

Dietitians of Canada (British Columbia)

Submission to the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation

MAY 2016

The Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation has an opportunity to further help British Columbians in need. Food costs have increased by at least 12% since 2009 in BC. Families and individuals across the income spectrum may be feeling the effect of the rising cost of food; however, higher food prices have the greatest impact on those households with the lowest incomes, as affordability is a function of both income and cost.

People receiving social assistance have a low income and are more likely to experience food insecurity. Rates of chronic disease, depression and suicidal thoughts are higher among children and adults living in food insecure households.¹ Food insecurity is a barrier to achieving social and economic independence, two key outcomes of the government's system of supports.

Dietitians of Canada acknowledges the provincial government for the Single Parent Employment Initiative, the exemption of child support payments, increased allowances and flexibility of earnings exemptions and planned increased disability assistance rates as part of the 2016 Budget.

Given the strong economy, it is timely for further income and disability assistance reform so that more British Columbians can afford sufficient healthy food and meet their nutritional needs. To that end, Dietitians of Canada encourages the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation to act in three areas:

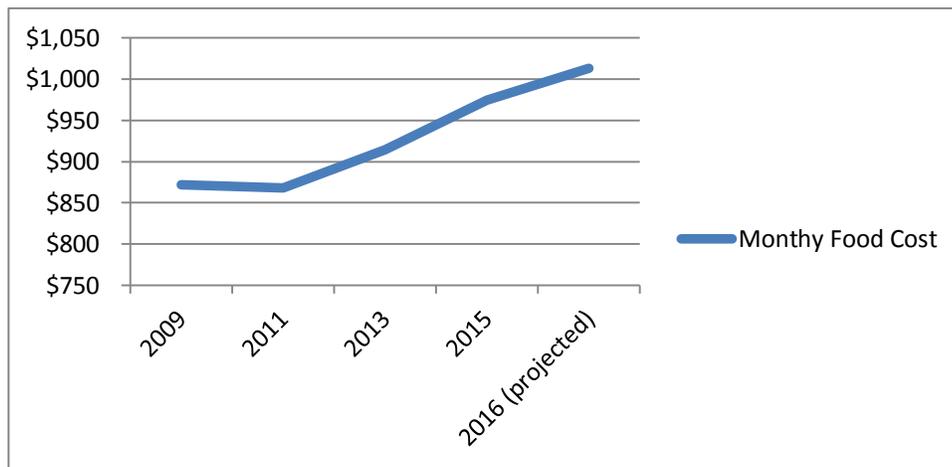
1. Ensure income and disability assistance rates provide recipients sufficient income to pay for enough healthy food to meet nutritional needs, using the most recent BC food costing data as an indicator of the cost of a healthy diet.
2. Evaluate policy interventions such as earnings exemptions to assess their effectiveness at decreasing food insecurity.
3. Strengthen the Nutritional Supplement Programs to better support SDSI clients who have nutritional needs beyond a basic healthy diet, using the unique expertise of dietitians to inform the process.

Food costs have increased by at least 12% since 2009 in BC.

HOW MUCH INCOME IS NEEDED TO PAY FOR A HEALTHY DIET IN BC?

British Columbians are feeling the effects of rising food prices. Data collection in BC demonstrates that food costs for a family of four increased from \$872 in 2009 to \$974 in 2015, a \$102 rise over the past six years as illustrated in Figure 1. The average monthly cost went up by 7% from 2013 to 2015 alone.ⁱⁱ The Food Institute at the University of Guelph is predicting further increases for 2016, as much as 4% across the country, exceeding the general rate of inflation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Figure 1: Average monthly cost for a family of four of a nutritionally adequate, balanced diet in BC based on the National Nutritious Food Basket from 2009 to 2016



Individuals and families across the income spectrum may be feeling the effect of the rising cost of food; however, higher food prices have the greatest impact on those households with the lowest incomes, as affordability is a function of both income and cost. This is demonstrated when the cost of a nutritious food basket is compared to income for recipients of BC Employment and Assistance (Appendix A).

Dietitians of Canada acknowledges the provincial government for enacting measures to provide more support to families with children receiving income assistance and individuals and families receiving disability assistance. This includes the Single Parent Employment Initiative, the exemption of child support payments, increased allowances and flexibility of earnings exemptions and planned increased disability assistance rates as part of the 2016 Budget.

