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Health Providers Call on Premier and Finance Minister to Ensure Provincial Budget Recognizes Links between Poverty, Food Security and Health

“In 2003, many advocates breathed a sigh of relief at the return of the Liberal government which promised to reverse some of the most punitive policies of the Harris government. But as the last budget before the next provincial election is about to be presented, we see that the poor of Ontario have little reason to be relieved,” remarked Drew Kostyniuk, a street nurse at Toronto’s Street Health. “Only last week, the Health Council of Canada highlighted again the costs to the health system of failing to address the preventable causes of illness and chronic disease, including lack of access to good quality nutrition at home and in schools. We see the human costs on a daily basis.”

Added Dr. Sharon Gazeley, “Poverty is a serious social problem *and* a critical health issue. This government promised to end the clawback on the National Child Benefit for social assistance recipients, and to raise the rates to reflect the real cost of living in Ontario in 2007. Instead, the paltry rate increases we have seen in the McGuinty years mean that the average family on social assistance is forced to make do on less than they had in 1995, once inflation is taken into account. This is some \$200 less a month than the Toronto Board of Health recommended in fall 2006 as ‘basic adequacy’ for a family and nearly \$400 less a month than they calculated would be needed by a one-person household. This is one place where I think my taxes would be very well spent.”

Gazeley and Kostyniuk referred to the presentation of colleague Dr. Gary Bloch, who spoke on the group’s behalf at pre-budget consultations at the end of January, calling for an immediate 40 per cent increase in social assistance rates.

Health Providers Against Poverty, a group of local physicians, nurses, and dietitians, has joined forces with other community advocates to focus public attention on the growing gap between the government’s promises to provide a healthy level of social assistance and the dire poverty in which social assistance recipients are forced to live.