



# Poverty Roundtable

## Hastings Prince Edward

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### **Re: Ontario's Food Security Strategy**

The Food Security Working Group of the Poverty Roundtable of Hastings Prince Edward applauds the development of an Ontario Food Security Strategy (OFSS) as part of the government's broader efforts to reduce the depth and prevalence of poverty in Ontario. We are writing to provide community feedback on the proposed strategy.

### **Regional Background**

Food security is an urgent issue in our communities. Hastings and Prince Edward counties experience some of the highest rates of food insecurity in the province. In 2014, the Canadian Community Health Survey reported that approximately 13.8% of households in our counties experienced food insecurity; this rate of food insecurity is almost 16% higher than the provincial average of 11.9%. Our communities are committed to reducing food insecurity and welcome the province's increased and focused efforts to assist us in our work.

### **About the Poverty Roundtable of Hastings Prince Edward**

The Poverty Roundtable of Hasting Prince Edward (HPE) was formed in 2013 to look at whether there are things we could do, or do differently, to address the causes of poverty and to broaden our capacity to do so by working together. We have approximately 400 members, representing social services, business, government, health, mental health, education, justice, housing, labour, faith, food security, and community members/volunteers who may or may not be currently experiencing poverty.

**Our vision is:** a community where everyone experiences a standard of living which is sufficient for their physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being without compromise of dignity and self-respect.

**Our mission is:** to eliminate the causes of poverty in Hastings and Prince Edward counties by building the capacity of our community to work together to plan for and implement strategic, long term solutions that result in fair and equitable opportunities for all.

The Food Security Working Group is an active subgroup of the Poverty Roundtable which provides an opportunity and a forum for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and advocacy, and has focused activities in community awareness and research, and emergency food responses and skill development related to food security.

### **Community Consultations on Ontario's Provincial Food Strategy**

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 17 community members came together at the Poverty Roundtable of Hastings Prince Edward office in Belleville to discuss the Ontario Food Security Strategy concepts and give input into the provincial consultation. Additionally, consultations were held by Food Security Working Group members in North Hastings. Collectively participants in the consultation were made up of people who have and are experiencing food insecurity, urban agriculture experts, health workers, food program providers and volunteers, as well as members of our social services committee and members of municipal councils.

### **Themes Emerged in the Consultation**

The main message from this consultation conveys the immediate need for an income-based response to alleviate the cause of food insecurity, while continuing to provide effective and supported emergency food security services during the development of long-term localized food and socially integrated systems.

Two common themes were identified from the May 17<sup>th</sup> community consultation, each containing distinct factors contributing to food security.

#### *Theme 1: Household or Individual Food Security*

Dietitians of Canada defines household food insecurity as “inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraint”. It is often referred to as “income-related household food insecurity”.

**Income-based responses** to food insecurity are seen as the first and primary issue and must be addressed immediately. Food insecurity is the result of a lack of income which diminishes and takes away choice. When income is low, there is not enough money to purchase sufficient healthy food after paying for shelter, utilities, transportation and healthy expenses. **Affordable housing** was identified as a major barrier to food security in Hastings and Prince Edward counties, as well as securing **transportation** to affordable food choices, specifically in rural communities such as North Hastings.

**Employment trends**, specifically lack of work, lack of health benefits through work, unstable positions and low wages, were also identified as contributors to income-related food insecurity.

### *Theme 2: Community Food Security and Food Sovereignty*

Dietitians of Canada defines Community Food Security (CFS) as “all people have safe and nutritious food. CFS happens if we develop food systems that can be sustained in the long term; offer healthy food choices; enable the community to be self-reliant; and provide equal access to affordable food for everyone”.

Food Secure Canada defines Food Sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”.

The notion that food insecurity allows us to accept incompatible **food systems** because urgency trumps change emerged during community discussions. When faced with the inability to meet basic needs, we look to inexpensive resources to ensure hunger is satisfied without consideration for a food systems approach that could have long term impacts on health, economies and the environment but which take time and resources to build.

