

Community gardens one way to access healthy food

• from **SOME** on page 1

not low cost. For some people it's totally out of reach. In Canada, generally our food cost is pretty good but the cost of eating is going up — there's no doubt about it."

Every year the Region's health department conducts a survey of six grocery stores in Halton to price 67 food items and determine the average price for a nutritious diet.

The 2011 report shows the cost of a healthy diet for a man, 31, on Ontario Works, is \$249 a month. However, with a total monthly income of \$635 and the average rent for a bachelor apartment in Halton at \$798, the report shows the individual is \$412 short every month to cover other basic expenses.

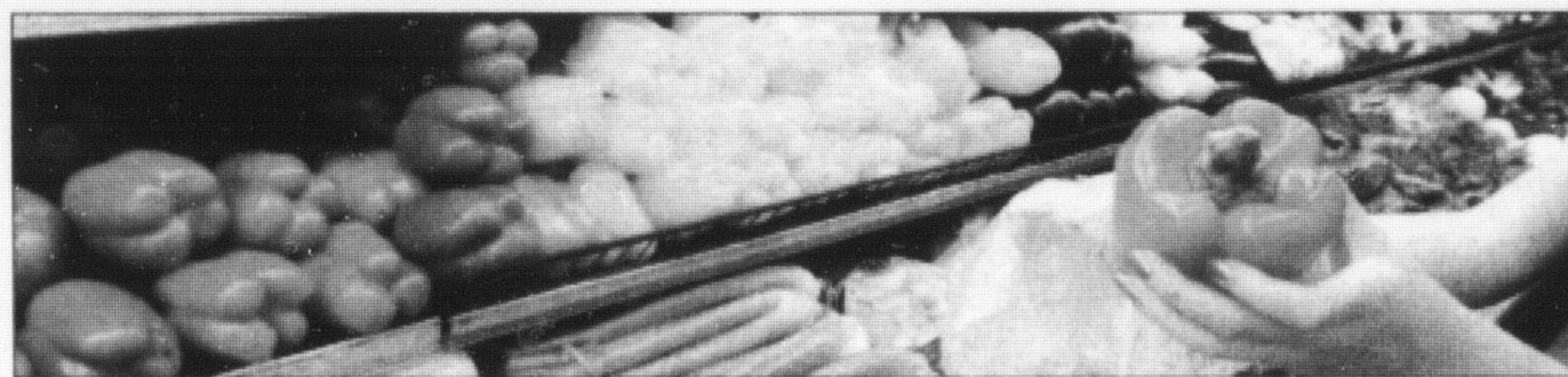
The same scenario rings true for minimum wage earners in Halton.

The report show a family of four with one parent working a minimum wage job (\$10.25 an hour for 40 hours a week) would have \$575 left over at the end of the month to cover basic living expenses after paying rent and purchasing a nutritious diet.

"In reality, people usually choose to pay their rent and other fixed expenses, e.g. heat, hydro and transportation. Food becomes a 'discretionary' expense, resulting in a diet of poor nutritional value," states the report.

An estimated 19,200 Halton residents experience food insecurity and turn to food banks for help. But often, donated foods lack important nutrients.

"Donated food is processed longer to have a longer shelf life," said Roblin. "(Food banks) are able to accept it in large quantities and store it and redistribute it to clients. If you



don't have a place to store, wash and distribute fresh food, it's a little more challenging."

Roblin said local farmers will donate surpluses of fresh produce to food banks, but often the donation will be of a single item, such as pears or apples. "So you're not going to have a variety. When we talk about fruits and vegetables you want to have a variety in your diet," she said, adding that dark orange and dark leafy green vegetables are particularly high in nutrients.

Halton's Fresh Food Box program aims to make fruits and vegetables an affordable staple in diets. Launched in 2004, the program purchases produce in bulk and sells fresh food boxes at a reduced cost.

"Our roots are from an anti-poverty coalition... people came together and asked what can we do to make an immediate difference in peoples' lives," said Brenda Moher, program director.

While the program reaches out to priority groups — those living on low incomes, seniors and new Canadians — it also helps Halton's working poor.

"In reality in Halton, because of the cost of housing, many people who make good wages would easily benefit from the Fresh Food Box

program," said Moher. "On paper they may not look like low income, but by the time they've paid their mortgage, paid for utilities, met their basic needs, food becomes a discretionary budget item. It's a basic need but because all those other things take such a portion of your income, the money left to buy food is often what you dip into when you have an unexpected expense."

Fresh Food Boxes come in three sizes. A family size box costs \$17 and comes with 15 different fruits and vegetables. "(The boxes) is something that clients pay for, so it's non-stigmatizing," added Moher.

When the program began, volunteers packed 160 boxes a month. Today, the box count is more than 700.

Aiming to provide some the area's most vulnerable residents with a healthy diet, Halton's ReFresh Foods is able to accept large donations of fresh food and store and redistribute it in a quick turnaround time.

"Meat items are the most expensive and it's difficult for many families to afford," said Charlotte Redekop-Young, executive director of Food for Life and ReFresh Foods.

The organizations collect surplus perishable foods from grocery stores and restaurants

and redistribute it to food banks and community agencies.

"We're a complement to food banks," she said.

Redekop-Young said the need for donated fresh food in Halton has grown since the agency launched in late 2008. "Many of our clients, seniors, or those on Ontario Works or disability can't afford a healthy diet."

Roblin said community gardens are one way to increase access to fruits and vegetables. "A true community garden is a place where various members of the community can gather and work together to grow a garden and share in the bounty."

This Sunday, the Oakville Sustainable Food Partnership and the Halton Food Council will host a free event for those interested in starting a community garden.

Community leaders working to make fresh food accessible to everyone will discuss the tools and resources needed to get a community garden started in your neighbourhood and touch upon other food initiatives popping up around Halton. For more information or to register visit www.communitygardenshalton.eventbrite.com.

Said Roblin, "Food banks may help (residents) get some of the canned good they need and free up some money to buy fresh food from the grocery store. But food banks are really just there as an emergency... If someone wants to follow a healthy diet, fresh fruits and vegetables are really an important part."

Christina Commisso can be reached at ccommisso@miltoncanadianchampion.com.



Breakfast With Santa

and a small gift for each child

All you care to eat brunch

Kids u/12 \$5.95

Adults \$10.95

Saturday, 26th November

10a.m. - 12p.m.

Reserve by November 19th

Call 905-878-8441



40 Chisholm Drive, Milton, Hwy 401 Exit 320

www.5thwheel.com