



Official Submission: Building Ontario's First Food Security Strategy

Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination
May 2017

Introduction

The Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination works collaboratively, informed by diverse voices of experience, to support local action and advocate for system and policy change that address the root causes of poverty. The Poverty Task Force (PTF) recognizes that household food insecurity is a critical priority and believes that everyone should have access to affordable and healthy food in a dignified manner.

It is the position of the PTF that a multi-pronged income-based response is needed to address the root causes of household food insecurity¹. The PTF's full position statement on household food insecurity is included in Appendix 1.

In alliance with other organizations, such as Dietitians of Canada and OSNPPH, the PTF advocates for a response to household food insecurity that includes:

- Living wage policies
- Increased social assistance rates
- Increased investment in subsidized, affordable and stable housing options
- A Basic Income Guarantee

Background

To help shape Ontario's Food Security Strategy, the PTF engaged with local stakeholders to provide input and share ideas to help the province achieve a vision where every person is food secure, to support them in leading healthy and active lives². Local conversations generally followed the questions put forward in the province's Discussion Guide, and reflected on local experiences and best practices. A list of stakeholders that participated in the engagement session are listed in Appendix 2.

¹ (Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, 2016)

² (Government of Ontario, 2017)

Food Insecurity & Food Security

The PTF and local stakeholders are concerned about the lack of understanding demonstrated in the province's Discussion Paper about issues related to community food security and food systems, and household food insecurity. The Discussion Guide appears to use the terms interchangeably throughout the document, suggesting that they are opposing concepts and that addressing one will lead to solutions for the other. However, research clearly demonstrates that food-based interventions that focus on improvements to the overall food system will not significantly address household food insecurity, which is an income-based problem. Understanding food security and food insecurity, including root causes, as well as identifying evidence-based interventions, is critical to the development of a food security strategy.

To help strengthen understanding of the concepts of food security and food insecurity, the PTF encouraged stakeholders that participated in informing this submission to consider the following definitions:

- Food Security: "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life³."
- Household Food Insecurity: "The inadequate or insecure access to adequate food due to financial constraints⁴."

The PTF strongly encourages the Government of Ontario to make addressing household food insecurity a priority as part of its broader Food Security Strategy.

Collective Impact

Like the province, the PTF believes that a collective impact approach can assist with driving required changes. Local stakeholders identified the PTF and The Seed as collective impact models that have had an impact on food insecurity initiatives in our community.

Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination

The PTF is a multi-sector, collaborative initiative focused on eliminating poverty in Guelph-Wellington and is funded by the City of Guelph, County of Wellington, and United Way Guelph Wellington Dufferin. In 2010, services providers and community members requested that the PTF take local action to improve the local emergency food system. Working in partnership with the University of Guelph's Community Engaged Scholarship Institute, the PTF conducted two in-depth research projects to explore what was working well and what was not, as well as possible solutions, according to emergency food providers and users. The final reports are available here:

³ (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006)

⁴ (PROOF, n.d.)

- Emergency Food Services in Guelph-Wellington: A Scan of the Current System and Thoughts on the Future (2011): http://www.gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Emergency_Food_Services_in_Guelph-Wellington.pdf
- Using Emergency Food Services in Guelph-Wellington (2013): <http://www.gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/6.-Emergency-Food-Services-GW-April-2013.pdf>

Based on the results of the research, the PTF convened key stakeholders (the Emergency Food Services Ad-Hoc Committee) to develop a set of short- and long-term recommendations. The recommendations were endorsed by the PTF and broadly supported by the community. The recommendation report is available here:

- Recommendation Report: Using Emergency Food Services in Guelph-Wellington (2013): <http://www.gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Recommendation-Report.pdf>

The PTF continued to provide backbone support to the Emergency Food Services Ad-Hoc Committee to implement the recommendations. Over time, this work transitioned from the PTF to the Guelph Community Health Centre and the Ad-Hoc Committee became known as 'The Seed.'

The Seed

In 2014, The Seed successfully applied to the Ontario Trillium Foundation under the leadership of the Guelph Community Health Centre and the Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition. This funding has supported The Seed to implement a collective impact model focused on food-related issues, including household food insecurity.

