

## Written Submission to City Budget 2022

Founded in 1983, Daily Bread Food Bank is a member-based organization comprised of 118 member agencies who operate 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.

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We welcome the opportunity to provide recommendations to City Council as part of the 2022 budget consultation process and to provide these written comments. A summary of recommendations is provided below, followed by a detailed description.

We wish to express our sincere thanks to the Mayor, City Council, City staff, and the Emergency Operations Centre, for their unwavering commitment to food access throughout the pandemic. This support was instrumental in enabling us to meet community need during this difficult time and demonstrated what can be done when empathy and justice guide our actions.

We are pleased to see in this proposed Budget that service levels have been maintained and that there are new investments in poverty reduction initiatives. We encourage City Council to consider bolder investments to address growing inequities in our city aggravated through the pandemic.

Thank you for considering our submission. For more information, please contact:

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## Background and Context

### Food Insecurity and Poverty in Toronto

No one should go hungry or face barriers to accessing food. Yet, we saw 1.45 million visits to foodbanks last year—a 50% increase compared to the previous year. Torontonians are relying on this food access in record numbers. New clients now outnumber existing ones.

Our annual Who's Hungry report reveals that food bank have a median annual income of \$13,272. For food bank clients living in private market rentals (i.e., not subsidized housing), 80% were paying more than half their income on housing. After paying the high cost of rent/utilities, clients had a median of \$9.17 left per person in day to cover other costs, including food, transportation and medical needs.

Stagnant incomes and a high cost of living are driving food insecurity and food bank use in Toronto. Among our survey respondents, one in three reported not eating for an entire day, one in six said regularly.

### Impact of COVID-19

Living through nearly two years of the coronavirus pandemic has meant nearly two years of readjusting and reprioritizing our goals in response to the increasingly urgent need for food among populations hardest hit by recurrent waves of new variants and all-time-high case counts. Over the course of a year, we normally open one or two food programs. Over the past year, we have opened 22 new food programs.

Food bank visits continue to climb dramatically due to the economic fallout from COVID. Daily Bread food banks are now serving close to 121,000 monthly, compared to approximately 65,000 per month prior to COVID.

We have also worked closely with the City of Toronto. The City's Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) was highly responsive in addressing food access challenges during the COVID crisis. Through the newly established Food Access Coordination and Support Table, we were able to cultivate new partnerships and access the supports we needed to feed those who come through our doors.

We are incredibly grateful for the leadership displayed by the City of Toronto, the EOC team, as well as divisions across the City, including Poverty Reduction Strategy and Toronto Food Strategy teams, Toronto Public Library, Toronto Office of Partnerships, Strategic Communications, Shelter Support and Housing Administration, Toronto Food Policy Council, and Fleet Services.

As the City of Toronto develops its 2022 budget, it is critical that poverty reduction be at the core of economic recovery efforts to prevent further crises. This is the time to invest in community.

## Recommendations

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### **Prioritize allocating resources to community-based, preventative and resiliency-based approaches**

*The pandemic demonstrated the importance of community-based responses to a strong, resilient, and equitable city. It is critical that we build on lessons learned during the pandemic by prioritizing affordable housing, poverty reduction, transit, childcare, and food security.*

#### **1. Invest in food access coordination and emergency planning by developing Emergency Preparedness Agreements with non-profit community partners and other orders of government.**

Food access emerged as one of the biggest issues facing the City during the pandemic. Prior to COVID, Daily Bread had been engaged in conversations with the City about an Emergency Preparedness Agreement to ensure Daily Bread had the appropriate resources to continue services in times of crises, such as extreme weather events. The pandemic has 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.

Daily Bread is willing and able to serve the city in times of crisis – in fact, that is what food banks do best. We have kept our doors open and food flowing throughout this pandemic. However, there are steps the City can take to help the network of food programs across the city ensure service continuity during future health crisis and extreme weather events. We ask that the City make 2022 the year to enter into emergency preparedness agreements with local, community-based agencies who are well positioned to assist with emergency food access in future crises. This includes material supports such as the continued provision of Personal Protective Equipment and wider operational supports such as electric generators. It requires a coordinated strategy, logistical support and space, and a plan ready for activation when emergencies arise.

