

NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa) calls on the province to raise social assistance rates.

TORONTO --The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa) has passed a Resolution sponsored by Ontario's Medical Officers of Health urging a significant increase in social assistance benefit rates to address poor health due to poverty and hunger in the province. The resolution was carried unanimously at the November 22nd alPHa Annual General Meeting and coincides with the release of a report by Campaign 2000 warning that one in six Canadian children, or 1.2 million, still lives in poverty.

"If this government is serious about making Ontarians the healthiest Canadians, then it must address the root causes of illness and premature death. There is no disputing that poverty and hunger are chief among these root causes", said Dr. Rosana Pellizzari, the Medical Officer of Health for Perth County.

Ontario's Public Health Units have calculated that the Basic Allowance of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program do not provide for adequate nutrition after housing costs are taken into account. Nutritious Food Basket measures, locally derived estimates of the weekly cost of a healthy diet, indicate that families on social assistance can not afford adequate nutrition. The situation is worse in northern and remote aboriginal communities where food costs are even higher.

In 2004, the McGuinty government announced a 3% increase to Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program allowances. It was the first such increase since Ontario Works recipients had their income cut by 21.6% in 1995 by the Mike Harris government.

"The 3% is woefully inadequate," added Sudbury's MOH, Dr Penny Sutcliffe. "Recipients of social assistance in this province are still living far below the poverty line."

This desperate situation led to a recent grassroots effort that saw health care providers throughout Ontario approving thousands of applications for access to a Special Diet Supplement that would increase monthly assistance by up to \$250. The success of this effort has led Social Services Minister Sandra Pupatello to severely narrow the qualification criteria for this supplement, effectively cutting off the vast majority of people who were receiving it.

In Toronto, the Board of Health has responded with a resolution calling upon the provincial government to raise social assistance rates by 40% and to assume full responsibility for funding Ontario's social assistance programs.

"Being poor and living below the poverty line causes very poor health and a greatly increased likelihood of premature death. As Medical Officers of Health we have an obligation to speak to important health issues like poverty," advises Dr. Chuck Gardner, Medical Officer of Health for Simcoe-Muskoka. "We call upon the province to raise the Basic Allowance of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program to ensure that the recipients and their families do not live below the poverty line."

As the provincial organization representing public health, alPHa provides leadership and expertise on public health management issues. Its members include Medical Officers of Health, board of health members and senior managers in public health disciplines including inspection, epidemiology, nursing, dentistry, nutrition, health promotion and business administration.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2005 alpha RESOLUTION NO. A05-18

TITLE: Adequate Nutrition for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program Participants and Low Wage Earners
SPONSOR: Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health

WHEREAS the 2001 alpha RESOLUTION NO. A01-19 - Ontario Works Allowances and Adequate Nutrition endorses that “the Government of Ontario be urged to review and ensure that the Basic Allowance portion of Ontario Works Financial Assistance allows for adequate nutrition”; and

WHEREAS The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care recommends that information about the cost of a Nutritious Food Basket be used on an ongoing basis to promote and support policy development to increase access to nutritious food; and

WHEREAS in 1995, Ontario Works (OW) allowances were reduced by 21.6%, Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) allowances were frozen, and both have since been increased by only 3%; and

WHEREAS these reductions to social assistance rates, combined with a 20% increase in inflation since 1995, have resulted in a decrease of 35% in the purchasing power of OW participants;

WHEREAS a family of four receiving OW benefits is eligible to receive a maximum allowance of \$1,215.00 per month to cover all expenses including food, rent, utilities, clothing and other necessities;

WHEREAS the maximum minimum wage paid to an experienced adult worker in Ontario is \$7.45 per hour and this rate is only expected to increase to \$8.00 per hour in 2007. A full-time worker (40 hrs/week) can be expected to earn \$1,222.00 per month to cover all expenses including health care costs in the absence of employer-provided health benefits;

WHEREAS in 2004, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Ontario represents a substantial portion of these monthly earnings (e.g. \$655.00 per month in the City of Greater Sudbury and \$1,052.00 in the City of Toronto);

WHEREAS Nutritious Food Basket measures continue to indicate that the Basic Allowance portion of OW and ODSP payments is unlikely to provide for adequate nutrition for individuals and families after shelter costs are taken into account. For the province of Ontario, it cost an average of \$122.83 per week in 2004 to feed a reference family of four, an increase of over 10.5% since 2000;

WHEREAS 322,911 individuals visited Ontario food banks in 2004, representing a 5% increase in food bank use since 2003, and it is known that 54% of Canadians who visited food banks reported social assistance as their primary source of income; and

WHEREAS recent grassroots efforts supported by many health care providers to exploit the Special Diet Supplement for OW and ODSP participants represents a desperate measure that illustrates the depth of concern over the adequacy of social assistance levels for basic nutritional requirements; and

WHEREAS adequate nutrition is essential for proper growth and development as well as a significant factor in preventing many chronic diseases including cancer

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Government of Ontario be urged to review the adequacy of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program rates from a health perspective and that allowances for basic needs and shelter be based on actual current representative costs;

AND FURTHER THAT the Government of Ontario be urged to review the current minimum wage from a health perspective and establish a living wage for all Ontario workers;

AND FURTHER THAT the Premier of Ontario, the Ministers of Community and Social Services, Health and Long-Term Care, and Health Promotion and the Chief Medical Officer of Health are so advised.