

Letter submitted to the YRMG on July 23, 2010

The York Region Do the Math Working Group is part of the provincial Put Food In the Budget campaign organizing committee (PFIB). This grassroots coalition was formed in 2009 because low-income individuals on social assistance in Ontario don't have sufficient funds to buy the food they need to survive, let alone have a healthy diet.

When we started our campaign we hoped that the clear need for a Healthy Food Supplement would result in a \$100 increase to Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program payments in the spring 2010 Budget. This would have cost the province \$700 - 800 million, an expense more than offset by significant savings in health and other ongoing costs of poverty. Instead of \$100, social assistance recipients got a 1% increase in the spring budget, about \$6 or \$10 per month, depending on the program. An extra loaf of bread and a couple of litres of milk.

Can we afford a \$100 increase? The *Cost of Poverty* report of the Ontario Association of Food Banks (2008) states that **"In Ontario, poverty-induced costs related to health care have an annual public cost of \$2.9 billion."** Not to mention added crime costs, also cited. The authors of *Poverty is Making us Sick - 2008* (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto), point out, **"a \$1,000 increase in annual income to the poorest fifth of the households will result in 10,000 fewer chronic conditions and 6,600 fewer disability days lost at work every two weeks."** Spend a billion, save three. Or more, and give people some dignity back at the same time. So the question is, can we afford not to do it? The cost of a Healthy Food Supplement is a true investment in the health of Ontarians. It also stands to save all of us significant health care dollars and safeguard workplace productivity.

When the Social Assistance Review Advisory Committee (SARAC) was struck by the provincial government in January, our hopes went up again. The SARAC Report was released in mid-June. Our initial enthusiasm quickly faded. No \$100 monthly Healthy Food Supplement. Instead the recommendation that the province engage in a long-term review of the system (beginning in September, perhaps) and taking 12-18 months. Once again no immediate strategies to redress poverty for those who are barely surviving today. We are also puzzled that the province intends to cut the Special Diet Allowance Program which has been helping thousands of people with medical conditions, by providing additional funds, depending on their medical condition, up to a maximum of \$250/month. . The new Special Diet Allowance will have a greatly reduced budget. And no one has explained yet how it will work.

We are truly disappointed in the government's failure to address the immediate needs of those living in absolute poverty in this province. The message for the lowest-income citizens so far? Get used to it. The York Region Do the Math Working Group believes a thorough review and overhaul of the system as it stands now is necessary, but what's stopping the government from doing something tangible for our neighbours who need it now?

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