



P.O. Box 69,
Station E, Toronto
Ontario M6H 4E1

tel: 416-652-7867
fax: 416-652-2294

e-mail:
general@thestop.org

web site:
www.thestop.org

location:
1884 Davenport Rd.
Toronto

charitable #
119192763RR0001

PRESS RELEASE

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No relief in sight this Thanksgiving: 1700 Ontarians "Do the Math" and find social assistance rates don't add up

Thanksgiving is a time to remember that everyone should have enough food to eat -- if not to celebrate with an abundant meal, at the very least to meet the minimum requirements for health and dignity. But data released from a new website shows what too many people lining up at food banks this Thanksgiving already know; social assistance in Ontario does not add up.

The Stop Community Food Centre recently launched a web-based budgeting tool called "Do the Math" (www.dothemath.thestop.org) that asks people to weigh in on what they think a person on social assistance needs to survive. More than 1700 people have completed the survey since it launched in June 2009, and results show that even the most frugal estimates fall far short of what people receive on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Highlights from the survey:

- The average total amount needed to live each month was estimated at \$1,430 (compared to \$572 current rate for OW recipients)
- 83% of those surveyed believe that a single person in Ontario needs more than \$1,020 to live each month (the current single month rate for ODSP)
- Average cost of monthly shelter was estimated at \$624 (compared to the \$349 provided for OW recipients and \$445 for ODSP recipients)
- The average cost of food each month for a single person was estimated at \$260 (compared to the Cost of the Nutritious Food Basket data provided by public health agencies that estimates the average monthly amount needed to purchase healthy food each month is \$209.55)
- 69% of respondents indicated that having internet access was a necessary expense
- 57% of respondent earned over \$30,000 per year
- 14% of respondents are on OW or ODSP

"Results from Do the Math confirm that many people do not believe that the stereotypes are true – that poverty is because of poor budgeting and bad choices. In fact, people from across socioeconomic groups filled out the survey and not only found that you can't survive on social assistance, but also signed virtual postcard petitions saying that the solution must be to rebuild our safety net. Particularly in difficult times like these having adequate social assistance as a last resort will help people to bounce back into the economy," says Nick Saul, Executive Director at The Stop. "Currently nothing could be further from the truth, and this is a key reason why food bank and meal program use is up 30% in our organization."

Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. David McKeown, said Thanksgiving is a time to reflect on the importance of access to healthy food. "People who live on social assistance cannot afford nutritious food and their health status suffers as a result. The government should address this urgent problem because social justice is an essential ingredient of healthy living."

Over 3,000 people have signed the online petition or postcard that calls for government to 'do the math' too, and overhaul of the system that sets rates, as well as for an immediate increase of \$100 as a first step to meet basic needs. The Put Food in the Budget campaign is a partnership between The Stop and the Social Planning Network of Ontario, and is endorsed by the Association of Public Health Agencies.

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Media contact: Jonah Schein, The Stop Community Food Centre, 416-652-7867 ex. 235,
Cell: 647-244-3715, civicengagement@thestop.org, Fax 416-652-2294, www.thestop.org