It is now timely to increase income and disability assistance rates to provide recipients with enough money to pay for a healthy diet. Income assistance (i.e. shelter and support allowance) has not increased since 2007, yet food costs have increased by at least 12%.

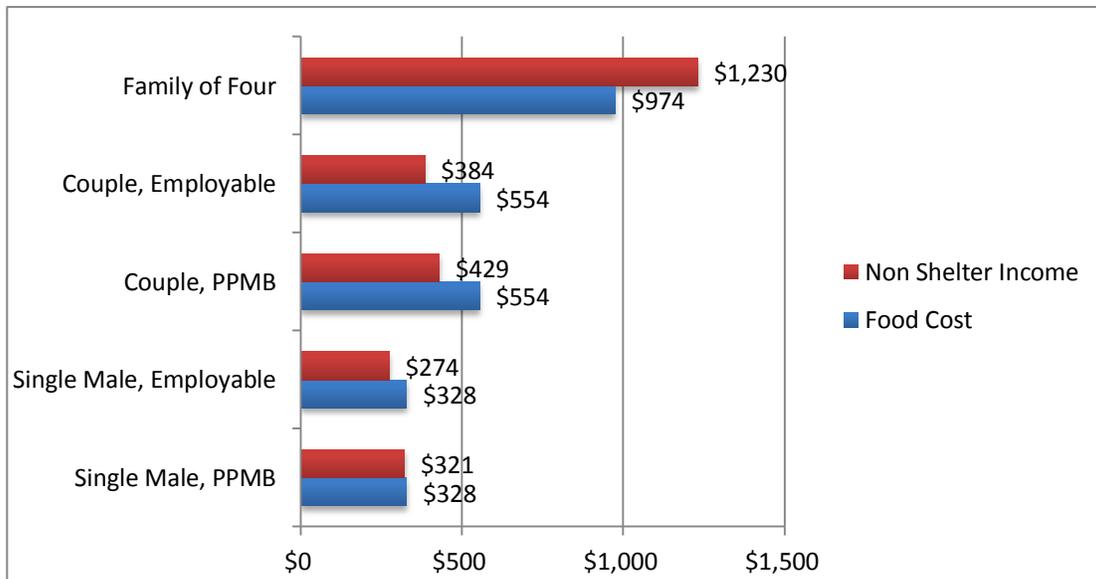
Higher food prices have the greatest impact on those households with the lowest incomes.

For a family of four, the cost of the nutritious food basket alone would require 79% of their income minus the shelter allowance, also known as non-shelter income. Given housing costs are likely to exceed the maximum shelter allowance of \$700, this family would have even less money to purchase healthy food and other necessities.

Other groups receiving income assistance face even greater challenges to meet their nutritional needs. For some, their income minus the shelter allowance is less than the cost of purchasing a nutritionally adequate diet. For example, an employable couple would need to spend 144% of their non-shelter income on food.

For some, their income minus the shelter allowance is less than the cost of purchasing a nutritionally adequate diet.

Figure 2: A comparison of income minus the shelter allowance to the cost of purchasing a nutritionally adequate diet in BC



A substantial increase in income and disability assistance rates is required to ensure British Columbians in need can afford a healthy diet. A commitment to regular increases using BC food costing data would ensure better alignment between income and the ability to purchase a healthy diet in future years.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE EARNINGS EXEMPTIONS AT DECREASING FOOD INSECURITY?

Earnings exemptions have the potential to increase income and assist in meeting basic needs, provided the earnings can be realized.

If a single male receiving disability assistance is able to find work and earn the maximum exemption, he would need to spend 24% of his remaining income on the nutritious food basket, versus 57% with no additional earnings (Appendix A). An employable male receiving income assistance earning the maximum exemption would spend 69% of his income after shelter on food, versus the 120% with no additional earnings.

However, while earnings exemptions can increase income, it is difficult to find and keep employment when one is hungry. Even living for one week with a significantly limited budget for food can lead to fatigue, lack of focus, and feelings of social isolation, as expressed by some dietetic student participants in the 2015 Welfare Food Challenge, a challenge in which participants agree to eat only food they can purchase with \$21 for one week.

"I felt fatigued every day. I didn't have the energy to exercise and I found it extremely difficult to focus on my studies. All I thought about was food. If living on a food budget this limited was a part of my regular life, I would not have been able to get through my daily routine, let alone complete my course work."^{iv}

If nutritional needs are met through income and disability assistance, earnings exemptions may have greater potential to help those receiving social assistance achieve social and economic independence.

