

# AAA Project Introduction and Background

## Advocacy: Awareness to Action Project

### *Building Bridges between Awareness and Action on Social Issues*

Following from our success with the [Put Food In the Budget Campaign](http://putfoodinthebudget.ca/) (http://putfoodinthebudget.ca/ ) both at the provincial level and at the local level with our *Do the Math Working Group*, York Region Food Network acquired funding in 2011 to continue our advocacy work around issues of food insecurity and inadequate income from the *Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario* ([http://www.heartandstroke.on.ca/site/c.pvl3leNWJwE/b.3581583/k.F7E3/Heart\\_Disease\\_Stroke\\_and\\_Healthy\\_Living.htm](http://www.heartandstroke.on.ca/site/c.pvl3leNWJwE/b.3581583/k.F7E3/Heart_Disease_Stroke_and_Healthy_Living.htm)).

Our primary objective over the past two years has been to advocate for the implementation of a \$100 Healthy Food Supplement for all adults on social assistance in Ontario who receive less than they did pre-1995 and who have been left out of the provincial government's poverty reduction strategy altogether. The result being increased food insecurity in York Region and across Ontario, increased reliance on over-burdened food banks, and the deterioration of hope and life chances for a completely impoverished group of people who continue in living in hunger, poor health, homelessness, hopelessness and despair.

As we worked in the past two years to create more awareness in York Region about the absolutely inadequate social assistance rates for individuals in this province, we realized that even when people and groups are aware, they often don't necessarily know how to take action on the issues and build a movement for change. The objectives of our new funding and project titled **ADVOCACY: AWARENESS TO ACTION** was to identify and implement advocacy strategies that would equip individuals, groups and organizations with the skills/tools to advocate for not only the \$100 Healthy Food Supplement, but also other social causes that would be on their radar.

## Tools and Strategies for Implementation of the AAA project.

1. *Video and Facilitator's Manual for use with the Video promoting eradication of poverty and building of healthy communities. Video entitled "Courage to Change My World."*
2. *Advocacy Letter and Tool Writing Kit / Resources to assist people in making changes.*
3. *Website to host AAA section for all advocacy resources, events and opportunities.*
4. *Petition for the Healthy Food Supplement – online* PETITION (<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/put-food-in-the-budget.html>) for Put Food In the Budget to help us advocate

## ***A brief history of some of our Advocacy Strategies***

**The first strategy - Do the Math Budget Survey** ([www.putfoodinthebudget.ca](http://www.putfoodinthebudget.ca)) has been successful in broadening general public awareness and also bringing more attention to senior levels of government as 15,000 people have been on-line to complete the survey and submit to the Premier as well as other Ministers involved: Meilleur, Matthews, Broten and Duncan in particular.

**Our second strategy** was to meet and educate MPPs from across York Region (and in the case of the PFIB - across Ontario); we requested that they complete **the Do the Math Budget Survey** of the monthly costs of living for a person on SA, and speak to the inadequate rates which are 40% lower when cost of living is taken into account, than they were pre-1995.

- This was a successful strategy in terms of RAISING AWARENESS among MPPs – 50 were met with across Ontario, the majority of which agreed the rates were insufficient (from all parties)
- **We met with all 7 MPPs in York Region and were able to ascertain quotes from several to this effect that we've been able to use in subsequent media pieces and to leverage other supporters.**

**A third strategy - The Do the Math Challenge across Ontario** was also very successful in bringing awareness to the issue and helping to begin the dialogue with people who are not usually involved in these types of issues.

- 1,000 people took the Diet Challenge, of living on primarily items from a food bank;
- **12 people in York Region completed it and spoke to it in a variety of ways, newspaper, face book, twitter, public events.**

Raising Awareness and bringing new advocates and champions on side has been quite successful due to these main strategies

***However, we continued to hear from MPPs that despite their awareness, they were not prepared to make the Healthy Food Supplement (HFS) an issue until the general public was on board with this kind of approach to reducing poverty.***

At the same time, during the **York Region Social Audit in April 2010**, we were hearing from individuals with lived experience of poverty and agency staff who indicated a wish to be involved in more advocacy efforts if leadership and a mechanism were in place to make participation more do-able and effective.