## Address the risk factors which lead to food insecurity

### 2. **HOUSING: Continue to increase investments in tenant protection initiatives, including Toronto Rent Bank, EPIC program, Tenant Defense Fund and RentSafeTO.**

The growing housing affordability and evictions crisis should be one of the City's top priorities in 2022. In a survey conducted in May 2020, 38% of food bank clients were worried about facing eviction in the coming months. While the City's Rent Bank and EPIC program can provide some support to prevent evictions, the scale of these programs is insufficient to address the unprecedented risk of evictions facing the city.

We cannot risk more people losing their homes during this pandemic. The consequences of evictions will be faced by the City in increased homelessness and shelter use. Investing upstream in the City's eviction prevention programs is critical to building community resiliency.

Housing supports are one of the key ways to ensure people don't fall into crisis. Our research shows 80% of private-market tenants are in Core Housing Need, that is they spend more than half their income in housing.

Municipalities are on-the-ground, delivering on the promises made by other orders of government to address affordable housing. We encourage City Council to continue to work with the provincial and federal government to continue to provide significant investments for rapid housing and supportive and affordable housing initiatives.

### 3. **TRANSPORTATION: Fully implement the Fair Pass Discount Program expansion.**

Transit in our city is critical and costly. In our annual Who's Hungry survey, our research shows that after paying for housing, foodbank users have on average \$9.17 per day to pay for meals, medication, and other essentials. A two-way transit ride at current prices is something they cannot afford. One in two food bank clients reported skipping meals to afford public transit.

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. We are encouraged to see the City identify the Fair Pass program as a priority, yet now a *budget commitment and action* is required.

#### Two key points need to be advanced:

- the Fair Pass program should be available to social assistance recipients who receive the transportation allowance, and
- the phase 3 expansion to all low-income city residents, already behind schedule, must proceed without delay.

**4. DIGITAL ACCESS: Adopt ConnectTO recommendation which expands underserved residents' digital access.**

Recent Toronto-based research showed that one-third<sup>1</sup> of households are worried about their ability to pay for home internet. Through the pandemic, public institutions such as the Toronto school boards and the Public Library have stepped up to improve internet connectivity among students and library patrons. As more services move online during and post-COVID, access to digital services, supports will be critical. The City must use its heft and carry through on its commitments to ConnectTO, to advance its Digital Infrastructure Plan, with equity and inclusion set as its first goal and principle.

**5. INCOME SUPPORTS: Continue to advocate to improve social assistance, including reinstating emergency benefits, increasing rates, and advocating against clawbacks.**

Close to two thirds of food bank clients in Toronto rely on social assistance as their primary income source. With rates falling below the deep poverty line, social assistance recipients are simply unable to afford the cost of these basic necessities. This deep poverty forces strain on City and community services. The City has an important role to play in continuing to advocate that the province immediately re-instate emergency benefits for social assistance recipients, permanently increase social assistance rates, and reduce clawbacks for recipients who receive federal COVID income supports.

### Holistic approach to building back

**6. Take a whole-systems approach to policy and program delivery: Accelerate existing strategies that deal with the most pressing needs facing Toronto residents, including the Poverty Reduction Strategy, HousingTO Action Plan, Licensed Childcare Growth Strategy, and Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism.**

2020 and 2021 have forced us to confront the deep schisms in our city and around us. Deep inequalities are embedded into city's neighbourhoods and institutions, resulting in the unequal opportunities for residents who already were facing systemic barriers accessing opportunities, nutritious food, good jobs, and safe and adequate housing.

The City already has roadmaps in place to address the deep-rooted, systemic inequities being faced by residents in our City, but these strategies need to be enacted and

<sup>1</sup> Andrey, S, M.J. Masoodi, N. Makki, and S. Dorkenoo, *Mapping Toronto's Digital Divide*, Ryerson Leadership Lab and Brookfield Institute. January 2021. P. 21.

appropriately resourced. We recommend that the City increase funding and formally accelerate timelines of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, HousingTO Action Plan, Licensed Childcare Growth Strategy, and Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism. It is important that the City continue to invest in these coordinated strategies and system-wide initiatives to have a meaningful impact on the low-income and racialized residents we serve everyday. The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and food insecurity on communities illustrates the need to center equity in the City's work, including targeted initiatives to support Black and Indigenous food sovereignty and, more broadly, food justice.

To address hunger and food insecurity, we need a holistic address of the social determinants of health and prosperity. The development of new affordable and deeply affordable housing units, childcare subsidies and spaces, transit subsidies, and community services are the most important investments that City can make to promote a strong recovery and greater resilience to future crises.