

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE –Food Insecurity feature #1

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Going hungry so the children can be fed

Submitted by Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit

Kara's problems stretched out like a mountain range. She was a single mother of a teen and one young child; after rent she was surviving on about \$300 a month to clothe, feed and take care of the rest of the family's needs.

Both she and her oldest child have medical conditions that limit their food choices; the gluten-free diet they should be using is expensive.

A bright and determined woman, she had gone back to school but daycare and rent were so high that she had to drop out.

"It was the worst feeling," she recalls. "It was like, here we go again. I sacrificed time from my kids; I made them get up at 6 in the morning ... I felt like I robbed them, just for nothing. I was so close to graduation; you get a taste of it, like the ice cream cone but without the ice cream."

Before her second child was born, there was a winter that was particularly bad financially. To make sure her son was fed, she ate less. "I didn't want to take from him; I lived off potatoes for a whole winter, pretty much."

A child's hunger is a sign of the most severe situation, says public health nurse Naomi Wachowiak.

"Parents will sacrifice their food so that the children can be fed," Wachowiak says. "If there's no food for the children, then the cupboard really is bare."

There's a stigma attached to receiving social assistance, too. "People have this judgment that people who are not working are just sitting around," Kara says. "Being single, most of the time I'm not stopping till 10 or 11 at night. Just like other moms. We're parents."

"People say you need training on how to budget. That's why we're surviving, because I budget! The cost of living is atrocious."

Kara has had some luck; she's now receiving regular child support payments, and learned of ways to ease the student loan payments. She's saving money by preparing meals from scratch—with the bonus that meals taste far better. Although she's still in a hole, she can see her way out of it.

It doesn't always have a happy ending. Chronic childhood hunger sets people up for long-term health problems; it increases the risk of depression and thoughts of suicide in youth and teens.

It's a situation sometimes called household food insecurity. One out of every five households in the lowest 20 per cent income bracket is living in moderate to severe household food insecurity in Simcoe Muskoka. Depression, lack of energy, and vulnerability to colds and illness all result.

"You can tell by a person's mood, the tone of their skin, whether they have energy," Kara-Lee says.

"You can tell whether somebody's getting adequate (nutrition)."

"It gets harder and harder for these people," Wachowiak adds. "The cost of nutritious food, housing and other basic needs continue to rise faster than social assistance rates and the minimum wage and good-paying jobs are getting harder to find."

Asked what she'd do if she had more money, Kara's thoughts turned first to her children.

"I'd go and buy my kids proper shoes. It would be nice to go to an actual store and buy clothes instead of going to a thrift store."

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.