

Monday, November 21, 2011

The Honourable Deb Matthews
Minister of Health and Long-Term Care
Hepburn Block
10th floor, 80 Grosvenor St.
Toronto, Ontario
M7A 2C4

RE: Improving Access to Healthy Foods for all Ottawa Residents

Dear Minister Matthews,

Every year, through the Nutritious Food Basket project, Ottawa Public Health determines the average weekly cost of a nutritious diet in Ottawa. From 2010 to 2011, the cost to feed a family of four for one week rose 4.9% to \$175.39. For families and individuals with low incomes, this often means there is not enough money to afford healthy food after paying for other essentials such as housing. In 2011, the average monthly rent of a three bedroom apartment in Ottawa was \$1227. For a family of four who receive financial assistance from *Ontario Works*, this represents 61% of their monthly income. As such, the cost of food and rent comprise approximately 99% of their income.

Unfortunately for these families, and many others earning minimum wage, food 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. In Ottawa alone, there has been a 12% rise in food bank use over the past three years. Notably over a third of food bank recipients are children. Poor nutrition leads to an increased risk of infectious and chronic disease, as well as reduced academic performance and low infant birth weights.

On behalf of the Board of Health for the City of Ottawa Health Unit, I am writing to request that the Government of Ontario consider the following to ensure healthy foods are available to everyone.

- Implement a comprehensive Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy that addresses the sustainability of a healthy food supply and the needs of Ontarians, particularly those with low socioeconomic status.
- Adjust social assistance rates to reflect the cost of living and annual rate of inflation.
- Increase minimum wage rates to \$11 per hour, indexed annually to inflation, to help ensure those who work full-time are not living in poverty.
- Introduce a provincial housing supplement program for low income families that will ensure families can afford the \$759 a month for a basic nutritious diet.



I am looking forward to our ongoing collaboration toward our common goal of improving access to healthy foods for all Ottawa residents.

I thank you for your attention in this matter.

Sincerely,

Diane Holmes
Chair, Board of Health for the City of Ottawa Health Unit

c.c.

The Honourable Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario
The Honourable Bob Chiarelli, Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation
The Honourable Madeleine Meilleur, Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services and Minister Responsible For Francophone Affairs
Lisa Macleod, Member of Provincial Parliament for Nepean-Carleton
Phil McNeely, Member of Provincial Parliament for Ottawa-Orléans
Yasir Naqvi, Member of Provincial Parliament for Ottawa Centre
His Worship Jim Watson, Mayor of the City of Ottawa
Dr. Arlene King, Chief Medical Officer of Health
Dr. Robin Williams, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health
Linda Stewart, Executive Director, Association of Local Public Health Agencies

