

December 15, 2009

Regional Council
Regional Municipality of York
17250 Yonge Street,
Newmarket, Ontario, L3Y 6Z1

Dear Chair Fisch and Regional Councillors;

I'd like to introduce you to the **York Region Do the Math Working Group**. We represent a committed group of volunteers, agencies, churches, food banks, community residents and businesses across York Region who are diligently working together to address the underlying cause of poverty and hunger – inadequate income. We also know that the extreme shortage of affordable housing and social infrastructure in our Region, as well as across the province, are critical contributing factors to the situation where an increasing number of people are coming to rely on social assistance.

Our group formed in June 2009 following a well attended Hunger Awareness Event held at York Region Food Network. Our call to action at that time, centered on a provincial campaign to Put Food in the Budget (PFIB) of individuals in Ontario receiving support from Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Benefits. As most of you remember the rates for social assistance were dashed in the mid 90's and have never recovered, leaving the most vulnerable people in our communities living on considerably less income than they had 15 years ago. Even with incremental increases in recent years, the cumulative effect of the original 22% cuts paired with the rising cost of living, mean that individuals on social assistance are actually trying to survive on roughly 40% less income than an individual in the 90's. How absolutely tragic is that? It is a reality that is almost impossible to comprehend and as a result, is not being adequately addressed.

One year ago this month, the provincial government, at the urging of the 25 in 5 Network, a provincially based coalition of anti-poverty groups, made a commitment to reduce child poverty in Ontario by 25% over 5 years. Their initial steps have been directed at children and families, and include a commitment to review the social assistance system in its entirety. Left out of this plan are individuals on both OW and ODSP which represent the group farthest below the poverty line and who face an enormous struggle to attain and maintain housing. The current basic rate for an individual on OW is \$572 and for an individual on ODSP the rate is \$1,020. Housing alone takes up the majority if not, the entirety of these monthly allowances, putting a significant group of individuals in our community on the street, or at prolonged risk of homelessness.

In response to the province's omission of new poverty measures to address this, the 25 in 5 Network in conjunction with the Social Planning Network of Ontario and The Stop Community Food Centre have been campaigning across the province to encourage the current government to put an additional \$100 Monthly Healthy Food Supplement in the

Budget for individuals on OSDP and OW. In all of the recent research including the Hunger Report released by the Ontario Association of Food Banks as recently as December 1 of this year, we see glaring evidence that people are going without food in order to pay their bills and keep a roof above their head. And contrary to the widespread belief that food banks can fill that gap, they can't. In York Region alone we have witnessed a 35% increase in food bank use, depleting the ability of the food banks to meet the needs in the community, not to mention that food banks are not the solution to long-standing issues of poverty, unemployment, inadequate incomes, and homelessness, etc.

We in York Region have joined the Put the Food in the Budget Campaign which is also endorsed by the Association of Local Public Health Agencies across Ontario. Putting Food in the Budget is a preventative measure aimed at improving the health and well-being of the individuals in question and it will also improve the overall health of our communities. It is also an issue of common human decency. Collectively at the neighborhood, municipal, provincial and federal levels, we need to work together to respond to the needs of individuals who find themselves in dire straits due to either the long-term effects of poverty or the more recent economic downturn that has affected us all.

We the York Region Do the Math Working Group would like to issue both a challenge and an invitation to York Region Municipal Council.

- 1.) **We invite you to join us in our efforts to persuade the provincial government to begin addressing the real needs of individuals in our communities who are living on OW and ODSP, by immediately adding to their monthly budget a \$100 monthly food supplement to meet their basic food requirements.** This is only a first step but it is one that cannot wait until the completion of the social assistance system review. It will significantly help those who are struggling with hunger on a daily basis, and it will also ease some of the pressure on our local communities to meet the ever increasing needs.
- 2.) **We urge each of you as individuals and/or as a group to DO THE MATH. Do the Math is an on-line survey tool developed by The Stop Community Food Centre and can be found at: <http://dothemath.thestop.org/survey.php>** The survey tool asks you to complete a monthly budget as you would see it, for an individual living on OW or ODSP. When you reach your total you will recognize the complete disparity between income levels and what it actually costs to live for a month in any community in Ontario. As a group we have now visited 6 out of 7 of the provincial MPPs in our Region and either completed the DO THE MATH SURVEY with them or discussed with them their thoughts and opinions re: the Healthy Food Supplement. For more information on this campaign and to read about the reports on MPP visits in York Region and across the province, please go to: www.povertywatchontario.ca You will also find out more about the Hamilton Summit on Poverty that several of us attended this past Friday December 4th. We are witnessing growing support for the implementation of the food supplement

across Ontario and would urge you to join us and support this progressive initiative.

- 3.) Because meeting the needs of individuals and families and building healthy communities that provide opportunities for all, is a responsibility that we all share as community residents, social service agencies, faith groups, service clubs, and governments at the municipal, provincial and federal levels, **we urge York Region Council to take a critical step forward in utilizing the GTA pooling dollars that were intended to support our local social service infrastructure, for that important purpose.** Increasing the investment to human services in this way, could go hand in hand with changes at the provincial level to make significant improvements in the lives of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

For more information on the devastating impact of the recession and cutbacks to the social service sector, which weakened it's very capacity to do what it does best – meet the needs of the community, please check out: Hard Hit: Impact of the Economic Downturn on Nonprofit Community Social Services in Ontario.
<http://www.spno.ca/images/stories/pdf/reports/hard-hit-impact-of-the-economic-recession-on-nonprofit-community-social-services-in-ontario.pdf>

It goes without saying that it is in everyone's best interests to work together to address these comprehensive needs in challenging times. We strongly urge York Region Council to take up the challenges we have presented here today. We invite you to work together with us in our efforts to secure the Healthy Food Supplement and would be most happy to meet with you individually or as a group, to DO THE MATH together.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests. We look forward to your responses and to the outcomes that follow.

Yvonne Kelly

Interim Chair

York Region Do the Math Working Group

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