

Food & Health, Social Participation

Food & health

The dialogue that emerged from the subject of food and health created a very clear message: people can simply not afford nutritious food on the amount of income they receive from social assistance, and health problems that emerge as a result end up costing the system more. One Blueprinter revealed that all the people she interviewed spent a great deal of time and effort trying to find affordable food that meets their dietary needs. When people get assistance, there is only enough money for food at the beginning of the month, and the rest of the month requires getting food from a food bank, or going hungry. Newcomers to Canada mentioned that their diet was good back in their countries of origin, but when they came to Canada a good diet is unaffordable, and obesity sets in. What was clear was that people receiving social assistance are often well educated on how to eat healthy, but simply cannot afford to eat that way.

Getting assistance for special dietary needs is a long, complicated process. People often have difficulties with filling in the special diet request forms and need help for that. There was the impression that doctors never have any records of special diets for their patients and are not too familiar with figuring out how to help their patients that need supplements.

Recommended Changes

1. Should food prices be specifically considered when setting benefit rates?
 - Based on the responses from those around the table the answer is yes, otherwise society pays more later in health care costs. When people don't have enough to live day to day it is the food that is usually sacrificed.
 - There should be a separate category for support for supplements in addition to just the food, so one can at least get vitamins.
2. Are there other options we should consider in order to ensure people have the food they need?
 - Bring food resources into the neighbourhoods and good food markets, community kitchens and gardens. These are especially important to have in poorer neighbourhoods.
 - In Brantford someone mentioned a farmer had donated land for a community garden.
 - Sometimes stores like No Frills have very good sales, but they are not at the times of the month when social assistance cheques are delivered. These stores should try gear sales to low income people.
 - Have more discount grocery stores with fresh produce available in poorer neighbourhoods – not all neighbourhoods have access to these stores.
3. How should special dietary needs be dealt with in the system?

- Until people are able to get or earn enough money to afford their own food, create support systems for people to navigate the special diet request forms. These can include health care workers, dieticians and social workers.

Social Participation

Social participation for people on assistance is essential for one's health but often limited. While free programs and events are available for some receiving assistance, access to these depends on the municipality one lives in, whether there is easily accessible information about these programs or events, and whether one can afford the public transportation in order to attend these events.

What social programs or events are available depend on how the municipality administers the funds from the province. People mentioned that a program available in one city wasn't available in another city when they had to move. While some provincial oversight takes place as to how the funds are administered, the municipality is often determined to be in the best position to determine how to disperse the funds based on need. This leads to the appearance of a patchwork of programs that people may or may not be able to use depending where they live in the province.

Even in cities where programs are available, there seemed to be a lack of awareness by many that such programs existed. Many community centres do provide some social events, but it's always a surprise to some people since these are not well advertised. Access to register to some programs is also challenge – you also often need to register on the Internet and many people don't have a computer at home or easy access to one. By the time they apply by regular mail, the programs are often full.

A big barrier for participating in social events, or even looking for work, is the transportation cost. If you already struggle to feed your family, you often can't afford the fares to go somewhere, or you don't eat that day. People with low income often have to walk to where they need to go, and if someone is elderly or otherwise have problems with their physical mobility, they are more or less stuck indoors during winter. Subsidized transportation for people with disabilities often creates difficulties, as there is the need to call ahead and go on-line to book their transportation well ahead of time. Any form of spontaneity in socializing, as well as emergencies, is impossible to manage. Some municipalities do not fully subsidize transportation costs for people on assistance; for instance the \$100 allotted for transportation in Toronto does not cover the cost for a monthly pass, and the \$21 extra dollars that needs to be spent is a very large chunk of a very limited budget. Those who are working poor but receiving no social assistance would not qualify for any transportation subsidies in many urban centres in Ontario, including Toronto.

Recommended Changes

1. How can the non-profit sector and organizations providing volunteer hours or other opportunities further capitalize on their ability to provide social activities for people?

- More coordination is necessary to advertise and disseminate information on free programs that are being held. People often are simply not aware.
 - More needs to be done to allow people access to them, including assisting with child care, transportation costs, and food.
 - Be aware of and accommodate the barriers that people may experience trying to register for free programs, such as not having a computer at home.
2. Is there a government role in supporting low-cost or free community activities? Non-profit organizations?
- There should be central monitoring and oversight for a more unified approach to provision of programs.
 - Create provincial standards about how discretionary funds should be spent as they relate to social and recreational activities for those receiving assistance
 - Government and non-profit organizations have to acknowledge and accommodate access to transportation as part of enabling everyone to fully participate in their community.