The Seed holds a vision for creating a dedicated space for food programming in Guelph that will:

- Increase access to healthy food
- Build food skills and knowledge
- Coordinate distribution of health food
- Use food to create community
- Advocate for policies that target the root causes of food insecurity

More information about The Seed is available here: <http://theseedguelph.ca/>

Empowered Communities

Stakeholders that participated in informing this submission were provided background from the province's Discussion Guide on the theme of 'empowered communities.' Based on this information, as well as their own experiences and knowledge, participants were asked a series of questions adapted from the Discussion Guide. Below is a summary of their responses.

Community Approaches

When asked to provide examples of community approaches that have increased affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate foods for food insecure households, participants identified an impressive list of innovative community approaches. Examples include:

The Pod Community Food Distribution Program

The Pod Community Food Distribution Program is an initiative of The Seed aimed at increasing access to fresh, healthy food for low-income community members in Guelph. The Pod acquires fresh produce from local distributors, retailers, and farmers through bulk purchasing, gleaning, and donations. The produce is stored in a centralized storage facility, and then redistributed on a weekly basis to community-based charitable food assistance programs. More information is available here: <http://theseedguelph.ca/>

An in-depth feasibility study and pilot program plan was conducted in advance of the launch of The Pod. This document can be accessed here: <http://theseedguelph.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Guelph-Community-Fresh-Food-Storage-Distribution-Feasibility-Study-and-Pilot-Program-Plan-2016.pdf>

An evaluation in October 2016 by the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination demonstrated early positive outcomes. Community-based charitable food assistance programs reported an increase in the quantity and quality of fresh produce they could distribute to clients because of working with The Pod⁵. The PTF will conduct a second evaluation in the fall 2017.

North End Harvest Market

The North End Harvest Market is a weekly free fruit and vegetable market to support low income families and individuals to meet their healthy food needs. To access the market, families and individuals are only asked to provide their name and address. More information is available here: <http://guelphneighbourhoods.org/programs/north-end-harvest-market/>

Market Bucks - Farmers Market Vouchers

Launched as a pilot project in 2015, the Market Bucks program allows consumers to purchase products from farmers' market vendors using vouchers. Market Bucks are distributed to low-income clients through social service agencies (e.g. Ontario Works) in three rural communities: Mount Forest, Palmerston, and Harriston. To reduce the possibility of stigma attached to use of the Market Bucks, they were also sold at full price to any interested party or individual. As a result, vendors receiving the Market Bucks as payment were unaware of how the Market Bucks were received.

An evaluation of the Market Bucks pilot in 2015 conducted by the PTF demonstrated that the program increased access to healthy, nutritious food in a dignified manner, increased connection to community for

⁵ (Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, 2016)

vulnerable residents, and increased exposure and revenue for local farmers/vendors⁶. Additional funding was received to run the program again in 2016 and a second evaluation by the PTF proved consistently positive results.

Guelph Youth Farm

A new program in Guelph, Guelph Youth Farm is a youth-led social enterprise where youth are mentored and supported by a unique coalition of businesses, public institutions, and not-for-profit organizations. The Farm grows and sells fresh organic food, and offers youth training programs and services. The Farm supports youth to learn and teach food skills, be creative community leaders, create food-based programs and events that support community health, and develop skills and contacts for future employment opportunities. More information is available here: <http://theseedguelph.ca/gyf/>

Community Food Systems Approaches

The province identifies a community food systems approach as one that focuses on achieving local environmental, economic, and social health outcomes. Local stakeholders identified several approaches from outside our community that they believe fit in this category and have proven successful. These examples include: The Stop Community Food Centre, Community Food Centres Canada, FoodShare Toronto, Hamilton Food Strategy, Toronto Food Policy Council, and Sustain Ontario.

Locally, participants pointed to The Seed as a successful community food systems approach that has had an impact in Guelph. The Seed is a community food project of the Guelph Community Health Centre. The Seed's mission is to use the power of food to build healthy communities and address the underlying issues of food insecurity and poverty in Guelph. There are three pillars to their work: food access, food literacy, and outreach and advocacy.

Strengths & Limitations of Community-based Approaches

Participants noted that community-based approaches have many strengths, including the ability to alleviate the symptoms of food insecurity in the short-term. Participants also stressed the value that such approaches have in building community, increasing social inclusion, and improving food skills and knowledge. However, participants also stressed that communities cannot address household food insecurity through food systems approaches and interventions.