HOW CAN THE NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENT PROGRAMS ACHIEVE BETTER OUTCOMES?

The Nutritional Supplement Programs are essential to improving the health outcomes of clients that have nutritional needs beyond a basic healthy diet. These programs provide supplements for special therapeutic diets, tube feeding equipment and supplies, as well as additional money for food for individuals on disability assistance who have a severe medical condition causing a chronic, progressive deterioration of health^v.

The foundation for an effective Nutritional Supplement Programs is having sufficient income to pay for a basic healthy diet. Increasing income and disability assistance rates for British Columbians in need is a key strategy to achieving better outcomes for clients on the Nutritional Supplement Programs.

In addition, timely access to the Nutritional Supplement Programs and flexibility to meet the changing and individual needs is paramount to achieving better outcomes. The current application process for the Nutritional Supplements Program is complicated and inefficient for recipients, care providers, and those administering the approval. The eligibility criteria are outdated and there is very limited nutrition expertise available at a provincial level to guide and monitor outcomes^{vi}.

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Dietitians have the education and training to understand the complexities related to people's health and social needs. They can help to optimize the Nutritional Supplement Programs by being included in all aspects of the process. They have the expertise to make informed decisions regarding eligibility, coverage, and the appropriate use of nutrition interventions. They can provide unique insights to streamline the application and approval process.

The Nutritional Supplement Programs can achieve better outcomes by increasing income and disability rates and improving the processes.

IN SUMMARY

Food costs in B.C. have increased by at least 12% while income assistance rates have remained unchanged since 2007. Given a strong provincial economy, it is possible to ensure that all British Columbians can afford to purchase enough healthy food to meet their nutritional requirements.

Dietitians of Canada (BC) urges the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation to increase income and disability rates, assess the effectiveness of earnings exemptions, and strengthen the Nutritional Supplement Programs to better support British Columbians in need to afford a healthy diet.

About Dietitians of Canada

Dietitians of Canada is the national professional association for dietitians, representing close to 6,000 members at the local, provincial and national level. Dietitians are the only nutrition professionals regulated by the BC Health Professions Act, are governed by ethical guidelines and standards of practice, and have extensive education and training in nutrition to ensure they work to the highest standard. As the voice of the profession, Dietitians of Canada strives for excellence in advancing health through food and nutrition.

APPENDIX

*Table 1: Total Basic Monthly Income of single adults on BC Employment and Assistance¹
and Monthly Cost of Food 2015²*

Single Adults	Income Assistance				Disability Assistance	
	Employable		Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers (PPMB)		Persons with Disabilities (PWD)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total Monthly Income	\$ 649	\$649	\$696	\$696	\$948	\$948
Shelter Allowance	\$375	\$375	\$375	\$375	\$375	\$375
Remaining Income	\$274	\$274	\$321	\$321	\$573	\$573
Cost of Healthy Food	\$328	\$277	\$328	\$277	\$328	\$277
Food Cost as % of Remaining Income	120%	101%	102%	86%	57%	48%
Remaining Income + Maximum Earnings Exemption (MEE)³	\$474	\$474	\$821	\$821	\$1373	\$1373
Food Cost as % Remaining Income + MEE	69%	59%	40%	34%	24%	20%

Table 2: Total Basic Monthly Income of couples on BC Employment and Assistance¹ and Monthly Cost of Food 2015²

Couples, no children	Income Assistance		Disability Assistance	
	Employable	PPMB	1 PWD	2 PWD
Total Monthly Income	\$954	\$1099	\$1348	\$1596
Shelter Allowance	\$570	\$570	\$570	\$570
Remaining Income	\$384	\$529	\$778	\$1026
Cost of Healthy Food	\$554	\$554	\$554	\$554
Food Cost as % of Remaining Income	144%	105%	71%	54%
Remaining Income + Maximum Earnings Exemption (MEE)³	\$584	\$1029	\$1778	\$2626
Food Cost as % of Remaining Income + MEE	95%	54%	31%	21%

Table 3: Total Basic Monthly Income of employable parents with children on BC Employment and Assistance¹ and Monthly Cost of Food 2015²

