

# ***Peterborough Food Action Network***

June 4, 2020

The Honourable Doug Ford  
Premier of Ontario  
[premier@ontario.ca](mailto:premier@ontario.ca)

The Honourable Todd Smith  
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services  
[prso@ontario.ca](mailto:prso@ontario.ca)

Dear Premier Ford and Minister Smith,

We are writing on behalf of the Peterborough Food Action Network (PFAN), a broad community network focused on everyone having enough healthy food to eat as part of a long-term food security strategy. PFAN brings together agencies and individuals to build community food security as part of local poverty reduction efforts.

First, we commend you and the Ontario Government for your tireless work with health experts, other levels of government, and our communities to keep all of us in Ontario safe. We sincerely appreciate these collaborations, especially as they have focused on addressing the needs of vulnerable people.

Your job has no doubt been made more difficult as the COVID-19 crisis has added considerably to the challenges of many Ontarians who were already struggling before the pandemic. In particular, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need for adequate incomes to address the constant state of emergency that many people on social assistance experience. A lack of money for basic necessities not only places Ontarians at greater risk of food insecurity, compromised physical and mental health, and social isolation. It also makes it difficult to take the precautions to keep others around them safe.

We know that you have made changes to social assistance to assist both those who are new to economic challenges and those who were already experiencing them. For example, Emergency Assistance will certainly help those whose circumstances have rapidly deteriorated. However, we find that the \$733 per month for *all* expenses for one person (which is the same amount provided by Ontario Works (OW)) will not be sufficient for many people as housing costs alone in Peterborough average \$734 per month for a bachelor apartment.<sup>1</sup>

We commend the implementation of the COVID-19 Emergency Benefit for people on OW and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The provision of \$100 for individuals and \$200 for families who qualify will certainly help some low-income households to cope with the costs incurred by the crisis. The recent changes made to extend this benefit for three more months, and to provide this amount monthly to individuals who originally qualified, will also certainly assist with meeting basic needs of some Ontarians most in need. In Peterborough, however, we have found that many people on social assistance are not aware of this benefit. Some are having challenges accessing this benefit, possibly related to longer response times in this busy time, or not understanding what needs they have

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to share in order to qualify for it. To circumvent these challenges, and because everyone is affected by the crisis in some way, **we recommend that information about the benefit be better communicated (for example, sending notifications with OW and ODSP cheques). Ideally, we also recommend that the benefit be made available to all OW and ODSP recipients automatically.**

While the Emergency Benefit and Emergency Assistance may be helpful, many social assistance recipients have still been having trouble meeting their basic needs. Nutritious food basket research by Peterborough Public Health in 2019 found that, after paying for housing and nutritious food, a typical one-person household receiving OW has **-\$224** left for any other expenses for the month.<sup>2</sup> A one-person household receiving ODSP would have \$41 remaining. A family of four receiving OW has \$363 available. This is compared to a family of four on a median income who has **\$5723** remaining. These numbers demonstrate that many Ontarians receiving social assistance were living in a state of crisis before the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected all of us. We recommend that this Government take the learnings from this pandemic crisis as an opportunity to ensure that all people have adequate incomes to cover their basic needs now and beyond the crisis through the following:

## **Intermediate term actions:**

- **passing Bill 60 to establish a Social Assistance Research Commission to recommend social assistance rates that meet basic needs**
- **raising social assistance rates to a livable level**

## **Long term action:**

- **work with federal counterparts to explore a jointly-funded Basic Income Guarantee**

As the pandemic crisis has shown, ensuring that people have stable incomes to meet their basic needs will not only benefit them but can contribute to the well-being of all Ontarians. Again, we are grateful for your evidence-based commitment to vulnerable people during this pandemic.

We look forward to seeing how this will continue beyond this crisis.

Sincerely,

## ***Original signed by***

Rosana Salvaterra, MD, MSc, CCFP, FRCPC  
Chair, Peterborough Food Action Network  
Medical Officer of Health, Peterborough Public Health

cc: Local MPPs

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<sup>1</sup> United Way Peterborough and District. (2019). *Housing is Fundamental*. Retrieved from: <https://www.uwpeterborough.ca/housing-is-fundamental/>

<sup>2</sup> Peterborough Public Health (2019). *No Money for Food is Cent\$less*. Retrieved from: <https://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2019-Limited-Incomes.pdf>