Food insecurity is not a food-based problem that can be impacted by food system enhancements or food access interventions at the community-level. Household food insecurity is a systemic issue strongly correlated with low income. Interventions that improve financial security are the only responses that have proven to be effective. For example, there is a 50% decline in household food insecurity among low-income

⁶ (Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, 2016)

seniors when they reach the age of 65 and become eligible for Old Age Security pension and Guaranteed Income Supplement⁷.

Evaluating Food Security

Locally, the PTF has played an important role in evaluating the impact of community-based approaches to household food insecurity. The PTF has conducted evaluations of The Pod and the Market Bucks Program. Links to these evaluations are available here:

- The Pod Evaluation Report <http://www.gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-Pod-Evaluation-Report.pdf>
- Evaluation Report: 2015 Market Bucks Pilot Project <http://www.gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Market-Bucks-Evaluation-Report.pdf>
- Evaluation Report: 2016 Market Bucks <http://www.gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Market-Bucks-2017-Evaluation-Report.pdf>

Local stakeholders acknowledged that organizational capacity to conduct evaluations of their programs is sometimes limited. Additional funding is required to support this, particularly for third-party evaluators who have the necessary methodological expertise and impartiality in the project findings. We are pleased to note that the province has also identified this challenge and has responded by dedicating up to \$5 million for food-related projects as part of the Local Poverty Reduction Funding.

We asked local stakeholders to identify possible indicators that could be used to measure the three dimensions of food security:

- 1) Food availability (having sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis)
 - a) Amount and quality of culturally-acceptable foods available from emergency providers
 - b) Amount of land available and secured for farmland (urban and rural)
 - c) Number of food desserts
 - d) Number of food swamps
 - e) Amount of healthy food available in public systems (e.g. schools, day cares, etc.)
- 2) Food Access (having sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet)
 - a) Nutritious Food Basket
 - b) Household food insecurity rates
- 3) Food Use (appropriate use based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care)
 - a) Level of food skills
 - b) Nutrition knowledge and attitudes
 - c) Fruit and vegetable consumption

Local stakeholders expressed concerns about the fact that data collection on these indicators is largely uncoordinated. This has resulted in different understandings about the state of food security and household food insecurity at a community level, which can lead to inadequate or inappropriate interventions.

⁷ (Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, 2016)

At a provincial level, concerns were expressed by stakeholders about the province's decision to opt out of measuring household food insecurity for 2015/16 as part of the Canadian Community Health Survey. This is particularly concerning given the fact that the province has identified measuring food insecurity as an outcome of the Basic Income Pilot project⁸. Not having the data from the CCHS survey will represent a significant gap in our understanding of household food insecurity at a provincial and community level.

Food Security is About More than Food

The province's discussion guide identifies several assets that are essential to food and nutrition security, including physical, social, financial, human, and natural assets. Local stakeholders were asked to consider the role of various sectors in increasing the assets. The following is a summary of the feedback collected.

Provincial Role: Increase Social Assistance Rates & Investments in Housing

Local stakeholders were very supportive of the provincial Basic Income Pilot program to increase some of the assets that are essential to food and nutrition security. However, there was acknowledgement that the pilot is focused on three communities over the next three years and that more is needed to address household food insecurity for those in immediate need.

Specific recommendations reflected those found in the PTF's position statement on household food insecurity, including:

- Increasing social assistance rates to ensure recipients have access to a full basket of supports essential to maintaining health, including adequate income and nutritious food
- Increasing investments in subsidized, affordable and stable housing options so households struggling to make ends meet do not have to face the dilemma of prioritizing basic needs

Other suggestions included:

- Introducing policies to increase healthy food environments
- Investing in the growth of the next generation of farmers
- Exploring legislation to reduce food waste
- Developing an awareness raising campaign about household food insecurity
- Investing in local food production
- Monitoring and reporting on food insecurity data
- Providing sustainable funding to community-based approaches to increase assets that are essential to food and nutrition security

⁸ (Government of Ontario, 2016)

Private Sector Role: Pay a Living Wage

In terms of the private sector's role in decreasing household food insecurity, local stakeholders focused on the need for employers to pay a living wage. This would support the 62.2% of food insecure households in Canada that are reliant on wages, salaries or self-employment⁹.