The consultation, in this secondary vain, highlighted the high value of **coordinated community programming around food**, especially sharing food-related activities such as growing, cooking and consuming food together without stigma. The need for a cultural shift of thinking about food security was identified, especially the importance of moving away from assigning personal responsibility for poverty and food insecurity, and expanding solutions beyond individual outcomes. In support of this shift, considerable time within the consultations was focused on discussing community solutions to food access, including municipal zoning by-laws and land use to support greater community building around food, food literacy, food sovereignty and food systems.

The facilitators of the community consultation also recognize the need for ongoing **data collection and research** to monitor food security trends and support efficiency of provincial and community-level programs and services for both household and community food security.

## **Findings**

Discussion from the community consultations was led by questions provided within the discussion paper [Building Ontario's First Food Security Strategy](#).

### **What does food security and food insecurity mean for you and/or your community?**

Our communities and their members experience food security when we exercise individual choice in food-related decisions, when we have the knowledge and capacity to address our own and our families' nutritive needs. We experience food security when we enjoy the social aspects of food in our own homes and in the homes of our friends, families and neighbours, or in the restaurants, fields, and orchards that contribute to the health and vitality of our communities. Finally, we experience food security when we recognize the economic benefits of food, supporting food producers in our communities who are also valuable employers, donors, friends and neighbours. Thus, while the technical definition of food security employed by the province for its food security strategy is adequate, our experience of food security includes, at the very least, nutritive, social, and economic aspects for the community as a whole.

### **What are the key challenges or barriers to food security for you and/or your community?**

We recognize that food insecurity is most often caused by **inadequate income**, and individuals in our communities who are reliant on government assistance, particularly Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program, are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity. A human rights-based response to food insecurity therefore demands immediate action to ensure sufficient incomes for those on all forms of government assistance, to ensure that they are not subjected to income-related food insecurity.

We also observe that food security in our communities is not determined by income alone. Even with a reliable source and sufficient level of income for all of our community members, such that economic access to food is not a concern, some people would continue to experience food insecurity. From our experience and extensive community conversations we can identify several factors that contribute to food insecurity beyond individual income insufficiency:

- *Transportation*: Inability to access affordable nutritious food due to living in a food desert with limited choices and/or traveling to urban centres where majority of food programs and services are located are large barriers to food security in Hastings and Prince Edward counties. In addition, mobility of seniors and people with disabilities can prevent access to various emergency food resources.
- *Isolation and lack of resources*: Shared meals are available in some of our communities, but not all, and they play an important role in food security and social belonging. Individuals living alone have spoken to the importance of social aspects and that they would not likely have the resources to prepare a nutritious meal on their own. Individuals living in boarding houses report not always having access to store or cook food.

- *Addiction*: Addictions play a role in food insecurity. Within community conversations held throughout Hastings and Prince Edward counties in the fall and winter of 2016-2017, people living with addictions discussed the challenge that higher incomes without concurrent addiction-related health supports would present to them in managing their health and accessing food. Greater incomes would increase the likelihood of spending incomes on drugs and alcohol, for example, vs healthy food. Food programs are important tools in accessing food and maintaining health as community members work through their addictions.
- *Employment*: The changing face of work, including long hours and shifts that are typical in the economic contexts of this region, make it challenging for food insecure households to access emergency food programs during typical operating hours. In addition, many households struggling to purchase food may have to work multiple jobs, reducing the time available to prepare healthy food from basic ingredients provided at food programs.
- *Poor Political/Community Partnerships*: Community members identified restrictive legislation as a barrier in furthering food sovereignty through community gardening, edible landscaping and urban agriculture. Municipal leaders identified lack of commitment and volunteerism from community members to organize and manage programs as a barrier to enhancing municipal-supported services.

