

Healthy diet unaffordable for some residents: report

Medical officer of health says 32,000 people living in Halton can't afford to buy proper food for healthy diet

By **Stephanie Hounsell**
CANADIAN
CHAMPION STAFF

For many Halton residents, a nutritious diet continues to be unaffordable, according to a health department study.

In fact, about 32,000 people — seven per cent of Halton residents — can't afford adequate food, a statistic that has remained steady over the past few years.

Those were key findings in the 2008 Halton Nutritious Food Basket Survey, presented in a report to the Region's health and social services committee January 13. The survey measures the cost of an adequate diet based on 66 common food items.

Its results have far-reaching effects.

Poverty often results in poorer eating habits — with food purchased that's higher in fat, sugar and calories — which in turn leads to less healthy residents, said Emma Tucker, a public

health dietician who presented on the report at the meeting.

"If you're in poverty, you're more likely to end up in a hospital bed," Tucker said.

According to the survey, and based on prices last June, it costs about \$133 each week to provide a basic healthy diet for a family of four in Halton, the report reads.

That's an increase of five per cent over 2007 and 10 per cent over 2006 and can be attributed to the rising cost of global food commodities.

For a middle-aged man, the weekly cost of a healthy diet is just over \$40, while it's about \$30 for a woman in the same age category.

The food basket results are combined with income and housing numbers and present the stark reality that many low-income residents face.

The report, from Medical Officer of Health Dr. Bob Nosal, gives the example of a single mother living in

Halton on Ontario Works with a seven-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old son.

Her total income would be \$1,665 per month, and rent would take \$1,224 of that. A nutritious diet would cost \$422, which means only \$213 would remain to cover basic needs including heat, hydro, insurance, transportation, clothing and household supplies.

"These families are more likely to pay the rent and necessary bills and have little or no money left for food," the report states.

"Clearly, there is a disconnect between what the government provides in benefit rates and the actual cost of eating for good health."

What's needed is to address the root problem of poverty, Tucker told councillors.

Nosal concurred.

"If the root causes are adequately addressed, we won't need all the other programs," he said.

Oakville Mayor Rob Burton questioned if what the Region is doing to combat this problem is working considering the level of food insecurity among residents has remained stable each year.

"Is it time to re-evaluate

what we've been doing?" he asked.

Commissioner of Social and Community Services Adelina Urbanski responded

it was only last month that the Province introduced its Poverty Reduction Strategy, and it will help the Region better measure the success of

its current measures and where there are gaps to fill.

Stephanie Hounsell can be reached at sthiesse@milton-canadianchampion.com.

Possibility grows in Ontario's Greenbelt ~ #1 in a series

Jason Verkaik hand-picks possibility.



Jason Verkaik at Carron Farms in the Holland Marsh

"In Ontario, we shouldn't have to import produce. We can grow it locally," says Jason Verkaik. Jason's a farmer in the Holland Marsh, 35 minutes north of Toronto. It's home to about 150 farmers, over 10,000 acres of some of the most fertile soil in Canada, and some of the most fertile thinking about local food production anywhere. All on farmland protected by Ontario's Greenbelt.

Until recently, the Marsh mostly grew carrots, onions and celery that were shipped around the world. But the farmers of the Holland Marsh Growers' Association turned that model on its head, starting with an initiative to grow international food for local markets.

Jason holds beautiful red carrots, often used in East Indian cuisine, that are

perfect examples. "Growing them here means they don't have to be shipped in from halfway around the world." Less shipping also means a reduced carbon footprint. Crop diversity actually improves the soil. And it's all boosting the local economy, as the Marsh now grows more than 40 different kinds of produce. Swiss chard, bok choy, Asian radishes, with more on the way. "If you want something, let us know," Jason says.

The farmers of the Holland Marsh are fired-up about the possibilities they're harvesting in Ontario's Greenbelt, and what it means to a world hungry for local food solutions. More and more farmer's can grow a wide variety of food and get it on local dinner plates within 24 hours. "It's really exciting to see what's going to be next."



To see a video of Jason and other stories from Ontario's Greenbelt visit: www.greenbelt.ca

Possibility grows here.

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