Additional recommendations were provided that focused on supporting food security (but would not impact household food insecurity):

- Supporting healthy food procurement policies
- Exploring opportunities to reduce food waste

Community Institutions Role

When considering the role of community institutions in increasing assets, recommendations from local stakeholders included:

- Improving social connectedness, social inclusion, and community-based networks
- Incorporating education about food security and household food insecurity into school curriculums
- Developing opportunities for food insecure households to inform solutions
- Establishing procurement policies that ensure local and sustainable food is purchased

Stakeholders also highlighted the following community-based initiative from Guelph-Wellington that is focused on increasing assets that are essential to food and nutrition security:

Circles Guelph-Wellington

Circles Guelph-Wellington is a community-based initiative that creates relationships across economic boundaries. It matches people of low-income who have attended the Getting Ahead program with people of middle- and upper-income who have attended Bridges Out of Poverty training.

Circles is a high-impact, 18-month voluntary strategy designed to:

- Provide emotional and practical support
- Assist with complex issues
- Build the "social capital" of people living in low income situations
- Show the community the very real barriers holding people in poverty
- Walk with people in poverty and support positive changes in their lives.

Circles Guelph-Wellington is currently conducting an intensive evaluation, funded by the Local Poverty Reduction Fund.

More information about the program is available here: <http://circlesgw.ca/>

⁹ (Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, 2016)

Social Enterprise

Local stakeholders had an opportunity to discuss social enterprises and develop a shared understanding of how they can tackle social and environmental challenges related to food insecurity. In general, there was consensus that social enterprises can have powerful impacts on some food insecure households. The following were provided as examples:

Garden Fresh Box

Garden Fresh Box (GFB) is a non-profit produce buying program that provides customers with affordable fresh fruits and vegetables and supports our local farmers. The GFB content changes from month to month because the fruits and vegetables are chosen in season when they are at the peak of their nutritional value. Subsidized boxes are available for low-income households. More information is available here: <http://www.gardenfreshbox.ca/>

Examples from other communities were also shared by stakeholders:

- 541 Eatery & Exchange <http://fivefortyone.ca/>
- The Raw Carrot <http://therawcarrot.com/>
- College Street Café and Catering <http://seontario.org/stories/college-street-cafe-and-catering/>

While participants could identify social enterprises that have had a positive impact, they stressed that such models are extremely limited in their ability to address system-level income-based issues that are at the root of household food insecurity. Stakeholders expressed concern about the province over-emphasizing the impact social enterprises can have on household food insecurity, rather than focusing on income-based solutions.

Additional Feedback

Local stakeholders were asked to reflect on discussions at the engagement session and to provide additional feedback that was not covered. In general, the comments reiterated the following recommendations for the Government of Ontario:

- Make addressing household food insecurity a priority as part of its broader Food Security Strategy
- Focus on multi-pronged, income-based responses to address the root causes of household food insecurity

Appendix 1 – PTF Position Statement: Household Food Insecurity



Position Statement: **Household Food Insecurity**

GUELPH & WELLINGTON TASK FORCE FOR POVERTY ELIMINATION / SEPTEMBER 2016

Position Statement

It is the position of the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination that a multi-pronged income-based response is required to effectively address household food insecurity.

Introduction

As a symptom of poverty, household food insecurity impacted over 3.2 million individuals in Canada in 2014 (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016). The health issues and associated health care costs as a result of household food insecurity are well documented, along with the impact household food insecurity can have on experiences of stigma, shame, stress, and social exclusion. While community-based charitable food assistance programs, such as food banks, play a role in addressing hunger, they are unable to reduce or eliminate poverty.

It is the position of the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination that a multi-pronged income-based response is needed to address the root causes of household food insecurity, which are financial constraints and financial vulnerability.

The position of the Poverty Task Force (PTF) is evidence-based and largely informed by the positions of experts in the field of household food insecurity, including the statements by Dietitians of Canada and the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (Appendix 1).

What is household food insecurity?

Household food insecurity is commonly defined as “inadequate or insecure access to adequate food due to financial constraints” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016a; Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016). Experiences of household food insecurity “can range from concerns about running out of food before there is more money to buy more, to the inability to afford a balanced diet, to going hungry, missing meals, and in extreme cases, not eating for a whole day because of lack of food and money for food” (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016).