### **What community-driven food initiatives have contributed to reducing food insecurity in your community?**

Many residents in our communities experience food insecurity; these are our friends, family and neighbours, and we are committed to correcting this injustice. Individuals and organizations are working to reduce hunger and promote food security through:

- Crisis responses at no cost (e.g. food banks and meal programs)
- Low-cost groceries and meals; (e.g. Good Food Box, Meals on Wheels);
- Food-related education for improved food literacy (e.g. community kitchens, cooking classes);
- Opportunities for urban food production (e.g. community gardens, edible green space and backyard poultry policies).

Food-related programs are most often provided in inclusive environments with as few barriers to access as possible. Many food-related programs also serve as venues for social interaction and integration, supporting the mental health and personal well-being of those who access the programs and those who volunteer.

Providing spaces for people to come together to share food and eat together (e.g. community meals and food centres), and supporting programs that increase food access in isolated communities (e.g. mobile food markets and meal delivery programs) are key initiatives that serve our most vulnerable populations.

## **What challenges have you experienced addressing food insecurity in your community?**

*Individual Income-based Challenges:* Persistent poverty-related factors such as low wages, precarious employment, and insufficient government assistance rates continue to undermine the effectiveness of our efforts to reduce hunger and improve food security in our communities.

*Community Coordination and Evidence:* Our community efforts are also hampered by insufficient coordination between organizations, insufficient partnership between organizations and government, and by lack of data collection to guide evidence-based planning. We require financial and human resources to match our willingness to work together to achieve greater coordination and collective impact.

## **What role can governments play in improving food security?**

### *Municipal Governments*

Support community food security by creating a food policy council that reviews food system elements unique to each municipality and work with community partners to reduce barriers.

Improve access to food by amending land use by-laws and zoning to permit urban agriculture (e.g. community and private food gardens, backyard poultry policies) and include edible landscaping (e.g. fruit producing trees and shrubs) on municipal property. Municipalities can also provide physical space for urban agriculture on municipality-owned or managed lands (e.g. green space, social housing property).

By assessing the health and food security impacts of policy actions, municipalities can promote food security in non-food related areas such as social service provision, public transit, and community planning. Municipal governments might also share some of the coordination and planning needs of community-based food programs and food system changes, through their management of funding programs and provision of human resources. A local municipality donating a truck for transporting produce for mobile food markets to under resourced communities in Prince Edward County is an example of this mandate.

### *Provincial Government*

The provincial government has a wider purview and responsibility for supporting food security through food related and non-food related policies.

To address income-related food insecurity, the provincial government should immediately increase government assistance rates in the Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program. Any new programs such as a guaranteed annual income should be sufficient to support food security for all recipients. Amending employment law to reduce precarious employment and ensure adequate wages will also be valuable for reducing income-related food security.

Create a provincial Food Policy Council as part of the Ontario Food Security Strategy, and include representatives from all government departments and agencies. Food is multi-faceted issue and universal across almost every aspect of government, especially agriculture, health, education, social services, and housing, to name a few. Through our community conversation, we discussed the impact of different provincial legislative decisions could have on increasing food security, specifically natural resources, correctional services, education, and health:

- *Natural Resources:* Many in our communities rely on natural resources for their food supply. Consider how environmental, conservation, and public health (especially food inspection and food safety) policies and regulations can be used to support food security for those who rely on hunting, fishing, and foraging for food.
- *Prison Farms:* Support reinstating farming at correctional institutions to increase economic advantage and support the local food system.
- *Food Literacy Education:* Support reinstating food literacy education in public school curriculum to provide children and youth with food and nutrition knowledge, skills and behaviours.
- *Health and Food Security Monitoring:* Routinely monitor provincial and community food security trends. We were disappointed to learn the Ontario government opted out of the Household Food Security Survey Module in the latest cycle of the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS). This data is essential for tracking long-term trends in food security, and in understanding food security in our communities and nation. We strongly encourage the government to advocate for the permanent inclusion of the food security module in the CCHS. In addition to understanding provincial and national food security trends, we ask the government to explicitly include food security data collection at the community level as an aspect of developing evidence and monitoring success through the proposed Food Security Strategy.