At that point **YRFN and the Do the Math Working Group applied for Advocacy Development Funding from the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario** to pilot an advocacy project in York Region that would involve more individuals with experience of poverty and a broader participation of agencies and individuals already working in this field. Heart and Stroke has provided us funding for this year, and potentially next, to develop an action plan strategy. This strategy will mobilize the community to make this a voting issue and in turn increase the pressure on our MPPs.

**ADVOCACY: Awareness to Action** was formed with the emphasis on Action and developing strategies to engage more people in the general public (as well as to engage people who were already on side with the issues but weren't clear on what they could do to effect change in their small corner of the world. (poverty advocates, agency board members, volunteers)

Our Target Audiences are primarily those who begin with some knowledge of the social landscape and issues, but require assistance to move beyond where they are currently to create change in their corner of the world. As a result, you cultivate Champions for the cause who are in a position to influence individuals in their circles and beyond.

- 1.) **Poverty Advocates as Citizens and Voters**
- 2.) **Board Members as Citizens and Voters**
- 3.) **Volunteers as Citizens and Voters (Volunteers are Voters Too Campaign)**

There is often a huge gap between awareness of issues and awareness of the types of action that people can take to effect change. The goal was to identify and compile for easy access –

**1.) Ways to get involved**

**2.) Resources to aid advocacy efforts and**

**3.) Processes and strategies that are most effective.**

**4.) New and Innovative Action Strategies that were introduced throughout the provincial PFIB campaign that could be replicated or adapted for use in communities with an active PFIB group.**

- **So the Goal of this project** was to develop strategies and mobilize people with actions that they could employ to put the Healthy Food Supplement specifically, and the need to address poverty more broadly, on the public agenda as we head into the October Provincial Election.

Here are some of the strategies we are currently working on to make this happen. Bear in mind that we are in the 5<sup>th</sup> month of the first year of funding, so the strategies are being developed and utilized as we speak. As a Pilot, we are planning to share our findings with other communities and groups as we develop them through ongoing networking, newsletters and websites of other poverty advocacy groups, email exchange and social marketing avenues.

## **STRATEGIES proposed for 2011 (and ongoing into 2012)**

- a.) **MPP Letter writing Campaign - 100 letters for \$100 Campaign (100 letters to 7 MPPs in YR)**
- b.) **Development of Advocate Teams in the north and south end of the Region:** Training of individuals on outreach, advocacy, speaking to the issues, going out to groups, and working with a peer training model
- c.) **Development of a Video** to be shared with community members, organizations, volunteers, local politicians, MPPs and MPs, highlighting the importance of Healthy Communities and working to eradicate poverty.
- d.) **Email Advocacy Initiatives: Go Petition for Healthy Food Supplement**
- e.) **Teams to visit MPPs to be developed over the summer.** Teams will include 1 or 2 members with lived experience and 1 or 2 staff persons or volunteer with knowledge of poverty issues.
- f.) **Specific Campaign to Engage Volunteers from the Emergency Food Sector** to support adequate incomes as an alternative to charity – and have a voice at the provincial level. This strategy originated with us and is being shared provincially and replicated in other communities. We have called this the **VOLUNTEERS ARE VOTERS TOO...** Campaign. It has since evolved to

embrace strong advocates from across Ontario who have renamed themselves the **FREEDOM 90 INITIATIVE**.

g.) **Placing the HFS in the broader context of other initiatives for Change that are presently taking place**