While poverty or low-income are often understood as the root causes, research suggests that household food insecurity is more accurately described as being caused by **financial constraints** and

financial vulnerability. When households have low or unreliable income, there is often not enough money to purchase sufficient healthy food after paying for rent, utilities, and other critical expenses. Unexpected financial or budget shocks, such as a job loss, rising housing or energy costs, or an unexpected health expense, can increase financial vulnerability, resulting in episodes of household food insecurity. Based on this understanding, researchers have concluded that household food insecurity is “not solely the product of an inadequate income level, but instead a lack of consumption insurance to address budget shocks, which are unexpected decreases in income or purchasing power of income” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b).

It is important to note, that while often used interchangeably, the terms ‘food insecurity’ and ‘hunger’ are not the same. Dietitians of Canada note that **hunger** is a physical symptom of severe food insecurity experienced by an individual, and not necessarily by everyone in the household (2016b). **Community-based charitable food assistance programs**, such as food banks and meal programs, are often the primary community response to hunger experienced by food insecure households.

How prevalent is household food insecurity?

The Annual Report on Household Food Insecurity reported that 12.0% of Canadian households¹⁰ experienced some level of food insecurity in 2014. The report notes that, “this represents 1.3 million households, or 3.2 million individuals, including nearly 1 million children under the age of 18. More than 1 in 6 children under the age of 18 lived in households that experience food insecurity” (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016). The provincial rate of food insecurity prevalence for Ontario was 11.9%, and in Guelph it was 13.2% (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016).

Statistics demonstrate that household food insecurity is more prevalent among households with children (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016). Women, unattached adults, people who have a disability, Indigenous Peoples, the homeless, and some new immigrants/refugees are among those who “disproportionately experience a higher prevalence or risk of household food insecurity” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b). Households receiving pensions as their main source of income have the lowest prevalence of household food insecurity (Herbert Emery, J.C., Fleisch, V., & McIntyre, L., 2013).

It is important to note that while statistics from community-based charitable food assistance programs are often used to demonstrate need in a community, they are not a valid measure of household food insecurity. Research has consistently identified that “Although a considerable number of people go to food banks, they represent only a small proportion – about 25% - of those who experience food insecurity” (OSNPPH, 2015).

¹⁰ The Annual Report on Household Food Insecurity utilized data from Statistic Canada’s annual Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS). In 2013 and 2014, the CCHS Household Food Security Survey Module was optional and British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Yukon chose not to include the measurement of food insecurity for their populations.

What are the impacts of household food insecurity?

Household food insecurity can lead to notable health issues among children and adults. Recent studies have reported that “the experience of hunger leaves an indelible mark on children’s physical and mental health, manifesting in greater likelihood of certain conditions, such as depression and asthma in adolescence and early childhood” (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016). Similarly, research has found that “adults in food-insecure households have poorer physical and mental health and higher rates of numerous chronic conditions, including depression, diabetes, and heart disease” (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016). Once a chronic condition is developed, health experts maintain that household food insecurity can interfere with the management of the condition (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b).

The health care costs of those living in food insecure households tends to be significant. Research has found that “compared to individuals from secure households, the odds of adults becoming a high cost user within the next 5 years were 46% greater for those living with food insecurity” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b). Additionally, health care costs of food insecure adults “increased with the severity of food insecurity: 23%, 49% and 121% higher costs among adults from households with marginal, moderate and severe food insecurity respectively.” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016)

Aside from the health issues and the associated health care costs, individuals from food insecure households can experience stigma, shame, stress, and social exclusion (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b). This was confirmed in local research findings, which reported the main barrier to emergency food services in Guelph and Wellington was feelings of stigma (Dodd, W., Nelson, E., Cairney, K., Clark, J. & Cartaginese, A., 2013).

The charitable food assistance response

Food banks, the most common form of charitable food assistance, were crafted as temporary relief operations during the recession in the early 1980s. However, food banks and other charitable food assistance programs have increased considerably over the past 30+ years and have “become a well-established part of the fabric of many communities across Ontario and Canada.” (OSNPPH, 2015). As a result, “food banking has grown and evolved into an extensive charity-based secondary food distribution system specifically for impoverished people” (OSNPPH, 2015).

