



## **Ontario Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee Submission**

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**Feed Ontario**

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## About Feed Ontario

Feed Ontario is a network of 1,200 direct and affiliate food banks and hunger-relief agencies across the province. In the last year alone, Ontario's food bank network served more than 537,000 low-income Ontarians who accessed our services over 3.2 million times. Over the course of the pandemic, the provincial food bank network saw a 26 percent increase in the number of first-time visitors (individuals and families who have never accessed a food bank before).

While food banks are working hard to meet the increasing demand for our services, this demand is starting to outpace the capacity and infrastructure of our network

Investments into key food insecurity and poverty reduction measures – including a strong and healthy workforce and adequate income earning opportunities - are essential to both reducing this escalating demand and supporting the province's COVID-19 recovery.

## Food Banks and Ontario's Workforce

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has significantly impacted Ontario's workforce and the ability for working Ontarians to secure the income needed to afford today's cost of living. However, what many might be surprised to learn is that, even prior to the pandemic, working Ontarians were already facing increased challenges in earning the income needed each month to afford even their most basic of necessities, like rent, hydro, transportation, and food.

As detailed in our [2019 Hunger Report](#), before the emergence of COVID-19, food bank use had already reached an unprecedented high, with more than half a million people accessing food banks over 3.2 million times in one year alone. In studying the key drivers of this trend, we found that despite the province's low unemployment rate, food banks saw a 44 percent increase in the number of adults with employment income accessing their services.

What this told us is that, even though these individuals were employed, they were still unable to earn enough income to afford all of their necessities and had no choice but to turn to food banks for assistance. In our surveying and research, we identified three key contributors to this trend: the rise in precarious employment, changes to Ontario's labour laws that benefited companies over working Ontarians, and insufficient support provided through worker assistance programs.

While the impact of COVID-19 has undeniably changed Ontario's workforce and employment landscape, it is our organization's hope that through the essential work of the Ontario Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee that we will not only strive to undo the damage done by the pandemic but also build an even stronger workforce in Ontario. One with increased opportunities that allow Ontarians to not just survive but actually thrive in their communities and contribute to the health and wellbeing of our province.

It is with this in mind that Feed Ontario would like to put forward the following recommendations as first steps the committee can take in strengthening our workforce:

## Recommendations for Building a Strong and Resilient Workforce

### 1. Increase the impact of the Low Income Families Tax (LIFT) credit by making it refundable

In the four years leading up to the pandemic, the proportion of employed adults accessing food banks grew by 44 percent. This was largely due to the rise in precarious work, which made it increasingly more difficult for hard working Ontarians to earn enough income for today's cost of living.

The LIFT credit, developed by the Government of Ontario in 2019, is designed to assist low-income households by providing up to \$850 in personal income tax relief annually. While this program is a strong first step in helping low-income workers, access to the benefit is limited as more than 1.5 million of the eligible 2.9 million Ontarians earn less than \$25,100 annually and are therefore unlikely to pay taxes.<sup>1</sup> This means that nearly half of the people that the credit is intended to assist are not able to access this support.

By making the LIFT credit or a portion of the LIFT credit a refundable tax credit, more low-income workers and households would be able to access this support, which would increase their financial stability and help to close the gap between earned income and expenses.

### 2. Work in partnership with MCCSS to improve support for those transitioning back into the workforce by increasing earning exemptions and eliminating clawbacks under Ontario's social assistance programs

Ontario's social assistance programs currently have high financial penalties (in the form of clawbacks) on earned income for people trying to reenter the workforce. This acts as a barrier to financial independence, as it makes it even more difficult for program recipients to establish sufficient financial resources that will enable them to move out of poverty, even once they reenter the workforce.

*As the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development and Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS) work together to develop wrap-around support and training opportunities to assist social assistance program recipients in reentering the workforce, Feed Ontario recommends strengthening these efforts by increasing earning exemptions under Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), as well as reducing or eliminating financial clawbacks on earned income.*

By allowing low-income workers to retain a greater portion of their earned income, you will eliminate the disincentives that clawbacks create as well as help to build a stronger financial foundation for individuals who are working to get back on their feet.

