

Submission to Toronto Budget 2024

Founded in 1983, Daily Bread Food Bank is a member-based organization comprised of 132 member agencies who operate 207 food banks and meal programs across Toronto. We believe that access to food is a basic human right, not a privilege. Our mission is to collaborate with all to eliminate food insecurity and advocate for solutions to end poverty. We wish to express our gratitude for the opportunity to provide recommendations as part of the 2024 Budget process.

There is a food insecurity crisis in Toronto: one in 10 people are now relying on food banks, twice as many as the year prior. In 2023, there were over 3 million food bank visits in Toronto with over 185,000 new clients, which is a fivefold increase compared to before the pandemic. Simply put, because of skyrocketing housing costs, food inflation, stagnating wages, and insufficient income supports, more Torontonians are experiencing food insecurity and being pushed into poverty, driving record food bank usage.

Given the immense fiscal challenges the City is facing, we commend the City for ensuring that the 2024 Budget protects and maintains critical core services and service levels that Torontonians need. We are thrilled to see \$152 million in new funding for shelter and housing, long-term care, public libraries, public transit, and community crisis responses. However, we encourage the City to consider new investments to address growing inequities and to continue advocating for the needs of those living in Toronto to other orders of government. A summary of recommendations is provided, followed by a detailed description.

Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) and Toronto Food Charter:

1. Fully fund the forthcoming (PRS) Action Plan to continue progress on poverty reduction.
2. Update Toronto's Food Charter and develop an implementation plan.

Promote resiliency among Toronto's community food programs:

3. Prioritize access to programming space for community food programs and a formalized role in the City's emergency planning and preparedness.

Make public transit more affordable for low-income residents:

4. Partner with community organizations to promote uptake of the Fair Pass Transit Discount Program to eligible residents.
5. Develop an 'ability to pay' implementation plan for the Fair Pass Transit Discount Program.

Amplify and advocate for the needs of Torontonians to all orders of government:

6. Continue to advocate to the federal government for a fully funded Canada Disability Benefit to support Torontonians with disabilities disproportionately impacted by poverty.
7. Push the provincial government to release the findings and recommendations of the Portable Benefits Advisory Panel to support Torontonians in precarious employment.
8. Continue to advocate to the federal government to step up with 'New Deal' funding for shelters to ensure that the City can support those most vulnerable.
9. Explore the prospect of expediting permanent annual public transit funding with the federal government, to support the TTC – the country's largest public transit system.

Background and Context

Food Insecurity and Poverty in Toronto

Daily Bread Food Bank and North York Harvest Food Bank's annual *Who's Hungry* report¹ found that food bank clients have a median monthly income of \$1,131, less than half of the Official Poverty Line for Toronto (\$2,302 for a single person)². After paying rent and utilities, Toronto food bank clients have a median of \$6.67 left per person per day – down from \$8.01 in 2022 – which is not even sufficient for a round trip on the TTC (\$6.70) to commute to work and back home.

High housing costs in Toronto are absorbing most of food bank clients' household incomes as nearly all (89%) food bank clients live in unaffordable housing, which is defined as spending more than 30% of their income on housing. Close to one quarter (23%) spend 100% of their income on housing, leaving no money for other necessities, putting them at extremely high risk of homelessness. Hence, food banks act as a stop gap in household budgets after paying the high cost of housing/utilities in Toronto.

Research undertaken by the City on purchasing nutritious food³ shows that while cost of living continues to go up, incomes are not keeping pace. This is most challenging for low-income households who struggle to pay for the basic costs of living. As such, nearly one in three (31%) Toronto food bank clients went a whole day without eating and more than half (55%) of clients missed a meal to pay for something else.

Recommendations

Poverty Reduction Strategy and Toronto Food Charter

1. Fully fund the forthcoming (PRS) Action Plan to continue progress on poverty reduction.

The City's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) focuses on six key areas for action and investment: housing stability, service access, transit equity, food access, quality jobs and livable incomes, and systemic change. At a time like this, where poverty rates are rapidly rising, we need accountability more than ever. The Poverty Reduction Strategy cannot, and should not, be a theoretical exercise or a wish list. It must have concrete, funded actions to address the challenges low-income Torontonians are facing. While we commend the City for investing in the Housing Secretariat, community crisis responses, shelters and libraries, we recommend that the City's budget allocate funding for all initiatives under the Poverty Reduction Strategy, which is scheduled to be released in February.

