

PROPOSAL FROM ENVIRONMENT HAMILTON'S GOOD FOOD BOX (GFB) PROGRAM TO PROVIDE FRESH FOOD TO SINGLE OW RECIPIENTS: ONE YEAR PILOT PROJECT

Karen Burson (Environment Hamilton) & Sally Palmer (Nutritious Food Plan Committee)

Introduction

This is a proposal for a GFB program to address the income shortfall (\$115 per month) that prevents single OW recipients from acquiring fresh fruit and vegetables in an affordable, dignified manner. It is a response to the City of Hamilton 2012-2015 Strategic Business Plan: Objective 1.5 is to promote health: *Support the development and implementation of neighbourhood...strategies that will improve the health...of residents; one of the strategic actions under this objective is: (vii)“In support of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction’s action plan, develop a program to improve access to healthy food for those in greatest need.* It is based on one of the options suggested by Public Health Services in their report to the Board of Health meeting, May 7, 2012: *Options for funding a model program for nutritious food.* It also fills a gap in the City’s food strategy: apart from a few GFB programs who subsidize low income people, it is very difficult for single OW recipients to access fresh fruit and vegetables.

Description of the Proposed Program

What is a GFB?: A selection of familiar and versatile fresh fruit and vegetables, mainly Ontario and Local produce, which sells for \$15 and includes about \$25 worth of fresh fruit and vegetables. For single OW recipients, we will substitute a \$10 Easy Box, worth at least \$15, with easy-to-prepare items. It would be fully subsidized, i.e. no cost to recipients.

Community involvement: The Environment Hamilton GFB program has links with other Hamilton groups: other GFB projects; programs that teach food preparation; community kitchens; and community gardens. As with most GFB programs, most of the work is done by volunteer staff at packing and delivery centres, which makes the program very cost-effective.

Suitability for Single OW Recipients

Non-stigmatizing: OW recipients would not risk being stigmatized by attending a GFB site, as the sites are in a variety of community centres, including places of worship. As well, many higher income people participate in GFB programs.

Nutritious food: Recipients of OW make up the largest proportion of Food Bank users. They have very little fresh food, because it tends to be more expensive. The GFB is totally comprised of fresh food and vegetables, which will benefit their diet.

Sourcing and Delivering Food

Sourcing: Produce will be supplied by Ontario farms with an emphasis on Hamilton, aiming for 50/50 content. Local food will be sourced through Hamilton Farmers' Market vendors, purchased by the GFB program. For preservation, food will be initially delivered to a cold storage site, to enable pickup by delivery centres without spoilage.

Accessibility: Most recipients can access their food within their own communities, as Environment Hamilton's GFB program has 23 packing/distribution sites that are widely distributed across the city. The sites include:

- City of Hamilton Housing
- Community Hubs
- Community Centres
- Places of Worship, especially those serving meals

The specific location of the delivery sites is shown on the Environment Hamilton GFB website. For potential recipients who cannot access one of these sites, the plan is to use volunteers for delivery.

Capacity

Present capacity: Environment Hamilton's GFB program presently serves a maximum of 350 recipients, but has the capacity to build to serve up to 500 single OW recipients over the course of a year. The program began with only 4 sites in February 2011 and increased to 23 sites by August 2012.

Estimating the uptake by single OW recipients: There are barriers to single OW recipients using the GFB related to: cooking and refrigeration facilities, food skills, mental health issues (for some), and the recipients' motivation/ability to travel to pick up their boxes. Thus we estimate that only a minority of the 6,200 single OW recipients will apply for the program. Applicants who cannot be accepted because of limits to capacity will be placed on a waiting list, and accepted only when others drop out.

Expanding capacity: When the pilot project ends, if it is decided to offer the program to all 6,200 single OW recipients, it is understood that the Environment Hamilton GFB program cannot meet this need, so additional suppliers will be sought. Food Share, Toronto, which serves about 4,000 people has offered assistance in expanding the program. Food Share has been expanding since 1994, in response to the lack of fresh food supplied by Food Banks.

Protocol at the sites

Eligibility: All single OW recipients living in Hamilton will be eligible. During the pilot project, the expansion of the program will be gradual and limited; thus applicants will be accepted for registration on a 'first come-first served' basis.