### 3. Connect people to quality employment by improving labour laws and worker support programs

A low unemployment rate is a good metric for assessing what percentage of the province's total labour force is unemployed; however, this metric does not speak to the quality of the jobs that people are

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<sup>1</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. (2020). Tax Expenditures: Oversight, Growth and Distribution. Toronto, ON: Financial Accountability Office of Ontario.

occupying. **As of 2019, Ontario had the highest proportion of minimum wage workers in Canada.** Of these workers:

- 48% are over 25 years of age
- 45% are working full-time
- 35% have a post-secondary diploma or degree

In order to build our province's resilience and strengthen Ontario's workforce, simply connecting people to jobs will not be enough. Workers need to have access to stable employment that provides a living wage, as well as paid sick days, and proper support through worker programs like WSIB. It is with this in mind that Feed Ontario recommends the following:

→ **Develop and protect labour laws that benefit people**

Ensuring that workers are supported and protected by strong labour laws is essential to job creation and connecting people to quality employment. This includes: paid sick days so that workers do not have to choose between going to work while sick (and running the risk of infecting others) or having enough income for necessities like rent, hydro, or food; increasing minimum wage to reflect today's cost of living and maintaining it alongside inflation; equal pay for equal work, including for part-time, temporary, or casual workers; the right to refuse last-minute requests to work; and at least three hours' pay for shifts that are cancelled without notice.

→ **Enhance worker support programs like WSIB**

Individuals that do not qualify for WSIB often end up on ODSP or Ontario Works. As the first line of support for injured workers, it is essential that this program is accessible to those who need it. Enhancements to this program should include universal coverage for all Ontario workers, increased transparency, and working in collaboration with the treating doctor.

#### **4. Invest in women by removing the barriers they face when entering the workforce and support low-income parents by making childcare more affordable**

According to Statistics Canada, women are bearing the brunt of job losses caused by COVID-19 as they represent the majority of the workers in the hardest hit sectors, including hospitality, retail, and food.<sup>2</sup> In working to build a resilient workforce, it is essential that women be provided with opportunities to obtain quality employment and to grow and thrive in their chosen professions. In support of this, Feed Ontario recommends the following:

→ **Remove the barriers women face when entering or reentering the workforce**

The province's economic recovery depends on women being able to enter or reenter the workforce. As such, it is essential that barriers women commonly face are addressed and that investments are made into their success. This includes: expanding workforce development programs for women, raising the wages and working conditions' floor for care workers, investing

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<sup>2</sup> Covid Further Clouded the Outlook for Canadian Women at Risk of Disruption - RBC Economics. RBC Thought Leadership. (2021).

in gender-based violence services, and investing in life stabilization supports and programs, like supportive housing, strong social assistance programs, and accessible and inexpensive transit options.

→ **Make childcare more affordable for Low-Income Families by retaining the current top-up to the Ontario Child Care Tax Credit and utilizing the federal government's childcare investments to build a high quality childcare system.**

In 2019, the average childcare cost in Ontario cities was over \$21,000 per child annually, the highest in the country.<sup>3</sup> This creates significant barriers for parents trying to reenter the workforce, as the cost of childcare often negates the net income earned. While the Ontario Child Care Tax Credit (also known as CARE) does provide relief for families, it primarily benefits middle-income families rather than low-income families. Feed Ontario recommends making the benefit's automatic top-up as outlined in the 2021 Ontario Budget a permanent provision moving forward, as well as utilizing the federal government's childcare investments to build an accessible, high-quality, licensed, public and nonprofit driven childcare system.

