



Advancing Social Determinants of Health

RNAO Vision backgrounder

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On September 3, 2014, Deputy Premier Deb Matthews released the "government's renewed, refocused effort to reduce poverty" in *Realizing Our Potential: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2014-2019*.¹ An important lesson learned from the province's first Poverty Reduction Plan is that investments such as the Ontario Child Benefit are effective in reducing child poverty rates and preventing additional families from falling into poverty.² While a good start, the 1.57 million Ontarians³ living in poverty need action, which is possible with a detailed implementation plan, complete with targets, timelines and accompanied by substantive public investment.

Minimum Wage: The minimum wage in Ontario was frozen at \$6.85 per hour from 1995 to 2004, which corresponded to a 17 per cent cut in purchasing power. From February 2004 to March 2010, important increases brought the minimum wage to \$10.25 per hour. After staying flat for four years, the minimum wage increased to \$11.00 per hour as of June 1, 2014.⁴ While the raise and indexing of the minimum wage were welcome, this amount still leaves a full-time worker 16 per cent below the poverty line.⁵ RNAO continues to support the community call to set the minimum wage 10 per cent above the Low Income Measure. A \$14 per hour minimum wage with increased attentiveness to ensuring fair legislation and enforcement of labour standards would create a pathway out of poverty.

Affordable Housing: The recent deaths of four individuals who were homeless (one each in a bus shelter, van, make-shift shelter, and city-run facility)⁶ during the space of an extremely cold period in Toronto are dramatic reminders of the link between access to safe, affordable housing and health.⁷ The most recent Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association's statistics indicate that at the end of 2013, there were 165,069 households waiting for rent-g geared-to-income housing.⁸ Average provincial waiting times for rent-g geared-to-income housing continue to increase from 3.2 years in 2012 to 3.89 years in 2013.⁹ Peel region has the longest overall waiting time at 8.39 years.¹⁰ For every household occupied, two cancel their applications and three more apply.¹¹ With existing rental stock aging and almost no rental specific housing being created,¹² prospects are grim without government's robust leadership and action. The Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association has proposed a model that would invest \$13 billion over ten years that would repair existing social housing stock and assist all households in need of affordable housing, especially the homelessness.¹³ An investment of \$1.3 billion per year would equal one per cent of the current provincial budget.¹⁴

Social Assistance: Public health units across the province continue to document the gap between the cost of nutritious food, shelter, and Ontario's dangerously low social assistance rates. In Toronto, for example, a one-person household receiving Ontario Works would have a deficit of \$337.06 per month, as average monthly rent would require 113 per cent of income, and the amount required to purchase healthy food would take 31 per cent of income.¹⁵ ¹⁶ A single person receiving Ontario Works must currently try to survive on \$656 per month.¹⁷ In addition to increasing social assistance rates so that

recipients can live with a measure of dignity and good health, it is critical that the Work-Related Benefit that provides \$100 per month for ODSP recipients and family members who work be reinstated.¹⁸

Food bank use in Canada and Ontario in 2014 remained higher than when the recession started in 2008¹⁹ and “within the food bank network, crisis has become the norm.”²⁰ According to the Canadian Community Health Survey for 2012, the number of food insecure households in Ontario was 571,300.²¹ This survey found that the proportion of households reliant on social assistance who were food insecure was 64.5 per cent in Ontario.²² The proportion of food insecure households reliant on wages and salaries in Ontario was 58.3 per cent.²³

Taking Action on Poverty: We know public policy can make a difference in people's day-to-day lives and improve health outcomes. In May 2009, all three provincial parties voted unanimously to pass Ontario's *Poverty Reduction Act*, which commits successive governments to remain focused on the fight against poverty.²⁴ It is crucial that we all work together to eliminate poverty so that all Ontarians can live in health and dignity.

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² Ibid, 9-12.

³ Ibid, 9.

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¹⁰ ONPHA, (2014a), 28.

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¹² ONPHA, (2014a), 5.

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