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Basic Income pilot critical for reducing household food insecurity

Having no money for food is “cent\$less”.

The cost of food and rent continues to creep out of range of many people as the gap between income and basic needs grows wider year after year.

A survey by the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit showed that in 2016 the combined cost of food and rent ate up 96 per cent of the income of a family of four on Ontario Works, up from 89 per cent just five years ago.

The health unit has joined with a number of organizations in a call for long-term policy solutions, including a basic income guarantee to help bring incomes more in line with the real cost of living. They've coined the slogan No Money for Food is Cent\$less to launch an awareness campaign.

“News that the provincial government plans to create a pilot program to explore ways of offering a basic income guarantee, or guaranteed annual income, is encouraging,” said Dr. Lisa Simon, an associate medical officer of health with the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit.

The evidence for a basic income guarantee is growing. “There have been several projects like this around the world that have had strong positive results for the people whose income needed that extra support,” Dr. Simon said, adding that “a basic income is an important piece of the toolbox of social and economic supports needed.”

Results of the health unit’s annual Nutritious Food Basket Survey show that many low income households in Simcoe Muskoka struggle to pay the rent and buy healthy food at the same time.

The annual survey tallies the cost of a standardized “basket” of 67 healthy foods obtained from a sample of store types and locations throughout Simcoe and Muskoka.

The cost of the Nutritious Food Basket plus average rents are then compared to incomes from both social assistance and minimum wage work to assess whether these income sources are enough to cover household necessities.

“This problem has remained persistently high over the years, with about one in eight Simcoe Muskoka households experiencing some degree of food insecurity,” said public health nutritionist Jane Shrestha.

"It is disturbing, particularly in public health, because we know how important a healthy diet is for long-term health."

Research compiled by the health unit showed that people experiencing household food insecurity—especially severe food insecurity—have poorer mental health, higher rates of heart disease and diabetes and use more health care services.

Shrestha said that as rents go higher and money for food gets tighter and tighter, people cope by cutting back on the amount of quality food they buy, including items like milk, vegetables, fruit and meat because they are relatively expensive. Price rather than nutrition becomes the deciding factor when shopping for food. For people in the most severely food insecure households it can even mean a day or more of eating nothing so that other necessities can be paid for. Juggling money for food is a huge source of stress for people who are food insecure.