecure, paying more than 30% of their income on housing, and almost a quarter of them pay more than 50%. In fact, Peterborough has the highest percentage of renting households with unaffordable shelter costs in Canada.⁵
- Post-secondary students comprise a significant part of Peterborough's at-risk population. At Trent University, 48% of students living away from home for the first time are food insecure.⁶ Beyond Peterborough, a 2018 report found that 2 in 5 university students across Ontario experienced food insecurity.⁷
- Peterborough's significant rural community also experiences distinct vulnerabilities to poverty such as transportation costs, social isolation, and distance from resources. Farmers are particularly at-risk for poverty as, for instance, total net farm incomes in Ontario dropped severely from 2017 to 2018.⁸
- The two First Nations communities neighbouring Peterborough County, Curve Lake First Nation and Hiawatha First Nation, are vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity. In fact, on-reserve households south of the 60th parallel in Canada have been found to experience 3 to 5 times the national rate of food insecurity.⁹

These groups, like all Ontarians, require sufficient incomes to meet their basic needs, options for stable jobs with liveable wages, and affordable childcare to allow them to participate in society.

Basic Income

Ontarians already benefit from several forms of basic income including the Ontario Child Benefit, Canadian Child Benefit, Old Age Supplement, and Guaranteed Income Supplement. Basic income has been deemed the most effective policy instrument to ensure that people can afford the food they need.¹⁰ In fact, food insecurity rates drop by half once people reach the age to qualify for OAS and GIS.¹¹

The Government asserted that the Ontario Basic Income pilot failed to help people join the labour force.¹² However, 37.5% of continuously employed respondents in the Basic Income pilot in Southern Ontario actually reported that their hourly rate became “better or much better” during the pilot.¹³ **We recommend a guaranteed basic income that is sufficient to provide a foundation for people to improve their employment and economic circumstances.**

Social Assistance

60% of people relying on social assistance in Canada are food insecure.¹⁴ **Any social assistance programs like Ontario Works or ODSP must provide incomes that are above the poverty line and reflect the cost of living.**

Employment

We question the Government’s consultation focus on “encouraging job creation and connecting people to employment.” In Canada, 65% of food insecure households already rely on employment income.¹⁵ A study of 800 Peterborough workers found that 62% were in precarious or vulnerable employment, meaning a lack of employment security, reliable hours, stable wages, benefits, and access to training.¹⁶ In and of themselves, jobs are clearly not a guaranteed route out of poverty or food insecurity. To reduce poverty, Ontarians need stable jobs with adequate pay, benefits, and working conditions. **We recommend liveable wages for all workers, combined with “equal pay, benefits, and working conditions for equal work regardless of our status as part-time, contract, or temporary workers.”¹⁷**

Downstream Cost Savings

Insufficient income to purchase adequate food adversely affects people’s health and subsequent healthcare costs. Indeed, health care costs for severely food insecure households are double those of food secure households.¹⁸ Ensuring that every household in Ontario has an income of at least \$30,000 would dramatically reduce food insecurity and lower healthcare costs while strengthening economic activity, as lower income people tend to spend the money they have.

Poverty in the Time of Emergency

We applaud the Government’s ongoing leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. We hope that the coincident timing of the consultation for a poverty reduction strategy underscores the importance of public investment in a time of crisis. Poverty and food insecurity – for far too many Ontarians – were acute and enduring crises long before the global pandemic. People who are vulnerable before a crisis are usually most impacted during one, so it is vitally important to ensure they have the economic resilience to cope. In the short term, we must continue to deploy every policy, funding and programming tool available to support those who are most vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the longer term, we need to recall the social compassion and economic savvy that steered us through the pandemic, and bring that same logic to bear on the more persistent crises of poverty and food insecurity.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

Dr. Rosana Salvaterra
Chair of Peterborough Food Action Network
Peterborough City and County

¹ Tarasuk, V. (2020). Webinar on Food Insecurity: 2017-2018 Report from PROOF.

² Tarasuk, V. (2017). Implications of a basic income guarantee for household food insecurity.

³ Tarasuk, V. (2020). Webinar on Food Insecurity: 2017-2018 Report from PROOF.

⁴ Peterborough Public Health. (2018). Food Insecurity in Peterborough.

⁵ United Way Peterborough and District. (2019). Housing is Fundamental.

⁶ Dasné, S. & Furgal, C. (2017). Food security at Trent University: Key results from the 2016-2017 food access survey.

⁷ Meal Exchange. (2018). The State of Food on Ontario University Campuses.

⁸ Statistics Canada. (2020). Net Farm Income (x1000). 7

⁹ University of Ottawa, Université de Montréal, Assembly of First Nations. (2019). First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study: Summary of key findings for eight Assembly of First Nations regions 2008-2018

¹⁰ Tarasuk, V. (2017). Implications of a basic income guarantee for household food insecurity.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Loriggio, P., National Post. (2018). Ontario basic income program was a 'disincentive' to get people working again, PC minister says.

¹³ Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. (2020). Southern Ontario's Basic Income Experience.

¹⁴ Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020). Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Precarious Employment Research Initiative. (2018). The PERI Reports: Infobrief#1.

¹⁷ Fight for \$15 and Fairness. (2017). Demands. <https://www.15andfairness.org/demands>

¹⁸ Tarasuk, V. (2017). Implications of a basic income guarantee for household food insecurity.