

OFPC
Ottawa Food
Policy Council

November 7, 2013
The Honourable Yasir Naqvi
Minister of Labour
109 Catherine Street
Ottawa, ON

Re: Increasing Minimum Wage and Social Assistance Rates

Dear Minister Naqvi,

The Ottawa Food Policy Council (OFPC) works to enable a broad and coherent discussion of policies related to food. On behalf of the OFPC, I am writing to request that the Government of Ontario consider increasing minimum wage and social assistance rates to ensure those living in poverty have access to healthy and affordable food.

Hunger and lack of access to healthy foods persists in Ottawa. Since 2005, household food insecurity, which refers to the inadequate or insecure access to adequate food, has been measured on the Canadian Community Health Survey. According to the most recent estimate (2011/2012), 7.7% of Ottawa households experienced food insecurity. This is consistent with the rest of Ontario, where 8.2% of the households reported some barrier to accessing adequate food.¹ The current minimum wage does not provide enough for people to access the foods they need for an active and healthy life. Currently, those earning minimum wage in Ontario are living below the poverty line.

Every year, through the Nutritious Food Basket project, Ottawa Public Health determines the average monthly cost of a nutritious diet in Ottawa. From 2012 to 2013, the cost to feed a family of four for one month rose from \$745 to \$789.² Unfortunately for families earning minimum wage and those receiving social assistance, food often becomes a discretionary expense after paying for other basic monthly expenses like heating, hydro, telephone and transportation. Little is left for nutritious foods. This results in a diet of poor nutritional quality and a greater reliance on emergency food assistance from food banks. The Ottawa Food Bank provides emergency food to 48,000 people a month, 37% of those being children.³ Food Banks Canada maintains that the key factor at the root of the need for food banks is low income.⁴ Poor nutrition leads to an increased risk of infectious and chronic disease, as well as reduced academic performance and low infant birth weights.⁵

The Ottawa Food Policy Council recognizes that any sustainable solution to poverty and

¹ Canadian Community Health Survey 2011, Statistics Canada, Share File, Ontario MOHLTC

² Nutritious Food Basket Survey 2013, Ottawa Public Health

³ Ottawa Food Bank 2012, <http://ottawafoodbank.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Food-Bank-Fact-Sheet-2012.pdf>

⁴ Factsheet 2012, Ottawa Food Bank

⁵ Nutritious Food Basket Survey 2012, Halton Region I-Health Department

food insecurity requires a commitment to economic and social policy reform, not only support for band-aid measures such as food banks or short-term nutrition support programs. Therefore, The OFPC is urging the provincial government to consider the following to ensure healthy foods are available to everyone.

1. Increase minimum wage to ten percent above the poverty line, indexed annually to reflect inflation, to help ensure those who work full-time are not living in poverty.
2. Increase social assistance rates to a level that reflects the true costs of nutritious food and housing, considering the annual results of the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care's Nutritious Food Basket results and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Rental Income (Ontario) reports.

We look to the Government of Ontario, under the leadership of Premier Wynne and her Cabinet, to take a lead in putting forth policy initiatives to reduce social inequalities and remove barriers for people to access the healthy food they require. We join other respected organizations and experts across the province that support the campaign to raise the minimum wage and social assistance rates.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to collaborating with you, supporting your efforts as Minister of Labour and working with you towards our common goal of ensuring that all members of our community can live in dignity and have access to a healthy and nutritious diet.

Sincerely,

Ottawa Food Policy Council

c.c.

The Honourable Kathleen Wynne, Premier of Ontario
The Honourable Deb Matthews, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care
Lisa Macleod, Member of Provincial Parliament for Nepean-Carleton
Phil McNeely, Member of Provincial Parliament for Ottawa-Orleans