- As part of the **ISARC Social Audit Report in YR**, one recommendation was for the Region to endorse and support the HFS to the Province. **ON January 27<sup>th</sup> 2011 they adopted the recommendations and forwarded their endorsement to the Minister of community and social services, Madeline Meilleur. They also forwarded this to Premier McGuinty. As well to OMSSA – the Ontario Municipal Social Service Association.** *This was a giant step forward for our Healthy Food Supplement movement in York Region and also helped us to gain leverage with other Municipal governments in Ontario who have also endorsed the Healthy Food Supplement in this past year.*
- Other **Advocacy and Action Related Events such as the screening of the documentary POOR NO MORE** that speaks to how poverty has taken a stranglehold in Canada and what options in other countries look like. We had three well attended showings of the documentary in various locations across York Region in May and June 2011. Over 100 people were in attendance at the
- We participated in the ISARC (Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition) Faith Leadership Summit in Spring 2011. At this time I was able to speak to Minister Broten (speaker at the event) about the Healthy Food Supplement and our upcoming meeting with her as a coalition.
  - As the group that orchestrated the York Region Social Audit and report we have maintained a close working relationship with the ISARC leadership and membership which has augmented our advocacy efforts considerably. They are strong supporters of our advocacy work in YR and the PFIB's work across Ontario.
- **Participating in the SPNO- PFO Campaign** – we invited Marvyn Novick from the Social Planning Network of Ontario to present the **Poverty Free Ontario Blueprint** and plans for a campaign on June 7<sup>th</sup> in York Region. Over 60 people attended the presentation at the Aurora Public Library on June 7, 2011. **The event was co-hosted by John Taylor, Regional Councillor for Newmarket and Patricia Taylor, co-chair of the Social Planning Council of York Region. It was sponsored by our own Do the Math Working Group and the AAA Project Planning Committee.**

**Since that time we have:**

  - Orchestrated the YR campaign and participated in the provincial campaign
  - Created and disseminated advocacy buttons for the province wide campaign

- Took the leadership of organizing the PFO Sign Campaign and Launch for York Region on September 15<sup>th</sup>.

***We also decided to get very focussed on the Volunteer Target Group. In terms of Constituent Groups that the Government is more likely to listen to and feel the pressure from, we decided it was the Volunteer Sector in this case, primarily the Volunteer Sector responsible for emergency food in the food banks and meal programs, that carried the strongest message and the most weight.***

28% increase in food bank use from 2008-2010 and a 25% increase in the provision of meal programs across Ontario alone in 2010 and that is only meal programs associated with known food banks. They are feeling the pinch and are worried about their capacity to meet growing needs. A significant number of the volunteers in food banks and meal programs are women and women in their 60's and 70's. Many also realize that this is not the best way of meeting people's basic needs, and that the government continues to download our collective responsibility to charitable groups and rely on haphazard charitable responses. It is irresponsible and does not even begin to meet the needs let alone do anything to eliminate hunger, despite the claims of organizations such as Daily Bread and the Ontario Association of Food Banks who are continuously trying to walk the tightrope between obtaining charitable donations in order to feed the hungry and raising awareness about the reality and effects of poverty. It has been our experience that to be in the business of doing both is almost impossible because giving the impression that you are and can address hunger through charity, takes the political pressure off of the governments involved to make some radical systemic changes which are necessary in order to alter the ever-expanding landscape of poverty in Ontario.

**More updates and information to follow .....**

**\*\*\*Updates on the Ontario Food Bank Awareness Group\*\*\*\*\* July 2011**

***This group met for the first time at the Community Education Centre Building in Newmarket on June 17, 2011. 21 people were in attendance from York Region and Simcoe Region with four others from across the province on the phone. The group has met 6 times since July 2011 and conference participating agencies/food programs from across Ontario.***

**STATED GOAL AND CHALLENGE TO OTHERS:**

***“Put Food in the Budget and Ease the Burden on Emergency Food Programs”.***

***The Group Invited others to comment on the following:***

- A 28% increase in food bank use occurred between 2009-2010
- The number of meal programs supported by food banks increased by 25% in 2010.

***“We need change. We need our governments to step up and provide effective social programs that allow families and individuals to live with health and dignity. We need politicians to be bold and make well-reasoned decisions for the long-term good of our citizens. We need help, because Ontario’s food banks cannot – and should not – have to shoulder this responsibility forever.” Hunger Count 2010.***

***What the Group wants others to know:***

While there will always be a role for volunteers, there are very real limits to the human resources required. We also believe that it is unreasonable to expect charitable responses to replace adequate income, good jobs and government responsibility for the health and well-being of its citizens.

***More updates to follow.....***