2. Update Toronto's Food Charter and develop an implementation plan.

The Toronto Food Charter was adopted over 20 years ago and does not account for the modern-day realities of food inflation, precarious labour, and the havoc wrecked by the pandemic on supply chains. While we are pleased to see that the City has committed to updating Toronto's Food Charter,⁴ we urge engagement with residents disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, poverty, and other inequities in our food system, and with community groups working to defend the food rights of their communities. This includes but should not be limited to: BIPOC communities; people with disabilities; low-income workers; students; seniors; newcomers; and renters. Furthermore, the City can utilize these consultations to support the development of a plan for implementation alongside the forthcoming PRS Action Plan to uphold its obligations to advance the right of every Torontonian to be free of hunger.

Promote resiliency among Toronto's community food programs:

3. Prioritize access to programming space and a formalized role in the City's emergency planning and preparedness for community food programs.

Due to soaring commercial rents and the rise in demand for services, many food programs are struggling to stay open. Some programs are also facing eviction due to the end of their leases, putting their operations at risk, and hampering access to food in communities. The City can increase the availability and accessibility of municipally operated and owned space for community-based food programs, services and gardens to promote resiliency by offering longer-term, affordable space agreements; eliminating or subsidizing fees; simplifying permit processes and increasing hours of operation; providing priority access for food security organizations; and leveraging community benefits agreements for more space.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that food access is a critical component of emergency planning, and that the City has an important role to play in coordinating food access and service continuity. The City can establish criteria to ensure food access and programs are embedded into neighbourhood hubs. By developing emergency preparedness agreements and plans with organizations delivering food security programs, the City can make sure that food banks are prepared for potential crises such as pandemics and extreme weather events. This includes material supports such as the provision of Personal Protective Equipment and wider operational supports like electric generators. It requires a coordinated strategy, logistical support and space, and a plan ready for when emergencies arise.

Make public transit more affordable for low-income residents:

4. Partner with community organizations to promote uptake of the Fair Pass Transit Discount Program to eligible residents.

At the time of conducting our *Who's Hungry 2023* survey of Toronto food bank clients, only those who received OW or ODSP, lived in social housing, or received a childcare subsidy were eligible for the Fair Pass Transit Discount Program. While we do not collect data on childcare subsidies in our annual survey and therefore could not assess uptake among this group, we were able to determine that only 39% of respondents receiving social assistance or living in social housing received the Fair Pass Discount.

Hence, it is important for the City to partner with community organizations to actively promote the Discount, rather than passive promotion. Outreach efforts need to meet people where they frequent, including food banks, libraries, shelters, community health centres, settlement agencies, etc. Collaboration between the city and community organizations can support uptake by increasing awareness about the discount and providing accessible application processes, communications, and information on an on-going year-round basis. Accommodation should also be available to overcome barriers like language and technology to ensure equitable access to the program.

5. Fully implement Phase 3 of the Fair Pass Transit Discount Program.

In July 2023, the City of Toronto began the implementation of Phase 3 of the Fair Pass Transit Discount Program to expand eligibility to anyone whose income falls below 75% of the Low-Income Measure After-Tax (LIM-AT).⁵ This is an important step forward for which Toronto food banks, transit riders, and anti-poverty organizations have been advocating, but the next step would be to fully implement Phase 3 so that anyone with LIM AT+15% can access the discount. This would mean that a single individual with an

income of \$31,455 and under would be eligible, compared to the current income threshold of \$20,514 or less. By fully implementing Phase 3 and expanding access to more low-income households, the City can support the well-being of individuals by ensuring equitable access to transit.

Amplify and advocate for the needs of Torontonians to all orders of government

6. Continue to advocate to the federal government for a fully funded Canada Disability Benefit to support Torontonians with disabilities disproportionately impacted by poverty.

People with disabilities in Canada are twice as likely to live in poverty than those without disabilities,⁶ because they face an additional cost of living with a disability in addition to barriers in accessing employment, housing, and healthcare. Of the 35% of food bank clients in Toronto who have a disability, 43% of them rely on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) where a single individual receives \$1,308 per month (approximately \$1,000 below the poverty line of \$2,302 in Toronto). Food bank use, and food insecurity more broadly, is driven by a lack of income.⁷ Social assistance recipients are legislated to live in poverty because of inadequate rates and have no choice but to rely on charity to survive.