**5. Put people at the centre of your design by consulting with and including the perspectives of people with lived experience in the development of your strategy**

Ontarians living in poverty and who have experienced significant job loss due to the pandemic are the experts on the challenges that they have faced and the ones that will be most impacted by the policies and programs developed through this plan. Including the perspectives of people living in poverty and/or those with lived experience is essential to ensuring that the workforce recovery strategy meets the needs of those it is intended to assist.

In support of this objective Feed Ontario recommends ensuring that the voices of people with lived experience are at the table and that their insight is used to guide the decision-making process as the strategy is developed and rolled out across the province.

Feed Ontario would like to thank the Government of Ontario and the Ontario Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee for receiving these recommendations on behalf of the provincial food bank network. We believe that our vision of ending hunger and poverty is shared by all levels of government and that this problem can be solved by working together.

If you have any questions or require any further information on hunger and poverty in Ontario, please do not hesitate to contact us directly anytime.

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<sup>3</sup> *Finding Quality Childcare - A Guide for Parents*. Finding quality child care. (2020). Retrieved from <https://findingqualitychildcare.ca/ontario>.

## Appendix A

### 2019 Hunger Report Highlights and Trends

- **Food Bank Use Data**
  - 510,438 adults, children, and seniors accessed food banks across Ontario between April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018 – March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, an increase of 8,848 people over the previous year
  - Ontario's food banks were visited over 3,059,000 times throughout the year, an increase of 4.2 percent over the previous year.
  - Ontario's food banks have seen a 27 percent increase in the proportion of people with employment income accessing their services over the last three years
  - 71 percent of households that access food banks indicate social assistance programs or government benefits as their primary source of income
  - 53 percent of households served by food banks identified as single-person households
  - 87 percent of food bank visitors were rental or social housing tenants
  - 33 percent of food bank visitors were children under 18 years of age
- **Ontario's Changing Workforce**
  - 48 percent of minimum wage workers are 25 years or older, with 1 in 3 holding a post-secondary degree
  - Since 1998, there has been a 31 percent increase in the proportion of workers in temporary positions
  - In Oakville, a minimum wage worker would need to work 78 hours per week to afford the average rent of a one-bedroom apartment alone.
  - Changes to Ontario's Labour Laws have included the elimination of paid sick days, the option to pay reduced wages to part-time, temporary, and casual workers
  - Only 28 percent of unemployed Ontarians are receiving Employment Insurance, which provides only 55 percent of an individual's former pay
  - 46 percent of injured workers with permanent impairments end up living in poverty five years after their accident

To download the complete report, please visit: <https://feedontario.ca/research/hunger-report-2019>

## Appendix B

### 2020 Hunger Report Highlights and Trends

- **Food Bank Use Data (leading up to COVID-19)**
  - 537,575 adults, children, and seniors accessed food banks across Ontario between April 1<sup>st</sup> 2019 – March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, an increase of 5.3% over the previous year, and 7.8% over the last two years.

- Ontario's food banks were visited over 3,282,500 times throughout the year, an increase of 7.3% over the previous year, and 11.8% over the last two years.
- The primary drivers of food bank use are: Ontario's insufficient social assistance programs, precarious employment, and unaffordable housing
  - 65.7% of food bank visitors cite social assistance as their primary source of income
  - 44% increase in the number of people with employment accessing food banks in the last four years
  - 86% of food bank visitors are rental or social housing tenants who spend the majority of their monthly income on rent
- **Impact of COVID-19 on food bank use and vulnerable people**
  - In surveying close to 200 food bank visitors throughout September it was found that:
    - 1 out of 2 food bank visitors are worried about eviction or defaulting on their mortgage in the next two to six months
    - 93% of food bank visitors borrowed money from friends and family, accessed a payday loan, or used a credit card to help pay for monthly necessities
    - The top three expenses that caused a survey respondent to miss a meal were rent, utilities, and phone/internet

To download the complete report, please visit: <https://feedontario.ca/research/hunger-report-2020>

