June 29, 2020

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, P.C., M.P.
Deputy Prime Minister
Privy Council Office
Room 1000
80 Sparks Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A3

The Honourable Bill Morneau, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Finance
90 Elgin Street, 17th Floor
Ottawa, ON K1A 0G5

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau, Deputy Prime Minister Freeland and Minister Morneau:

Subject: Basic Income for Income Security during COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

The Board of Health for the Porcupine Health Unit strongly supports a basic income for all Canadians to ensure everyone has a sufficient income to meet their basic needs. As such, the Board of Health endorses the enclosed correspondence to the federal government from Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit, dated May 20, 2020, Timiskaming Health Unit, dated June 9, 2020, the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, dated May 9, 2020 and Canada’s Senate, dated April 21, 2020. These letters request that the federal government change the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) into a basic income for all Canadians, during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

The measures taken during COVID-19 to support Canadians are an important opportunity to address the economic disparities that impact health. Income insecurity impacts the health of the population. This includes housing instability, food security, poorer physical and mental health outcomes as well as chronic health conditions. Food insecurity is an important public health issue in the Porcupine Health Unit (PHU) area. The PHU is located in Northeastern Ontario and serves communities in the Cochrane District as well as Hornepayne, in Algoma District. Geographically, the PHU is the largest of the 34 health units in Ontario. As the most sparsely populated of all the health units, about one-third of the PHU area is rural. There are many demographic and socioeconomic factors that make the PHU district unique in the province, including a higher Francophone and Indigenous population in addition to a higher unemployment rate, a higher percentage of those not completing high school and lower life expectancy.\(^1\)
Furthermore, access to affordable, nutritious foods is a challenge, especially in the smaller communities in the region. Many of the communities only have one grocery store and some do not have a grocery store and must travel to other communities to purchase food. The PHU has experienced a 10% increase in the cost of healthy food since 2015. In 2019, the cost of the Nutritious Food Basket was approximately $25 higher per week than the Ontario provincial average. When the cost of healthy eating is added to local rent rates and various income scenarios are compared, year after year this survey demonstrates that many residents in the PHU area living on a low income are unlikely to have sufficient income to purchase a basic healthy diet for themselves and their families.

Food-insecure Canadians are much more likely than others to have serious physical and mental health problems\(^{(4)}\), and they are less able to manage these conditions. Research shows that severe food insecurity can reduce a person’s life expectancy by 9 years, as well as pose a significant cost to our health care system.

We strongly recommend your government take immediate action on developing the Canada Emergency Response Benefit into legislation for a basic income as an effective long-term response to the problems of income insecurity, poverty and household food insecurity, as well as a response to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,

Sue Perras
Board Chair, Porcupine Health Unit

cc: Hon., Doug Ford, The Premier of Ontario
Mr. Charlie Angus, MP – Timmins – James Bay
Ms. Carol Hughes, MP – Algoma – Manitoulin – Kapuskasing
Mr. Gilles Bisson, MPP – Timmins – James Bay
Mr. Guy Bourgouin, MPP – Mushkegowuk - James Bay
Municipal Councils
Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA)
Ontario Boards of Health
Ontario Public Health Association

1. Porcupine Health Unit. Health Status Report 2020 (Draft); 2020 [cited 2020 May 29].