

March 21, 2020

Dear Premier Ford,

We wish to convey our sincere gratitude for the leadership the provincial government is demonstrating in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We applaud the initiative taken by your government to invest in infection prevention and control initiatives, enact job protections for workers and eliminate the medical note requirements, and to halt evictions proceedings at this time.

At the Daily Bread Food Bank, we are working hard to continue to meet the local food needs of low-income and vulnerable residents across Toronto. We are preparing for a surge in need as workers face layoffs due to business closures and the economic downturn.

Like you, we believe that people are Ontario's greatest asset. To protect low-income Ontarians in this time of economic and social uncertainty and medical risk, we recommend that your government take the following steps:

1) Provide immediate financial support to Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) recipients.

Social assistance recipients rely on food banks to meet their basic needs, but food banks across Ontario are rapidly closing due to mandated community centre closures and the fact that many food banks are run by volunteers who are considered high-risk (over the age of 60). Without access to these programs, people on OW and ODSP will simply be unable to afford food. They certainly do not have the ability to follow the guidance to have 14 days worth of food on hand to self-isolate. While a permanent increase to OW and ODSP rates would help move these individuals out of poverty, a temporary increase to rates or providing access to Emergency Assistance funding during the pandemic will go a long way to ensuring the basic needs of these individuals are met.

2) Provide immediate relief to low-income households to cover the cost of utilities, cellular service and internet.

To support these households in complying with the Ministry of Health and local public health unit recommendations to stay at home as much as possible and socially distance, we recommend providing immediate financial relief to low-income households to cover the cost of utilities, including internet and cellular service. While at home, it is crucial that low-income households be able to access the vital information the government is sharing to protect themselves and their loved ones from the virus. Additionally, low-income individuals, particularly single individuals, are at risk for mental health challenges as a result of social distancing. It is critical that these individuals have access to telecommunications to stay in touch with their friends, case workers, and counsellors.

3) Expedite the roll-out of the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit.

We urge the province to act swiftly to fully implement the housing benefit as Ontarians are already beginning to see the effects of the economic downturn. This housing benefit will provide much needed relief to low-income families to ensure that they can focus on their health, instead of worrying about affording to pay rent. We recommend that the Canada-Ontario Housing



benefit be made available to individuals receiving OW and ODSP without clawing back their benefits.

4) Make the Low-Income Family Tax credit refundable.

Another mechanism available to support low-income households is the Low-Income Family Tax Credit. Currently, of the 2.9 million Ontarians eligible for LIFT, 1.5 million do not receive any benefit because they earn less than \$25,100 and therefore do not pay taxes.ⁱ The vast majority of food bank clients fall into this category. By making the LIFT credit refundable, the lowest-income households will receive a financial boost. As a result, instead of relying on food banks and other community programs, these households will be able to put this money towards purchasing food, clothing and other basic necessities, thereby fueling the economy.

5) Implement at least 7 permanent paid sick days and an additional 14 paid days during public health emergencies such as COVID-19.

The Alberta government has shown great leadership by granting 14 paid sick days for individuals in self-isolation or who are caring for a family member with COVID-19. We urge the Ontario government to follow suit. As we have learned from this pandemic, when employees feel that they cannot afford to stay home when they are sick, it puts everyone else at risk – including their coworkers, the people on public transportation while they commute, and the customers and clients they interact with.

We believe that these interventions will significantly improve the financial security, health and wellbeing of low-income Ontarians to help them weather this storm, as well as the potentially challenging months ahead. We are willing and able to assist the province in anything needed during this difficult time. We thank you again for your tireless efforts during this crisis.

Sincerely,



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Chief Executive Officer



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CC:

Minister Todd Smith
Associate Minister Kinga Surma
MPP Christine Hogarth

ⁱ Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. (2020). Tax Expenditures: Oversight, Growth and Distribution. Toronto, ON: Financial Accountability Office of Ontario.