Communities and community organizations require stable and predictable resources to undertake their essential work in addressing food insecurity. We call on the government to assist with these funding needs through the creation of a food security fund. The Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative, which promotes community control over priority-setting and fund disbursement, provides an excellent template for a dedicated food security funding regime.

### **What role could the private sector play in increasing income-related food security within the province?**

Businesses in our communities contribute to food charity programs by providing employment, making financial donations and providing fundraising opportunities, and supplying and encouraging volunteers. Several businesses also provide land for employee-supported gardens. Businesses could also support food security through their core economic activities. Employers can ensure that their employees have the financial means to achieve food security by paying

adequate wages and ensuring sufficient and predictable hours each week. Private business owners involved in the food system could support and contribute to a municipal food policy council.

### **What roles can farmers, local growers, and Indigenous knowledge keepers play?**

As employers and corporate citizens, farmers and food producers share the private responsibilities and opportunities in supporting food security. Food producers in our community have traditionally been very supportive of food related programming, and are important and valued partners in providing healthy food and meals through food banks and meal programs. We note that many small-scale food producers in our communities provide environmentally and socially responsible products, but that their businesses are limited by market size and cost of production compared to commercial producers in the larger global food system.

### **What roles can local community institutions, such as community centres, schools, community hubs, religious centres, libraries, etc., play?**

Community social service organizations are well placed to identify food security-related needs and respond to them promptly through direct food related programs and activities and indirect complimentary roles.

Community organizations can intentionally adopt a rights-based approach to food and promote food security. As reliable and trusted community actors, community organizations can provide public education to increase understanding of household food insecurity and reduce stigma surrounding poverty and food insecurity. Such education is the foundation of improved public discourse and broad support for rights-based actions to address food insecurity.

Schools and community hubs can provide opportunities for food literacy education, including growing and preparing healthy food.

### **What promising community initiatives have you seen that increase food security?**

Research on increased social assistance rates on the ability to reduce food insecurity in Newfoundland and Labrador demonstrates the impact of provincial poverty reduction action (Loopstra, Dachner, and Tarasuk, 2015).

Secondly school based programs, (i.e. the provision of meals in schools) provides immediate results for children in meeting nutritional and learning needs.

### **Conclusion**

The development of Ontario's Food Security Strategy is the first step in reducing the unacceptable level of food insecurity in our province. The Poverty Roundtable of Hastings Prince Edward encourages the provincial government to create a multi-prong approach to food



security, focusing both on individual income-based food security and community food sovereignty and social inclusion solutions.

We encourage you to review the appendix which contains a complete record of the comments collected during our community consultation event on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017. We appreciate the effort to participate in this consultation and look forward to further development of Ontario's Food Security Strategy.

Sincerely,



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**APPENDIX – Community Consultation Comments**

**What does food security and food insecurity mean for you and/or your community?**

Food Security	Food Insecurity
<p>Dining in restaurants                      VS                      Underutilized land                      Having back-up food in the pantry                      Choice and option of food                      Consistent food prices                      Education about growing/storing/cooking food                      Knowledge of community programs                      Community of sharing resources and food                      Connectedness with farmers                      Overcoming stigma related to program use                      Food as a social network                      Socialization                      Positive social interactions                      VS                      Transportation to food                      Access to different food sources                      VS                      School education (food literacy)                      Home economy classes                      Equal resources for adults and children                      Cost effective shopping skills                      Access for nutritious food outside the home (kids)                      Local food in grocery stores (change in legislation)                      Improving process for farmers to grow and make it easier to sell food                      Making healthy food affordable                      Making local food affordable</p>	<p>Serving in restaurants                      Underutilized land                      # of organizations working to decrease food insecurity                      Lack of knowledge to provide food for ourselves                      Choosing between housing or food                      Aging, disability (physical including allergies and special diets for diseases, and mental health and cognitive limits)                      Health                      Not having facilities to store/cook/grow food                      Relying on others for facilities (precarious housing)                      Isolation, worry, vulnerable                        Limited food access (no choice)                      Addictions reduce food spending</p>