To reduce poverty among people with disabilities, the federal government passed *Bill C-22: The Canada Disability Benefit Act*, to develop a Canada Disability Benefit (CDB) and is currently in the process of developing regulations to inform program design, such as who's eligible and the amount of the benefit.⁸ In 2023, City Council passed a motion calling on the federal government to fully fund an adequate and accessible CDB.⁹ We strongly commend the City for doing so but urge officials and staff to continue their advocacy efforts with the federal government to ensure that the CDB is fully funded in the upcoming 2024 federal budget as Torontonians with disabilities cannot afford to wait anymore.

7. Push the provincial government to release the findings and recommendations of the Portable Benefits Advisory Panel to support Torontonians in precarious employment.

Having a job does not protect against food insecurity - nearly half (47%) of food bank clients have at least one member of their household who is employed. Of those reporting employment, nearly 3 in 4 (71%) had no medical, dental, retirement benefits or paid sick days through their employer – which is a 26% increase compared to the year prior. These individuals must pay out of pocket for important services, like dental work, medications, physiotherapy, and other ancillary health services. In the absence of sufficient money to pay for these services, many will simply go without or delay seeking care, putting them at risk for exacerbating their conditions and reducing their ability to work and earn income.

At the provincial level, Ontario's Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee established a Portable Benefits Advisory Panel in March of 2022 to explore the development of a benefits program that is attached to workers to provide access to consistent benefits regardless of their place of employment. This program could help support Torontonians in precarious employment access important benefits, but recommendations were expected in 2023, and still have not been released. We urge the City to advocate for the Province to release the findings and recommendations of the Advisory Panel so the work on the development and implementation of the Portable Benefits program can begin.

8. Continue to advocate to the federal government to step up with ‘New Deal’ funding for shelters to ensure that the City can support those most vulnerable.

The New Deal signed with the Province of Ontario is a key step forward to restoring Toronto’s fiscal sustainability, but funding gaps remain that must be addressed by the federal government – particularly the costs of shelters to house asylum-seekers/refugees. We support the City’s efforts in advocating for the federal government to provide \$250 million as full reimbursement of costs associated with the asylum-seeker/refugees claimant response. As the crisis continues to grow because of federal policy, it is incumbent on the federal government to provide the funding streams that the City requires to ensure that asylum-seekers/refugees are not turned away from shelters and provided with essential and basic services in a dignified fashion. Canada has always been a welcoming place for those fleeing persecution and looking to settle for a better life, but resources must be provided by the federal government as the City simply cannot keep up with historic inflows of people without additional support.

9. Explore the prospect of expediting permanent annual public transit funding with the federal government, to support the TTC – the country’s largest public transit system.

In a city of this size, affordable and reliable transit is necessary to ensure that all communities can access the services and supports they need. However, the TTC is one of the lowest publicly funded transit systems in North America, meaning that the TTC relies heavily on rider fares to cover costs.¹⁰ Unfortunately, with ridership still not yet restored to pre-pandemic levels, and a funding model that is heavily reliant on user fees (fares), the funding gap will continue to grow unless investments by all orders of government are made, including the massive backlog of State of Good Repairs (SOGR) for the TTC. The City should advocate to the federal government to expedite the permanent annual public transit funding that they have promised¹¹ to take effect in 2024-2025 instead of 2026-27 as originally planned. As the TTC, the country’s largest public transit system, continues to face a shortfall of hundreds of millions of dollars; recouping these costs from riders will exacerbate the budgetary challenges already faced by low-income Torontonians and aggravate efforts to restore ridership to pre-pandemic levels.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input. For more information, please contact:

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¹ <https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/DB-WhosHungryReport-2023-Digital.pdf>

² <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110006601>

³ <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/accountability-operations-customer-service/long-term-vision-plans-and-strategies/poverty-reduction-strategy/food-security-in-toronto-poverty-reduction-strategy/>

⁴ <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.EC28.15>

⁵ <https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-of-toronto-expands-fair-pass-transit-discount-program-eligibility-to-make-transit-more-affordable-for-more-low-income-residents/>

⁶ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2023/06/landmark-canada-disability-benefit-legislation-receives-royal-assent.html>

⁷ <https://proof.utoronto.ca/food-insecurity/who-are-most-at-risk-of-household-food-insecurity/>

⁸ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/disabilities-benefits.html>

⁹ <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2023/mm/bgrd/backgroundfile-239867.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://torontofoundation.ca/vitalsigns2021/>

¹¹ <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/transit-transport/consultation-eng.html>