

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – Food Insecurity feature #3

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Working is no guarantee of paying the bills

Submitted by Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit

Sharyn was facing financial demands that she could have managed if she'd had a modest full-time job. But as a single mother with children, the system wouldn't let her get started. Ontario Works didn't allow her to work more than about eight hours a week before clawing back payments, leaving her without enough funds to cover rent. So when she was offered extra hours at work, she had to turn them down.

"I had to visit the food bank to meet our food needs," Sharyn said. Because of her situation, Sharyn asked that her real name not be used.

Using food banks is a last resort. Only one-quarter of the families that meet the definition as "food insecure" are turning to food banks for help, even though their incomes are too low to cover even the basic needs.

Sharyn's situation was not unique. When Kara came back from maternity leave, she was told she would have to work an evening shift. It had taken her a year to find daycare she could afford, "but they're not going to watch him till 9 at night." With her son a little older, but with a second child, she tried going back to school in hopes of finding good work, but the barriers were huge. She was trying to get out from under Ontario Works, doing some daycare herself. The days were exhausting: Using transit to get the children off to daycare and herself to school was a two-hour ordeal—and the bills were huge.

Turning to the food bank has simple reasons behind it: "Not enough income and too much going out for basic things."

Charitable groups do their best to address food insecurity, by providing food to meet the most urgent needs. But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

"The real problem is the level of income," says Jane Shrestha, a public health nutritionist with the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit. "Poverty is the root cause of food insecurity."

Asked what they'd do with a guaranteed income, both women's thoughts turned to food: fruits, vegetables, and a flavourful cut of meat.

"It would help people with their mental health, I think," Kara said. "So many people feel depressed because they feel like they can't provide. And then you add a hungry belly or a lack of proper nutrition..."

Sustainable, income-based solutions are needed to tackle poverty. The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit is working with many local organizations to push for income solutions that will bring people out of household food insecurity.

If you'd like to get involved, visit www.smdhu.org/centsless or call Health Connection at 705-721-7520 or 1-877-721-7520 weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.