Employable Parents, Income Assistance	Single Parent		Two Parent Family	
	Boy (4 yrs)	Girl (8 yrs) Boy (14yrs)	Boy (4 yrs)	Girl (8 yrs) Boy (14 yrs)
Total Monthly Income	\$1556	\$1855	\$1678	\$1931
Shelter Allowance	\$570	\$660	\$660	\$700
Remaining Income	\$986	\$1195	\$1020	\$1230
Cost of Healthy Food	\$435	\$736	\$701	\$974
Food Cost as % of Remaining Income	44%	62%	69%	79%
Remaining Income + Maximum Earnings Exemption (MEE)³	\$1386	\$1595	\$1420	\$1630
Food Cost as percent Remaining Income + MEE	31%	46%	49%	60%

Table 4: Total Basic Monthly Income of people with disabilities who are parents with children on BC Employment and Assistance² and Monthly Cost of Food 2015²

Persons with Disabilities - Parents Disability Assistance	Single Parent		Two Parent Family⁴	
	Boy (4 yrs)	Girl (8 yrs) Boy (14yrs)	Boy (4 yrs)	Girl (8 yrs) Boy (14 yrs)
Total Monthly Income	\$1852	\$2153	\$2074	\$2324
Shelter Allowance	\$570	\$660	\$660	\$700
Remaining Income	\$1282	\$1492	\$1413	\$1623
Cost of Healthy Food	\$435	\$736	\$701	\$974
Food Cost as % of Remaining Income	34%	49%	50%	60%
Remaining Income + Maximum Earnings Exemption (MEE)³	\$2082	\$2292	\$2413	\$2623
Food Cost as % of Remaining Income + MEE	21%	32%	29%	37%

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Dietitians of Canada. *Food Insecurity in Canada*. October 1, 2015. Retrieved from http://www.dietitians.ca/Downloads/Public/Food-Insecurity_one-pager_Eng.aspx
- ⁱⁱ Provincial Health Services Authority. (2016). *Food Costing in BC 2015*. Vancouver, B.C.: Provincial Health Services Authority, Population and Public Health Program.
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- ^{iv} Yu, Elizabeth. *Welfare Food Challenge 2015 – 5 key takeaways from this eye-opening experience*. March 10, 2016. <http://www.dietitians.ca/Learn/Practice-Blog/March-2016/Welfare-Food-Challenge-2015-%E2%80%93-5-key-takeaways-from.aspx>
- ^v Province of British Columbia. Overview of BC Provincial and Federal Nutrition Benefits Program. Healthlink BC <http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthyeating/bc-nutrition-programs.html#provincial-programs> Accessed 20 April 2016
- ^{vi} Dietitians of Canada, BC Region (2013). Submission to Auditor General. <http://www.dietitians.ca/Downloadable-Content/Public/BC-AG-Submission-Nov-12-FINAL.aspx>

FOOTNOTES TO APPENDIX

- ¹ Monthly income rounded to nearest dollar. Source: Total Basic Monthly Income on BC Employment and Assistance (Sept 2015), e-mail correspondence with Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation Sept 15, 2015. For singles and couples, no children this includes support and shelter allowances, GST credit, BC Low Income Climate Action Tax Credit, BC Sales Tax Credit. For single and two parent families this also includes BC Early Childhood Tax Benefit, Canada Child Tax Benefit, National Child Benefit Supplement, Universal Childcare Benefit.
- ² Provincial Health Services Authority. (2016). *Food Costing in BC 2015*. Vancouver, B.C.: Provincial Health Services Authority, Population and Public Health Program. Food costs are gender and age specific and rounded to the nearest dollar. Adults are 31-50 years; single parent is female; couples include a male and female.
- ³ Income assistance recipients are eligible for a monthly earnings exemption. For an individual or couple who can work this is \$200 per month. For PPMB this is \$500 per month. Disability assistance recipients are eligible for an annual earnings exemption. For an individual this is \$9600 annually, a couple including one person receiving disability assistance this is \$12,000 annually and a couple where both are receiving disability assistance this is \$19,200 annually. In these tables the maximum has been divided equally into 12 monthly payments to reflect the maximum earnings exemption available on a monthly basis. Source: Total Basic Monthly Income on BC Employment and Assistance (Sept 2015), e-mail correspondence with Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation Sept 15, 2015.
- ⁴ One parent is PWD, the other parent is on income assistance and is considered employable.