



Growing Stronger Together
Whitney Block, Room 4620
99 Wellesley Street West
Toronto, ON, M7A 1A1

Deb Mathews
Minister of Children and Youth Services
Minister Responsible for Women's Issues

July 22, 2008

Dear Minister Mathews,

We are a joint working group sponsored by the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) and the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (ALPHA). Our membership is drawn from both organizations, demonstrating broad commitment for Ontario's Public Health system to take action on social conditions that determine health.

Our work to date has been directed at strengthening the Public Health system mandate and practice regarding taking action on the social determinants of health and more specifically, on poverty prevention. Many of our members have participated in the poverty prevention strategy consultations you have held around the province. With this letter, we wish to restate the public health perspective on these issues.

Let us begin by congratulating your government for making poverty reduction a priority. We hope that you will meet and exceed your target for a 25% reduction in 5 years and look forward to a future target of 50% reduction over 10 years. We endorse the strategies put forward by Campaign 2000, the 25 in 5 Network and Social Planning Councils of Ontario and hope you will give their recommendations your most serious consideration.

We are encouraged that the government is committed to monitoring poverty and the effectiveness of the strategy through concrete indicators. Public Health practitioners in Ontario have experience with monitoring health status and determinants over time and we wish to promote the use of several indicators that will track employment security, food security, child care access, housing, education and training. Of course, the incidence of poverty itself must be tracked, and we recognize the challenges in choosing indicators for this purpose. We believe that at least 3 indicators are necessary, because they track different things:

1. a measure of absolute poverty or market basket measure, ideally based on actual costs in different regions of the province;
2. a relative poverty measure (like LICO) - because it allows us to measure our progress over time, and compare across jurisdictions;
3. and, some type of deprivation index - because averages can mask significant hardship, so "poverty rates" can be improving, while depth of poverty for some is worsening.

We recommend that Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) rates be revised and increased so that they are based on actual living costs, including housing and food. The cost of food is collected annually by health units across Ontario via the Nutritious Food Basket survey, but currently this data is not used to inform social assistance rates. As well, OW and ODSP rates need to be indexed annually to reflect inflation, especially if, as predicted we are entering a time of rising food costs.

We advocate expanding supports and protections for lower wage workers, including ramping up the timeline for the \$10.25 /hr minimum wage and indexing the minimum wage annually to reflect inflation. We also recommend launching a review of the Employment Standards Act to ensure vulnerable workers are protected.

During the consultations, there was much discussion about the effectiveness of existing community-based programs. As you are aware, Public Health units work with many coalitions, networks and groups across the province on poverty prevention initiatives. We urge you to move beyond demonstration programs and pilot projects once their impact has been measured. To reduce poverty in Ontario, you must harness innovation and fund effective and evidence-based strategies universally accessible across the province.

Recent program enhancements will provide increased access and support to vulnerable populations. Initiatives like access to dental care, subsidies for recreation and school nutrition programs, and the universal Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program provide support to vulnerable populations and are effective population health policies and programs. We anticipate that these programs will make a difference in the lives of Ontarians. However, there is little evidence that they will reduce the incidence of poverty. Research on the social determinants of health indicates that reducing poverty requires sustained investments to increase individual and family income.

We know that you are committed to a multi-year strategy with targeted investments and we applaud this. Effective poverty prevention will also require horizontal integration across government programs. We urge you to begin plans to streamline and knit together poverty prevention initiatives across provincial ministries and with the federal government.

The OPHA-ALPHA Working Group on the Social Determinants of Health is pleased to have been involved in the consultations thus far. We offer our ongoing support and assistance to you on this critical matter.

Thank you for your leadership on social justice issues in Ontario. In the long term, we anticipate that the poverty prevention strategy will result in significant population health gains and reduced health inequities. This will be reflected in reductions in health care expenditures. It is the “right” thing to do for many reasons.

Sincerely,

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