

**Presentation to the Board of Health
City of Hamilton**

Monday, October 15, 2012
1:30 pm
Council Chambers, City Hall

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Introduction

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Maria Antelo and I am a community developer at Hamilton Community Legal Clinic/Clinique juridique communautaire de Hamilton. I appear before you today in order to add my voice to that of other community members and organizations in asking that the Board recommend to City Council that single unattached individuals on Ontario Works receive Good Food Boxes (GFBs) as described in Option 2a from the "*Options for Funding a Model Program*" that I believe was forwarded to you last month by the Nutritious Food Plan Committee.

This option would mean that single unattached individuals on Ontario Works would receive boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables, primarily from local farms, that would be delivered to pick-up locations around the city. We understand that the boxes provide about \$25 worth of food, but it would be fully subsidized, meaning it would be of no cost to single unattached individuals on OW.

My colleague Craig Foye appeared before you on May 7th and asked that you "provide single unattached individuals on Ontario Works with food vouchers in an effort to close the gap somewhat between the woefully inadequate provincial social assistance rates for singles and actual cost of food in this community (based on staff's evidence-based analysis)."

At the time, you had some concerns about this proposal. We believe that Sally Palmer & Maureen Leyland, Co-Chairs of the Nutritious Food Plan Committee (NFP) have now addressed those concerns in their new proposal which you will learn of in the next presentations.

The Clinic would also strongly recommend that any such benefits also include a public education component in the form of a pamphlet or insert that provides information about the research into the costs of a nutritious food basket and the inadequacy of social assistance rates.

Hamilton Community Legal Clinic is a community based not for profit agency whose diverse team of caring professionals and volunteers provides legal services to low income individuals and communities to promote access to justice and to improve quality of life. We do this through: summary advice and referral, representation, community development, law reform and public legal education. The clinic is run by a volunteer board of directors and we are funded by Legal Aid Ontario.

Single Unattached Individuals in receipt of Ontario Works Benefits

On September 27, 2010, the Board of Health directed staff to “assess the feasibility of implementing a model program for nutritious food and report back...”. Staff reported back on November 28, 2011 recommending a “program to provide a \$20 gift certificate for each of the approximately 6,250 single unattached people who receive Ontario Works assistance in Hamilton...”¹. In their report, Staff recognized that the evidence shows that those individuals “have the most difficulty affording nutritious food after the rent is paid”.²

The most recent Nutritious Food Basket report finds that a one person household in receipt of Ontario Works benefits will have a shortfall of \$115.78 per month after paying their rent and purchasing nutritious food.³ Please note that this research only takes into account the costs of food and rent and doesn't take into account the costs of other basic necessities for a single person such as transportation, telephone, personal hygiene products, cleaning supplies, clothing,

¹ City of Hamilton, “Feasibility of Implementing a Model Program for Nutritious Food Report” BOH11028/CS11082, Public Health Services, Healthy Living Division, 28 November 2011 at page 2

² *Ibid.*

etc. In fact the situation is probably even worse for many singles than is acknowledged in the staff report, since many will be in a one-bedroom apartment when they first come on to benefits.

The fact that social assistance recipients are regularly facing the choice between paying the rent and eating is borne out by the foodbank statistics: about 75% of those accessing a foodbank in Hamilton are in receipt of provincial social assistance benefits.⁴

This depth of poverty among `welfare` recipients is not surprising, given that "welfare" rates were cut by about 22% overnight in 1995 leaving many individuals and families unable to subsist. John Stapleton noted in 2011 that since that time the consumer price index ("CPI") has risen about 35%, while "welfare" rates have increased less than 15%. Currently, it would take about a 63% increase in basic rates to restore 1993 levels.⁵ Even these startling numbers tend to underestimate the depth of real poverty faced by those on social assistance since the CPI does not fully reflect the increases in expenses faced by social assistance recipients whose major expense are housing, utilities, and food where increases have consistently outpaced the CPI.

In 1993 a single person on General Welfare received \$663 per month. Today, almost 20 years later, a single person in receipt of Ontario Works benefits⁶ receives \$599.

³ City of Hamilton, "'Nutritious Food Basket" BOH11027, Public Health Services, Healthy Living Division, 26 September 2011, at page 1 of Appendix A

⁴ See "Hamilton Hunger Count 2011" by Hamilton FoodShare at:

<http://www.hamiltonfoodshare.org/downloads/Hunger%20Count%20Report%202011.pdf>

⁵ see "Less on their Plate: Canada's Poorest People Facing a Frightful Food Crisis", by John Stapleton, 1 September 2011, <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/monitor/less-their-plate>

⁶ Ontario Works benefits replaced General Welfare benefits following the cuts to social assistance in 1995.

You may recall that the Clinic has appeared in front of Council and its committees a number of times to advocate for issues around the inadequacy of provincial social assistance rates. In particular Hamilton City Council has repeatedly supported the need for an arm's length body to set evidence-based provincial social assistance rates based on an analysis of the actual costs of rent, food, and other basic necessities in communities across the province, and has written to the Province to recommend that such a system be put in place. Unfortunately the Province has not taken steps to implement this recommendation and we await the final report of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario (due in June, 2012), in hope that the Commissioners will also recommend this most necessary and fundamental reform.

Implementing a Model Program for Nutritious Food

The clinic's position is that we support any additional benefits to singles on Ontario Works.

We are in support of providing single individuals on OW with a GFB.

However, we also strongly suggest that any such benefit should include a public education package. That package would explain the findings of the City Public Health Department's reports regarding a healthy food basket, particularly the alarming shortfall for singles on Ontario Works. It is imperative that the city-funded benefit is tied in to this research.

Our position is that the information package that would be given to recipients and available to the community at large should also include information on how people can contact their MPP in order to let them know what they think on this

issue and ask that they advocate for support for an evidence-based and arms-length system for setting provincial social assistance rates. (As mentioned, this is a position that the City of Hamilton adopted some time ago.)

Our suggested approach would then tie the benefit into an effective and efficient public education initiative on a vital public health issue and would also empower community members to effect related systemic changes.

The Clinic is prepared to work with the City to put such an advocacy package and campaign together.

What are we asking?

1. That the Board of Health recommend that Council direct staff to implement a pilot program for Nutritious food whereby the city will provide GFB to single unattached individuals in receipt of Ontario Works benefits in recognition that these individuals have the most difficulty affording nutritious food after the rent is paid;
2. That the GFB pilot program include a public education pamphlet, given to recipients and available to the community at large, which summarizes the findings of the Public Health Department regarding the shortfalls in Ontario Works benefit rates with regard to healthy eating, and provides contact information for local area MPPs so that individuals can contact them to voice their opinions.