## Appendix C

The Feed Ontario network is inclusive of the below 133 direct member agencies who in turn serve over 1,100 affiliate hunger-relief organizations across the province. Please see below for a list of our direct membership:

|             |  |               |  |
|-------------|--|---------------|--|
| Acton       | Acton Foodshare                            | Meaford       | Meaford Food Bank and Outreach             |
| Ailsa Craig | Ailsa Craig & Area Foodbank & Thrift Store | Midland       | The Midland Salvation Army Food Bank       |
| Alliston    | The Good Shepherd Food Bank of Alliston    | Milton        | The Salvation Army/Khi Community Milton    |
| Aurora      | Aurora Food Pantry                         | Mindemoya     | Manitoulin Family Resources                |
| Bancroft    | North Hastings Community Cupboard          | Minden        | Minden Community food Centre               |
| Barrie      | Barrie Food Bank                           | Mississauga   | The Mississauga Food Bank                  |
| Barry's Bay | Madawaska Valley Food Bank                 | Mountain      | House of Lazarus Matilda Resource Centre I |
| Beamsville  | Community Care of West Niagara             | Napanee       | The Salvation Army Napanee                 |
| Beaverton   | Brock Community Food Bank                  | Newcastle     | Clarington East Food Bank                  |
| Belleville  | Gleaners Food Bank Quinte Inc.             | Newmarket     | Newmarket Food Pantry                      |
| Belleville  | Quinte Region Food Sharing Shelter         | Niagara Falls | Project SHARE                              |
| Blenheim    | The Salvation Army Chatham-Kent Ministries | North Bay     | North Bay Food Bank                        |
| Blind River | Blind River Emergency Food Bank            | Norwich       | The Salvation Army Norwich                 |
| Bobcaygeon  | Bobcaygeon Helps Food Bank                 | Oakville      | Kerr Street Mission                        |

