

## Submission to City Budget 2021

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. Our mission is to collaborate with all to eliminate food insecurity and advocate for solutions to end poverty.

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.

We welcome the opportunity to provide recommendations to City Council as part of the 2021 budget consultation process. We are pleased to see 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. A summary of recommendations is provided below, followed by a detailed description.

### **Invest in food access coordination and emergency planning**

1. Continue to resource the Food Access Coordination and Support Table.
2. Develop Emergency Preparedness Agreements with community agencies to ensure food access during future crises.

### **Prioritize allocating resources to community-based approaches that promote resiliency**

3. Increase investments in eviction prevention initiatives including the Toronto Rent Bank, EPIC program, and Tenant Defense Fund.
4. Fully implement Phase 2 of the Fair Pass expansion and provide a concrete plan and timeline to complete Phase 3.
5. 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.
6. Continue to recognize and resource Toronto Public Library to enhance neighbourhood-based digital access and inclusion.

### **Advocate for the needs of Torontonians to all levels of government**

7. Continue to advocate for affordable housing funding, emergency rent relief, and the rapid expansion of the Canada-Ontario Housing benefit.
8. Continue to advocate to improve social assistance, including reinstating emergency benefits, increasing rates, and advocating against clawbacks.
9. Continue to advocate that the provincial government implement paid sick days.



## Background and Context

### Food Insecurity and Poverty in Toronto

There were close to 1 million food bank client visits in the Toronto region the year leading up to the pandemic—a 5% increase compared to the previous year.

Our annual *Who's Hungry* report reveals that food bank have a median monthly income of \$892, less than half the official poverty line for Toronto. For food bank clients living in private market rentals (i.e., not subsidized housing), 83% were paying more than half their income on housing. Despite the high cost of rent, 29% of survey respondents were living in inadequate housing requiring major repairs, 50% have pest programs, 19% lack proper food storage/appliances and 13% are in overcrowded conditions.

Stagnant incomes and a high cost of living are driving food insecurity and food bank use in Toronto. Among our survey respondents, 43% of adults went hungry at least once per week, and this was the case for 22% of children.

### Impact of COVID-19

When the COVID lockdown was declared in March, almost a third of food banks had to temporarily suspend service because they were in community centres mandated to close, were run by high-risk volunteers, or were in spaces too small for physical distancing.

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 keep our doors open. We are incredibly grateful for the leadership displayed by 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.

Food bank visits continue to climb dramatically due to the economic fallout from COVID. Daily Bread food banks are now serving close to 110,000 individuals monthly, compared to approximately 65,000 per month prior to COVID.

Phone surveys with food bank clients in Toronto conducted at the height of the first wave of COVID-19 revealed that stress/anxiety about having enough to eat tripled during the pandemic. Three quarters of survey respondents who had never accessed a food bank before reported that they began using food banks because of the pandemic. Close to 40% of respondents were worried about facing eviction in the coming months.

As the City of Toronto develops its 2021 budget, it is critical that poverty reduction be at the core of economic recovery efforts to prevent another long-term crisis. This is the time to invest in community.

## Recommendations

### **Invest in food access coordination and emergency planning**

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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.

#### **1. Continue to resource the Food Access Coordination and Support Table.**

The Food Access Coordination and Support Table served, and continues to serve, a critical function in ensuring food access throughout the city. Through the City's coordination role, the community stakeholders at the table, including Daily Bread Food Bank, Second Harvest, North York Harvest, FoodShare, Salvation Army, and Canadian Red Cross, have been able to share resources, collaboratively problem-solve, and identify issues to the City for speedy resolution. We ask that this table continue to be resourced, as it has proven to be effective at maintaining and expanding food access across the City. Given the close relationship between poverty and food insecurity, we further recommend that the Poverty Reduction Strategy Office continues to play an active role in advancing food security initiatives.

#### **2. Develop Emergency Preparedness Agreements with community agencies to protect food access.**

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 us ensure service continuity during future health crisis and extreme weather events. We ask that the City make 2021 the year to enter into emergency preparedness agreements with community-based agencies who are well positioned to assist with emergency food access in future crises.

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

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The City faces a daunting task in 2021 of continuing to meet heightened need for social services, while also setting the foundation for economic recovery from COVID. The pandemic demonstrated the effectiveness of community-based responses to rapidly and effectively respond to unique community needs. It is critical that we build on lessons learned during the pandemic by prioritizing affordable housing, poverty reduction, childcare, and community-led initiatives to build a stronger, more resilient and equitable city.



**3. Increase investments in eviction prevention initiatives including the Toronto Rent Bank, EPIC program, and Tenant Defense Fund.**

The growing evictions crisis should be one of the City's top priorities in 2021. In a survey conducted in May 2020, 38% of food bank clients were worried about facing eviction in the coming months. 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.

**4. Fully implement Phase 2 of the Fair Pass expansion and provide a concrete plan and timeline to complete Phase 3.**

Food bank use has increased by 60% in the inner suburbs over the past decade. 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 commit to completing the implementation of Phase 2 of the Fair Pass expansion this year, and urge the City to release a detailed plan and timeline for the roll-out of Phase 3 of the transit discount to benefit more low-income residents. It is important that Phase 3 planning is undertaken in 2021 so that it can be budgeted for in 2022.

**5. 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.**

The City already has roadmaps in place to address the deep-rooted, systemic inequities being faced in our City, but these strategies need to be 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 strategic, systemic initiatives that will have a meaningful impact on low-income residents. 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.

**6. Continue to recognize and resource Toronto Public Library to enhance neighbourhood-based digital access and inclusion.**

The Toronto Public Library has always played a strong role in supporting community resiliency, and this was clearly demonstrated during COVID where libraries stepped up to open temporary pop-up food banks and provide internet connectivity kits consisting of laptops and wifi access to enable low-income residents to continue to access digital services. As more services move online during and post-COVID, the role of the library in ensuring community digital access, supports, and inclusion will be critical.

## **Amplify and advocate for the needs of Torontonians to all levels of government**

Poverty reduction requires a coordinated effort between all levels of government. The City of Toronto has an important role to play in continuing to advocate for the needs for those living in Toronto. We recommend the City focus its advocacy on the following critical issues.

### **7. Continue to advocate for affordable housing funding, emergency rent relief, and the rapid expansion of the Canada-Ontario Housing benefit.**

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 were pleased to see the City call on the provincial government to reinstate the residential evictions ban and to expand the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit. We encourage City Council to continue this advocacy and to also recommend working with the provincial and federal government to introduce a short-term emergency rent benefit to help households who have accrued arrears and to continue to provide significant investments for rapid housing and supportive and affordable housing initiatives.

### **8. 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 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.

### **9. Continue to advocate that the provincial government implement paid sick days.**

Close to 60% of employed food bank clients work in industries with the highest rates of COVID cases, including sales, trades and transport, manufacturing and utilities. We commend the City for its strong advocacy on paid sick days. We encourage the City to continue to advocate for the rights of workers to the province both during COVID and after the pandemic has been controlled.

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

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