While community-based charitable food assistance programs are well-intentioned and help some individuals, a growing body of evidence suggests they are ineffective and inappropriate for addressing the root causes of household food insecurity. Dietitians of Canada point to a Canadian study that looked at coping strategies for child hunger over the course of a decade. Despite a growth in the number of food banks and other community resources, use of these services as a coping method to deal with hunger remained static (2016b). Other research concludes that “only about one-fifth of food insecure households go to food banks, and typically they receive no more than 3-5 days’ worth of food staples per month” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016).

The barriers that limit community-based charitable food assistance programs, such as food banks, in addressing household food insecurity are embedded in their very design. Primarily dependent on donations for supply, charitable food programs are “typically not able to meet the preferences, religious restrictions, nutritional or health-related dietary needs of clients” (OSNPPH, 2015). Others note that “limitations are rooted in the current ad hoc nature of community food programs, in that they tend to be small-scale programs arising at the community level, with limited and/or short-term funding and reliance on volunteers, and thus are inherently limited in capacity” (Loopstra, R. & Tarasuk, V., 2013).

Some charitable food assistance programs have moved to expand beyond simply providing emergency food, to focus on building food preparation and growing skills, nutritional knowledge, and creating opportunities for social inclusion. However, research findings remain consistent, pointing out that these programs “are not used by the majority of food insecure households” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b). Additionally, research findings have debunked assumptions that food insecure households lack food preparation skills, knowledge or motivation, challenging “the idea that food skills alone might be an adequate mechanism for protecting households from food insecurity” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b).

Case studies of participatory food assistance programs, such as community gardens, found that they were inaccessible and did not fit with the needs, interests and lives of participants (Loopstra, R. & Tarasuk, V., 2013). With the expansion of community gardens, community kitchens, and Good Food Box programs in Canada, researchers have rebuked assumptions about the relevance of such programs to food insecure households. Leading national household food insecurity researchers argue that “while these programs aim to offer an alternative to charitable food assistance – something that was equally rejected by families in our study population – these findings highlight that community food programming may not be an accessible or efficient way for these families to meet their food needs.” (Loopstra, R. & Tarasuk, V., 2013).

Despite the limitations of community-based charitable food assistance programs, they continue to play a role in meeting the immediate need of some individuals in food insecure households. However, it is critical to not lose sight of the fact that charitable food programs “cannot themselves reduce or eliminate poverty through the redistribution of wealth” and are “ill-equipped to affect the structural inequities that perpetuate food insecurity” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b).

The income-based response

Financial constraints and financial vulnerability are the root causes of household food insecurity, making income the strongest predictor. Research clearly demonstrates that “the probability of food insecurity rises as household income declines” (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016) (see Figure 1). Thus, to adequately address household food insecurity, income-based responses must be put in place to respond to income changes and household expenses (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b).

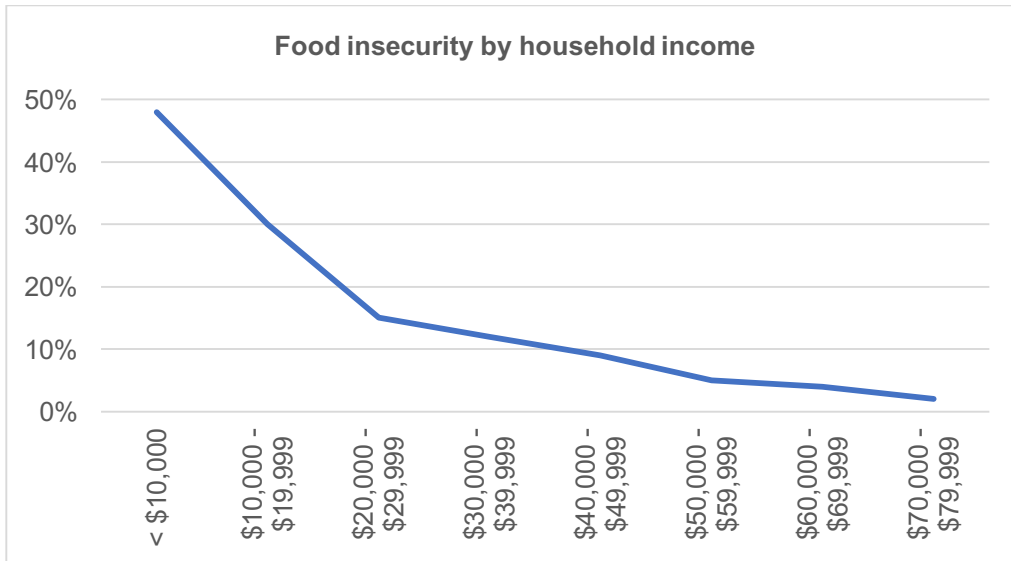


Figure 1: Food insecurity by household income. Adapted from Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A., & Dachner, N., 2016.