|                |  |                 |   |
|----------------|--|-----------------|---|
| Bolton         | Caledon Community Services - The Exchange  | Orangeville     | Orangeville Food                        |
| Bracebridge    | The Salvation Army Bracebridge             | Orillia         | The Sharing Place Food Centre           |
| Bradford       | Helping Hand Food Bank - Bradford          | Oshawa          | Feed the Need in Durham                 |
| Brampton       | Knights Table                              | Owen Sound      | The Salvation Army Owen Sound           |
| Brantford      | Community Resource Service                 | Palmerston      | Palmerston Community Food Bank          |
| Brockville     | Brockville & Area Food Bank                | Paris           | The Salvation Army                      |
| Burk's Falls,  | Burk's Falls and District Food Bank        | Parry Sound     | Harvest Share Community Food Program    |
| Burlington     | Burlington Food Bank                       | Pembroke        | St. Joseph's Food Bank                  |
| Caledonia      | Caledonia & District Food Bank             | Perth           | The Table Community Food Centre         |
| Cambridge      | Cambridge Self Help Food Bank              | Peterborough    | Kawartha Food Share                     |
| Campbellford   | Campbellford Fare Share Food Bank          | Port Colborne   | Port Cares Reach Out Centre             |
| Carleton Place | Lanark County Food Bank-The Hunger Stop    | Port Elgin      | Saugeen Shores Community Food Bank      |
| Cayuga         | Cayuga Food Bank                           | Prescott        | Food For All Food Bank                  |
| Chatham        | Chatham Outreach for Hunger                | Renfrew         | Renfrew and District Food Bank.         |
| Cobalt         | Cobalt Coleman Latchford & Area Food Bank  | Richmond Hill   | Richmond Hill Community Food Bank       |
| Cobourg        | Northumberland County Food 4 All           | Ridgetown       | The Salvation Army Chatham-Kent         |
| Cobourg        | Northumberland Fare Share Food Bank        | Sarnia          | The Inn of the Good Shepherd            |
| Cochrane       | Cochrane Regional Food Bank                | Sault Ste Marie | The Salvation Army                      |
| Collingwood    | Collingwood Foodbank, Salvation Army       | Seeleys Bay     | ROLL Aid Centre                         |
| Concord        | The Food Bank of York Region               | Sharbot Lake    | North Frontenac Food Bank               |
| Cornwall       | The Agape Centre                           | Simcoe          | Simcoe Caring Cupboard                  |
| Drayton        | Drayton Food Bank                          | Smiths Falls    | Smiths Falls Community Food Bank        |
| Dunnville      | Salvation Army Community & Family Services | Smithville      | West Lincoln Community Care             |
| Eganville      | Eganville and District Community Food Bank | South River     | Good Happenings Food Bank               |
| Elliot Lake    | Elliot Lake Emergency Food Bank Inc.       | St. Catharines  | Community Care St. Catharines & Thorold |
| Erin           | East Wellington Community Services         | St. Marys       | The Salvation Army St. Marys Food Bank  |
| Fergus         | Centre Wellington Food Bank                | St. Thomas      | St. Thomas Elgin Food Bank              |
| Fonthill       | Pelham Cares Inc                           | Stoney Creek    | Hamilton Food Share                     |
| Fort Erie      | The Salvation Army Fort Erie               | Stratford       | Stratford House of Blessing             |
| Fort Frances   | The Salvation Army Family Services         | Strathroy       | Salvation Army - Strathroy              |
| Gananoque      | Gananoque Food Bank                        | Sudbury         | Banque d'aliments Sudbury Food Bank     |
| Georgetown     | Georgetown Bread Basket                    | Georgina        | Georgina Community Food Pantry          |
| Gloucester     | Ottawa Food Bank                           | Sydenham        | South Frontenac Community Services      |
| Goderich       | St. Vincent de Paul - Goderich             | Thunder Bay     | Regional Food Distribution Association  |
| Grimsby        | GBF Community Services                     | Tillsonburg     | Helping Hand Food Bank Tillsonburg      |
| Guelph         | Guelph Food Bank                           | Toronto         | Daily Bread Food Bank                   |
| Hagersville    | Hagersville Food Bank                      | Toronto         | North York Harvest Food Bank            |
| Hanover        | The Salvation Army Hanover Food Bank       | Trenton         | Trenton Care and Share Food Bank        |
| Hastings       | Hastings/Roseneath Ministerial Food Bank   | Uxbridge        | Uxbridge Loaves & Fishes Food Bank      |
| Hawkesbury     | Hawkesbury Central Food Bank               | Walkerton       | Walkerton & District Food Bank          |
| Huntsville     | The Salvation Army Huntsville              | Wallaceburg     | The Salvation Army Chatham-Kent         |
| Ingersoll      | The Salvation Army CFS & TS                | Warkworth       | 7 Hills Community Pantry                |
| Jarvis         | Jarvis Caring Cupboard                     | Wasaga Beach    | Wasaga Beach Ministerial Food Bank      |
| Kanata         | Kanata Food Cupboard                       | Waterdown       | FoodwithGrace Waterdown Foodbank        |
| Kingston       | Partners in Mission Food Bank              | Waterford       | Waterford & District Food Cupboard      |

|               |   |             |  |
|---------------|---|-------------|--|
| Kirkland lake | The Salvation Army Kirkland Lake Foodbank     | Welland     | The Hope Centre                        |
| Kitchener     | The Food Bank of Waterloo Region              | Warton      | Bruce Peninsula Community Food Bank    |
| Lanark        | Lanark Highlands Food Pantry and Thrift Store | Wilberforce | Central Food Network                   |
| Lindsay       | Kawartha Lakes Food Source                    | Winchester  | Community Food Share                   |
| Listowel      | The Salvation Army                            | Windsor     | Unemployed Help Centre of Windsor Inc. |
| London        | London Food Bank                              | Wingham     | North Huron Food share                 |
| L'Original    | Banque alimentaire L'Original Food Bank       | Woodstock   | The Salvation Army Woodstock           |
| Mattawa       | Mattawa and Area Food Bank                    |             |  |