

Put Food in the Budget

Promote health and fight poverty

Do the Math ‘Challenge’

Invitation: This is an invitation to your community to participate in the Do the Math Challenge (referred to from here on as the ‘Challenge’) which will be the week of October 4 – 8, 2010. This ‘Challenge’ is inspired by the recent initiative of The Stop Community Food Centre and is in response to the request of several communities who are interested in replicating the ‘Challenge’ in their community.

The Challenge asks community leaders to take part in a public act of solidarity with people on social assistance by living for one week with some of the very limited food options faced by people on social assistance in Ontario. (See Challenge Format below for more details)

The reasons for this public act of solidarity are to show the

- Inadequacy of social assistance rates in ensuring a healthy diet and affordable housing.
- Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty that there is public support for immediate implementation of the Healthy Food supplement – an increase of \$100 per month for every adult in Ontario receiving social assistance* - as a first step towards ensuring a life of health and dignity for people in Ontario with the lowest incomes.

To demand

- An immediate increase of \$100 per month for every adult receiving social assistance as a first step towards addressing the inadequacy of current social assistance benefits
- A fair and transparent way of setting social assistance rates so that people can meet their basic needs and lead a healthy and dignified life.

* **Note:** An annual increase of \$1,000 in income for the poorest 20 per cent of Canadians would lead to almost 10,000 fewer chronic conditions and 6,600 fewer disability days every two week. (*Poverty Is Making Us Sick, A Comprehensive Survey of Income and Health in Canada. Lightman, Mitchell & Wilson, 2008*). <http://socialplanningtoronto.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/poverty-is-making-us-sick.pdf>

Provincial Challenge: There will be a Provincial Challenge Team made up of leaders of Ontario organizations and leaders of the Put Food in the Budget Campaign whose income is social assistance.

The Anglican Archbishop Colin Johnson has committed to be part of the Provincial Challenge team. Leaders of labour, faith, health and arts organizations are also being invited and we will confirm with you their names as they confirm their participation.

Schedule - Provincial Challenge

- Orientation – There will be an orientation session for people who have accepted the ‘Challenge’ where they will meet with a group of leaders of the Put Food in the Budget Campaign whose income is based on social assistance. The purpose of this meeting is to orient the ‘Challenge’ participants to the full experience of social assistance and to create a context for their Challenge experience. This Orientation will be in early September – date to be arranged.
- Press conference – There will be a press conference on Monday October 4 at Queen’s Park to announce the Challenge and introduce the provincial Challenge team.
- Challenge – October 4 – 8, provincial Challenge team will take the Challenge and report through website and media interviews their experience.
- Provincial ‘Town Hall’ meeting – Monday October 18th (evening) will be a Town Hall meeting in Toronto where the provincial Challenge team will report on their experience. We will invite people from around Ontario to join us for the Town Hall meeting and to stay for the following day for a strategy session on moving forward. This meeting is tied to closely co-incide with the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. <http://www.un.org/events/poverty/2006/index.html>
- Strategy Day – Tuesday October 19th representatives from communities around Ontario will meet to develop strategy to continue pressure on the McGuinty government to implement the Healthy Food Supplement.

Format of ‘Challenge’ - Community leaders who accept the ‘Challenge’ will choose a set of food choices that a person on social assistance typically has available in the last week of a month. Campaign leaders whose income is based on social assistance will create a short profile of their individual circumstances and provide a list of food that they typically have available in the last week of the month. Challenge Team members will choose the profile of one of the Put Food in the Budget leaders and make that their diet for three days to a week. (Challenge team members will purchase the food themselves from the list provided in the profile they select).

We invite your Community Challenge team to also hold an orientation session between members of your community with lived experience of poverty and with Community Challenge team members. We also invite you to hold a press event on Monday October 4th to announce and ‘kick-off’ the Community Challenge. We also invite you to hold a town hall meeting in your community after the Challenge is complete. You may choose

to hold this in conjunction with International Day for Eradication of Poverty events in your community.

Organizing Responsibilities of Community Challenge: If your community accepts the Challenge then we ask you to take on these responsibilities:

1. Recruit local community leaders to accept the Challenge and support them to
 - Choose a diet based on the food options of lived experience of members of our Put Food in the Budget team that rely on social assistance and maintain this diet for between three days and one week.
 - Report in their own journal or on our campaign website (or both) their experiences while on the Challenge
 - Talk with people in their social, work and professional circles about the Challenge as they experience it
2. Organize a public event (timing to be determined) that explains why your community is taking the Do the Math Challenge
3. Organize in a public event after completion of the Challenge to describe the experiences of people who took the Challenge and speak to the need for an immediate \$100 increase in social assistance benefits

Checklist – A detailed checklist and sample materials will be developed and be available for your community in August.

Next Steps

1. **Are you interested in accepting the Community Challenge?** This invitation is to provide you with an overview that you can bring to the leadership group in your community for an initial discussion and to begin thinking about who you might ask in your community to accept the Challenge. We would like you to let us know as soon as you can if you are interested, the questions that you have and the supports that you think you will need.
2. **Tell us what you need** - Your questions and suggestions will help the Put Food in the Budget Campaign develop detailed resource materials and tools to support you if you choose to accept the Community Do the Math Challenge. These materials will be ready in August.

For more information please contact¹ Mike Balkwill,
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¹ I will be on holidays from July 19 – August 10. Please send email with questions, comments and I will follow-up when I return.

BACKGROUND

Rationale for the Challenge: Community representatives from the Put Food in the Budget campaign visited more than forty MPP's across Ontario and asked them to complete the survey. The MPP's who completed the survey said that a single person needs a minimum income of \$1340 per month. Almost all of them said social assistance is inadequate.

The Liberal MPP's gave different reasons for not supporting the Campaign's request for an immediate increase, because of the recession; because they wanted to wait for the results of the Social Assistance Review, or because they feel there is not public support.

Minister Meilleur said to our delegation that 'she would love to give people an extra \$100 per month but it's not on the public radar'.

The purpose of the Challenge is to demonstrate that there IS public support for an immediate increase in social assistance as a first step towards health and dignity for people receiving social assistance.

Secondly, the Social Assistance Review terms of reference have just been released. The Review will not begin until September and will last twelve to eighteen months. There will likely be no recommendations before the next election and no possibility of implementation before the election. So a second purpose of the Challenge is to raise awareness that the Ontario Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy means little if it ignores the poorest people in the province and fails to immediately improve the income of people on social assistance.

Finally, it is important to show public solidarity with people in Ontario who experience persistent stigmatization and discrimination.