## APPENDIX – Community Consultation Comments

### What are the key challenges or barriers to food security for you and/or your community?

- Time and income (personal challenges)
- Legislation (grocery, land use laws for edible landscaping, small livestock like chickens)
- Seasonal variation (can't grow all year around)
- Lack of education about growing food
- Not enough partnerships between government and private business, community
- Ineffective food systems
- Improve food economy
- Who will take responsibility of growing food in edible landscaping (people or the government)
- Financial start-up too high (to farm, grow food)
- Programs are for able-bodied/mind people only
- Concentration of programs in urban areas or for people that have access to transportation to travel to programs
- Attitudes , belief that meals have to be complex or challenging to cook to be healthy
- Lack of communal food preparation and learning spaces (like community food centres)
- Commitment is lacking (from people to volunteer, organize programs)
- Perception that cooking isn't fun
- Employment scheduling (challenging to get to emergency sources of food, no time to source healthy, safe, acceptable food if you have to work several jobs)
- Reliance on grocery stores for food (no access to indoor greenhouses, growing space)
- Balance (work and selfcare)
- Income is too low allow balance between working and taking care of self
- Too much time away from home working
- Cycle of poor nutrition → fatigue → working → poor nutrition
- Unstable employment
- High cost of food (especially in the winter) with limited suppliers
- Enormous economic barriers given that more than 50% of North Hastings population is on a limited/fixed income (statistics are hard to find on the high rates of poverty but some estimate 60% living below the poverty line)
- Transportation is an issue for many who cannot get to a grocery store
- Limited choice of affordable food
- Limited local, organic choices that are affordable
- High cost of living (rent is high, hydro and now water/sewage rates) which mean people do not have money left for food
- Lack of government support at all levels – North Hastings community feels it is being left out and left behind, with no concern for rural residence. Residents feel the area is valued for its resources and tourism but residents are in the way and do not matter to policy and decision makers at all levels of government.

## APPENDIX – Community Consultation Comments

### What community-driven food initiatives have contributed to reducing food insecurity in your community?

- Community kitchen groups
- Community gardens
- Options
- Mobile markets to rural/vulnerable communities
- Crop mobs (food reclamation, gleaning at farms)
- Loving Spoonful
- School gardens
- Food banks and drop-in meal programs for emergency food
- Recipes, lessons at food banks, food box programs
- Meals on wheels to isolated people
- Green Wheel Farms (spin farming, square foot gardening)
- Community supported agriculture
- Community working together to grow food and bring people together (Harvest the North community gardens)

### What challenges have you experienced addressing food insecurity in your community?

- Precarious employment
- Low wage
- Stable and sustainable funding!!! [for programs r/t food security]
- Difficult to measure success [of programs r/t to food security, required to secure funding]
- Not having appropriate foods for health/culture
- Food waste – health regulations, “ugly” produce
- Working in silos
- Duplications of agencies
- By-laws (chickens in backyards, etc)
- Lack of formal evidence (research) to prove effectiveness of community programs
- Unable to get coordinator for programs
- Lack of training to sustain programs
- Lack of collective action (13 people at meeting vs 500 at meeting)
- Lack of awareness
- Funding appropriate food to serve to people (at emergency meal programs)
- Silos between governments (municipal/provincial/federal), community, not-for-profits
- Communication is poor (people’s voice not heard)
- Controversy about terms – “Reducing duplication” is a funders’ term vs. “feeling safe” (community term)