In alliance with other organizations, such as Dietitians of Canada and OSNPPH, the PTF advocates for a multi-pronged income-based response to household food insecurity that includes:

1. Living Wage policies
2. Increased Social Assistance rates
3. Increased investment in subsidized, affordable and stable housing options
4. A Basic Income Guarantee

Living Wage Policies

Households reliant on wages, salaries or self-employment account for 62.2% of food insecure households in Canada (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016). Dietitians of Canada point out that “simply having an employed worker in the household does not necessarily ensure food security for a household. For the approximately one million Canadian adults who earn the minimum wage set for their region, full-time wages are not enough to raise their households above the poverty line” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016).

Providing an adequate income helps support households to be food secure. A living wage is defined as “the hourly rate at which a household can meet its basic needs, once government transfers have been added to the family’s income (such as the Universal Child Care Benefit) and deductions have been subtracted (such as income taxes and Employment Insurance premiums)” (Living Wage Canada, 2015). It is calculated based on a modest budget, which provides an estimate of what that family needs to earn to meet basic living expenses, support the healthy development of their children, and fully participate in work, family life, and community activities. In Guelph & Wellington, the living wage is \$16.50/hour and food expenses account for 13% of overall household expenses (Ellery, R., 2015).

Living Wage employers recognize that paying a living wage constitutes a critical investment in the long-term prosperity of the economy by fostering a dedicated, skilled and healthy workforce (Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, 2015). By paying a living wage, employers can play a critical role in helping households combat food insecurity.

Increased Social Assistance Rates

While the proportion of food insecure households is lower for households receiving social assistance (15.7%) compared to households reliant on wages and salaries (62.2%), the prevalence is much higher (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016). In fact, “the prevalence of food insecurity amongst households living on social assistance is two to four times higher than for households whose main source of income is employment” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016). In 2014, food insecurity impacted 60.9% of households reliant on social assistance (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016).

Despite recent increases by the Government of Ontario, advocates continue to point out that social assistance rates remain grossly inadequate. Recently, the Income Security Advocacy Centre pointed out that, “with fruit and vegetable prices up 12% to 18% last year, the lack of significant investment in incomes means people on social assistance will continue to rely on food banks and suffer from health problems associated with poor diets” (2016).

As part of an official review of social assistance in Ontario, it was recommended that the adequacy of rates be improved so that recipients “can obtain nutritious food, secure housing and other basic necessities” (Lankin, F. & Sheikh, M., 2012). Local feedback from Guelph & Wellington strongly supported this recommendation and the PTF has actively advocated for an immediate increase in social assistance rates, along with indexing that would ensure rates keep up with the cost of living (Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, 2013). By responding to these recommendations, the Government of Ontario can play a critical role in helping households combat food insecurity.

Increased investment in subsidized, affordable and stable housing options

Households struggling to make ends meet are often faced with the dilemma of having to prioritize basic needs. Research indicates that “most food insecure households cannot spend adequate amounts of money on healthy food because they must prioritize a substantial portion of their budget for housing and utility costs” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b). Canadians who rent their homes are at particular risk of being food insecure, with 24.5% of rental households reported as being food insecure, compared to 6.2% of homeowners (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N., 2016). The situation can be even more difficult for individuals experiencing homelessness, whose food insecurity can be “compounded by multiple complex concurrent problems such as addictions, mental and physical health problems” (Dietitians of Canada, 2016b).

A 2015 report from Federation of Canadian Municipalities called for federal tax incentives, investments in social housing, and investments and collaborations across governments “to ensure that rental

subsidies are made available [and] to ensure that persons and families exiting from homelessness can be affordably stabilized in permanent housing.” Similar calls to action were directed at the Government of Ontario by local stakeholders in Guelph & Wellington as part of the province’s renewed Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy (County of Wellington, Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, Wellington-Guelph Housing Committee, 2015). By responding to these recommendations, the federal and provincial government can play a critical role in helping households increase their after-shelter income and offset their probability of being food insecure.