Registration: Applicants may register for the program at the site closest to them by presenting current documentation from the OW program; this could be:

- A cheque stub
- A drug or dental card; a copy of the card should be obtained by the recipient when it is surrendered in the process of purchasing drugs or accessing dental care
- A letter from the OW office

- Similar forms of ID can be used each month when participants come to collect their GFB. A registered participant who cannot attend may arrange to have a proxy pick up the GFB, provided this person has the participant's ID

Possible misrepresentation: Usually the amount of the OW cheque will show whether the applicant is single; anyone receiving more than \$599 would be considered ineligible for the GFB. It is possible that family heads, who are repaying an overpayment, may receive less than \$599; as the Social Assistance Review Commission noted in a discussion paper, a high level monitoring system to combat abuse can be more expensive than it is worth.

'No shows': GFBs that are not picked up will be offered to the next person on the waiting list; registered recipients who do not show up or explain their absence for two consecutive months would be deregistered and the next person would be moved up from the waiting list.

Cost of Program

One-year pilot project: During the pilot project, GFBs would be fully subsidized, so recipients would not pay. After one year, the project will be evaluated to see whether it is worth continuing; if it is discontinued, we expect that those who have experienced the benefits of fresh food will be motivated to use their limited food money to continue the GFB. For \$10 they will receive \$15 worth of food.

Food: The \$625,700 that was earmarked from the SSIR (OMPF funds from the Province) for a food supplement for single OW recipients would potentially provide 5,000 recipients with GFBs @ \$10 for 12 months. The initial 12 months would be a pilot project to assess the effectiveness of the program with 500 recipients, for a cost of \$60,000 (plus administration costs) using the protocol described above.

Administration: For the larger program, administration costs would likely be \$30,000. In a report to the Board of Health, Nov. 28, 2011, the plan to provide a \$20 per month gift certificate to single OW recipients stated, "Additional estimated administrative costs for 0.5 FTE clerical staff to monitor

the gift card distribution and maintain records would add approximately \$29,000". The smaller pilot project might be done for \$5,000 given the involvement of volunteers to distribute the food. Current programs that provide \$15 GFBs consider that \$1 of each \$15 payment goes to administration, as most of the work is done by volunteers.

Evaluation

A report from Public Health Services, *Feasibility of implementing a model program for nutritious food (November 2011)* suggested an evaluation of the program could be conducted with the existing PHS operational budget, by dedicating resources allocated for evaluation projects within the Healthy Living Division in 2012 and 2013 to this project. A set of questions has been developed by "Food Share, Toronto", and used in their 2011 evaluation of a Farmers' Market voucher program. Their report, *Sharing the Harvest*, showed that recipients were able to eat differently using the vouchers. Of all participant survey respondents:

- 65% were able to buy healthy, fresh, and local foods;
- 42% were able to buy foods they couldn't otherwise afford;
- 35% tried new foods; and,
- 29% were able to buy foods not otherwise available in their neighbourhood.

Conclusion

This proposal is a good fit for Hamilton in several ways:

- It outlines a way for the BOH to follow up their initiative, begun in September 2010, to provide a food supplement to single OW recipients, in recognition of the gross inadequacy of their social assistance incomes.
- It fits with the City of Hamilton 2012-2015 Strategic Business Plan with respect to Objective 1.5, *Strategic action (vii): In support of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction's action plan, develop a program to improve access to healthy food for those in greatest need*
- It is based on one of the options put forth by Public Health Services in their report to the Board of Health meeting, May 7, 2012: *Options for funding a model program for nutritious food.*

- It fills a gap in the City's food strategy: apart from a few GFB programs who subsidize some of their low income participants, it is very difficult for single OW recipients to access fresh fruit and vegetables.



Hamilton & District Branch

Sept. 17, 2012

Councillor _____
71 Main St. W., 2nd Fl.
Hamilton, ON L8P 4Y5

Dear Councillor,

Re: A food supplement for single recipients of OW

We are writing to follow up on the decision made by the Board of Health (BOH), at its May 7th meeting, to turn down one of the options in the Public Health Services (PHS) report, *Options for Funding a Model Program for Nutritious Food*. The need for a food supplement was originally raised at a BOH meeting in Sept. 2010, when the annual Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) report showed that single recipients of OW were unable to obtain adequate food on the social assistance they received—less than \$600 per month.