## **APPENDIX – Community Consultation Comments**

### **What role can governments play in improving food security?**

- Gardens in social housing units (Communities in Bloom, Veggies in the Village)
- Partnership of city staff and volunteers (urban agriculture programs)
- Support for “free” community garden program
- No ownership of community food programs, just coordination (free produce, take one/leave one model of gardens)
- Show political will to implement living wage policies
- Committing to pilot projects
- Government program similar to CIP for home gardening/food production (tax break)
- Mental health supports
- Zoning by-laws mandate edible green space/game meat use
- Environmental support (i.e. fish hatchery, decontaminate local fish population), stewardship
- Support aquaponics
- Facilitate food security in winter/cold season (greenhouses allow food growing all year around)
- Prison gardens, farming
- Make processes for wild game to be allowed for donation
- Make it easier to get off social assistance (allow employment without claw back of OW/ODSP right away)
- Government campaigns to reduce stigma related to poverty (change attitudes and behaviours from all of society)
- Raise social assistance rates and pensions immediately to reflect the cost of living
- Extend guaranteed income pilot project to all of Ontario
- Raise minimum wage to \$15/hour
- Support municipalities who cannot carry the expense of small towns (i.e. Bancroft cannot sustain large sewage treatment plant)
- Support small community-based agencies who are struggling to keep up with demands responding to poverty, make funding accessible for small agencies

### **What role could the private sector play in increasing income-related food security within the province?**

- Paid time off to volunteer
- Accessible benefits for part-time/contract workers
- Reasonable wages (living wages)
- Employer awareness of value of living wage
- Employer awareness that paying living wage does not equal a loss
- Support/demand local food systems (government incentive to support local economy)

## **APPENDIX – Community Consultation Comments**

- Promotion of living wage as a social norm (promoting social conscience)
- Reducing precarious employment
- Investing in employees to reduce high turnover
- Businesses that are environmentally responsible
- Supportive of co-ops
- Invest in employees, not temp agencies (labour laws)
- Stable employment
- Benefits (health, dental) to enable employees to use wage for food (which will support health and reduce sick time)
- What role can farmers, local growers, and Indigenous knowledge keep play?
- Education
- Employ differently-abled people
- inclusiveness
- reemployment for mental health, incarcerated people
- therapeutic for PTSD
- Employment
- Meaningful
- Mentoring
- Inclusion
- Military, single moms
- Mentoring
- Offer food reclamation, gleaning, crop mobs
- Sharing resources

### **What roles can local community institutions, such as community centres, schools, community hubs, religious centres, libraries, ect., play?**

- Facilitating educational component
- Need funding
- Need increase awareness for available funding
- Needs to be sustainable
- Facilitate/lead community gardens
- Work with schools
- Encourage sustainability
- Communicate, share resources
- Open to everyone (inclusive)
- Reduce insurance, liability issues
- Open spaces up for use
- Reduce stigma
- Offer programs outside of conventional hours (number of working poor increasing)
- Make programs inclusive and open to all

## **APPENDIX – Community Consultation Comments**

- Need money, affordable housing, job to buy food (don't need education about growing food, cooking food)
- Stop remedial tone of food security program
- Need individualized approach to social assistance (everyone's circumstances are unique and different)
- Stop blaming individuals for own poverty
- Commit as community to include everyone to solve food security problems, bring people together from all sectors
- Build community resiliency
- Foster relationships with Indigenous friends and communities

### **What promising community initiatives have you seen that increase food security?**

- Community garden space
- By-laws promoting edible green space, yards for growing food
- Community-shared poultry
- Meal and snack programs at schools and in communities
- Food for Learning
- Breakfast, Snack, Lunch programs
- Community food centres
- Mobile food markets
- Heart to Home, Meals on Wheels programs
- School gardens
- school lunch programs (government-funded)
- Home economy mandatory in school
- Possibility of aquaponics to extend growing seasons to increase availability of affordable, healthy food (North Hastings Community Trust)