A Basic Income Guarantee

A Basic Income Guarantee, also known as a Guaranteed Annual Income, is an unconditional cash transfer from government to individuals or families to provide a minimum annual income (Lamman, 2015). The Basic Income Canada Network notes that a BIG “ensures everyone an income sufficient to meet basic needs and live with dignity, regardless of work status” (2015). In April 2016, the Poverty Task Force endorsed the following position statement on a Basic Income Guarantee:

“It is the position of the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination that poverty is an urgent human rights and social justice issue for local, provincial, and federal governments. A Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) is required as part of a coherent strategy to effectively eliminate poverty.”

Proponents of a BIG often point to Canada’s low rates of poverty among seniors, as the result of its public pension system. The system includes the Old Age Security (OAS) program, the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), and the contributory Canada Pension Plan (CPP). Research has demonstrated that food insecurity prevalence rates fall by half at age 65, largely as a result of a change in income sources, from employment to the public pension system (see Figure 2). This has led researchers to conclude that “the introduction of a GAI at age 65 that provides consumption insurance reduces food insecurity risk” (Herbert Emery, J.C., Fleishch, V., & McIntyre, L, 2013).

A BIG has the potential to dramatically reduce food insecurity by addressing the root causes – financial constraints and financial vulnerability. While a BIG would provide additional income that would support those facing chronic household food insecurity, it is understood that poverty is not always a “product of inadequate income, but rather a lack of consumption insurance to address budget shocks” (Herbert Emery, J.C., Fleishch, V., & McIntyre, L, 2013). A BIG would provide consumption insurance to allow liquidity-constrained households to adjust to small but frequent budget shocks, reducing the need for reactive interventions, such as food banks (Herbert Emery, J.C., Fleishch, V., & McIntyre, L, 2013). By working in partnership to design and implement a BIG, all levels of government have the opportunity to effectively eliminate poverty, thereby drastically reducing household food insecurity.

The PTF calls on:

- Municipal governments to support local living wage movements to ensure that working families and individuals can be food secure.
- The Government of Ontario to
 - increase social assistance rates to ensure recipients have access to a full basket of supports essential to maintaining health, including adequate income and nutritious food; and
 - consult and work in partnership with key stakeholders, including community-based anti-poverty initiatives like the Poverty Task Force, to design and implement a Basic Income Guarantee.
- The Government of Canada to expedite investigation of a Basic Income Guarantee as part of a National Poverty Strategy.
- For all levels of government to work in partnership to increase investments in subsidized, affordable and stable housing options.
- Social and health service providers, community organizations, local businesses, the education sector, faith-based organizations, and emergency services to become aware of and promote a multi-pronged income-based response to household food insecurity.
- Community-based charitable food assistance programs to join advocacy efforts that support a multi-pronged income-based response to food insecurity.

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Appendix 2 – Local Stakeholders

The PTF would like to acknowledge the local stakeholders that participated in our engagement session. We are appreciative of the knowledge and expertise that brought depth and unique insights to this submission.

- Alex Goss, Manager of Community Investment, City of Guelph
- Andrew Seagram, Coordinator Community Use of Schools, Upper Grand District School Board
- Beth Leith, Community Member
- Branka Gladanac, Public Health Nutritionist, Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health
- Brendan Johnson, Executive Director, Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition
- Christina Boumis, Financial Health & Literacy Lead, Family Counselling & Support Services for Guelph-Wellington
- Dominica McPherson, Neighbourhood Support Worker, Grange Hill East Neighbourhood Group
- Elsa Mann, Team Leader, Rural Wellington Community Team - Mount Forest Family Health Team
- Gavin Dandy, Directing Co-ordinator, The Seed
- Jaya James, Director, Lakeside HOPE House
- Kari Simpson, CEO, East Wellington Community Services
- Kate Vsetula, Community Health Manager, Guelph Community Health Centre
- Lisa Needham, Public Health Nutritionist, Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health
- Mark Rodford, Director, Business Development, United Way Guelph Wellington Dufferin
- Rebecca Clayton, Guelph Community Health Centre
- Shakiba Shayani, Director, Community Investment, United Way Guelph Wellington Dufferin
- Tina Brophy, Community Member
- Tom Armitage, Distribution Coordinator, The Seed

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