On May 7th, Councillors Merulla and Farr, supported by Councillors Duvall and Morelli, recommended using the \$625,700 remaining in the Social Services Initiative Reserve (SSIR) to fund Option 1 in the "*Options for Funding a Model Program...*" report; Option 1 was a 5 month pilot project, providing \$20 gift certificates for the Farmers' Market each month. Eight Councillors voted against this, stating various concerns:

- (1) possible abuse of gift certificates;
- (2) the stigmatizing effects of using 'vouchers';
- (3) the need could be met by food banks;
- (4) constituents outside the central city could not access Farmer's Markets

We believe that single OW recipients, who have been identified as worst off regarding nutritious food, should receive 'their fair share' of available resources. Such a decision would fit with the City's 2012-2015 Strategic Business Plan: Strategic Objective 1.5 speaks to improving the health and well-being of residents; under this Objective, Strategic action (vii) states: "In support of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty

Reduction's action plan, develop a program to improve access to healthy food for those in greatest need." These are certainly our poorest citizens.

We understand from PHS that this year's NFB report will be brought to the BOH meeting on Oct. 15. It is expected to show that single OW recipients are in even greater need this year than in 2011, when they were \$115 per month short of being able to afford the NFB. We are asking that Councillors consider Option 2a from the "*Options for Funding a Model Program...*" report. This option would provide Good Food Boxes (GFBs), at \$15 per month, for single OW recipients who registered for the program. The program, described below, would address most of the concerns raised at the May 7 meeting:

- (1) Abuse: recipients would get food, rather than a gift card;
- (2) Stigma: involvement in the program would not be stigmatizing, as many middle-class people participate
- (3) Food Banks: It is generally recognized that Food Banks provide less nutritious food than the fresh food provided by the GFB program;
- (4) Rural distribution: GFBs are already being delivered to areas outside the central city, and the distribution can be expanded, if there is demand from a rural area

If selected, Option 2a would involve having boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables, primarily from local farms, delivered to pick-up locations around the city. It would be modelled on Environment Hamilton's GFB program, which has 23 delivery sites, including Hamilton Mountain. Normally the boxes are sold for \$15, and provide about \$25 worth of food. For OW singles, transportation and cooking skills may be a problem, so a smaller box of 'easy to prepare' food would be supplied. It would cost \$10 and provide at least \$15 worth of food.

Recipients would not receive a GFB automatically, but would have to apply for this; we expect that many would not apply because of lack of space or cooking facilities. We would start with a one year pilot project, accepting the first 500 applicants at a cost of \$120 each--\$60,000. The program would be evaluated after one year, to make a decision about its continuation. If participants' responses are positive, there would be \$565,700 left in the fund to continue the program for a possible 5,000 applicants for the following year. Funds could also be allocated from the Council Strategic Capital Fund.

We recognize that Councillors must be concerned about the sustainability of projects to be supported by public funds. We cannot claim sustainability for this program beyond the first two years. We respectfully point out, however, that programs presently funded through SSIR would not have passed the 'sustainability' test when first funded. Over

time they have established precedence. We believe this program deserves the same opportunity—it may be expected to improve the eating habits, and ultimately the health, of people who are living on shamefully inadequate incomes.

We hope you will support the GFB program when it is raised at the BOH meeting on Oct. 15th. One or two members of our group (the Nutritious Food Plan Committee) will be calling you for an appointment to discuss it further. If you have questions, Sally Palmer can be reached at 519-647-3927.

Sincerely,

Sally Palmer & Maureen Leyland, Co-Chairs
Nutritious Food Plan Committee (NFP)

This initiative has been endorsed by:
Social Action Committee (OASW, Hamilton)
Campaign for Adequate Welfare & Disability Benefits
Hamilton Community Legal Clinic
McMaster Community Poverty Initiative
Mental Health Rights Coalition, Hamilton
Canadian Federation of University Women (Hamilton)
HOPE (Hamilton Organizing for Poverty Elimination)
Registered Nurses Association of Ontario (Hamilton Branch)