



September 9, 2024

**Deputation to the Board of Health, regarding Item HL16.2, Toronto Public Health
2025 Operating Budget Submission by North York Harvest Food Bank**

My name is Sarah Watson and I am the Director of Community Engagement at North York Harvest Food Bank.

NYH is the primary food bank for northern Toronto, our catchment stretches from Steeles in the north to Eglinton in the south, and from Highway 27 in the west to Victoria park in the east - nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ of the geography of the city.

We have been providing emergency food support to community members in these areas for nearly 30 years, but never have we seen the level of demand that we, and our partners, have been faced with over the last several years.

In July of 2019 we saw roughly 13,000 visits to our programs. This past July we saw nearly 30,000.

And of that 30,000 - 27% of those were children and youth - more than 1 in 4.

18% were 12 or younger.

We also see every day that poverty and food insecurity does not impact all people equally.

Racialized communities, in particular Black, Latin American, Middle Eastern and Indigenous community members, and their children, are all vastly over-represented in our programs.

And Newcomers to Canada, those who have come here with the promise of opportunity for themselves and their children, we also see at vastly disproportionate rates.

Last year, as part of the Annual Who's Hungry survey that we conduct each year in partnership with our colleagues at Daily Bread food bank, 16% of parents said their child had gone hungry at least once a week or more in the last 3 months, up from 12% the year before.

And we know that comes as a last resort to families, who will do everything in their power, including skipping meals themselves, so their children can eat.

No child anywhere - but especially in a country as resourced and wealthy as Canada, should ever go hungry. The impacts of food insecurity and hunger on children are far-reaching and have a profound impact on their health and well being, but also on their ability to learn. A child who goes to school hungry, cannot be expected to learn or to focus.



It is our understanding that last year there were 21 additional schools eligible for funding, but lack of budget meant they could not be added, and that many existing programs are struggling to provide adequate food to students with their current funding.

And all of this at a time when our city is facing a level of crisis - in terms of poverty and food insecurity that NYH has not witnessed in our 30 year history. We have never seen the level of demand for emergency food support that we are facing right now and quite frankly - it is unsustainable. Programs will and have collapsed under the pressure we are currently facing.

We cannot move forward like this as an organization or as a city.

North York Harvest strongly supports that the Board of Health reiterate its request that the Government of Canada expand the national School Food Program to provide funding for a universal student nutrition program and that the province of Ontario increase its investment to match that of the City of Toronto and to address the inflationary cost of food.

Food banks and the charitable sector alone cannot, and should not carry the weight of this crisis. All levels of government must work together to ensure that all of our children have access to the food and nutrition they need to grow, learn and reach their full potential.

A fully funded Universal free school nutrition program would go a long way to helping us reach that goal.