



Mr. Michael Parsa
Parliamentary Assistant to the **Minister of Finance**
c/o Budget Secretariat
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Re: 2022 Ontario Budget Consultations with Rural Ontario

Dear Honourable Michael Parsa,

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective from rural Ontario – Grey County and Bruce County.

The [Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force](#) is made up of over 52 organizations, research institutions, community voices and government partners. As an Action Table of the [Grey Bruce Community Safety and Well-Being Plan](#), we are focused on upstream interventions that address complex community health challenges, such as addictions and substance abuse, mental health, decent work, housing and homelessness.

- **We encourage the province to continue its support to the Community Safety and Well-Being Plan** process and to go beyond planning to provide sufficient funds to carry out the plans.

People in rural communities of Grey County and Bruce County simply do not have enough income to ensure they can find a place to call home. A safe and affordable home is the first step in stabilizing lives and builds the foundation for people to access employment and education opportunities. We need a housing strategy which reflects our rural reality.

- **We encourage the province to create a full spectrum of rural housing options** that are safe and affordable for all - newcomers, seniors, Indigenous people and young families.

In Grey County and Bruce County, hospitals are discharging people into homelessness, long wait lists exist for case management and treatment for people with mental health and substance use disorders; and the number of deaths are rising in our rural towns and villages of people due to an opioid crisis.

We are grateful to the province for the work started with the Coordinated Access Services/By Name List. However, we need to ensure people are housed permanently before we can start to address the complex needs of people experiencing trauma, mental health issues and substance use disorders.

- **We encourage the province to increase its investment in transitional and supportive housing.** And to ensure culturally appropriate long-term housing solutions exist for Indigenous communities.

Grey Bruce Public Health reports there were 25 confirmed opioid-related deaths in Grey Bruce in 2020, 33 in 2021 and 5 deaths already in the month of January 2022. This is more than a 50% increase from 2019 (12 deaths). Our partners on the frontline have seen an increase in the complexity of client cases with people entering the social services system experiencing homelessness, food insecurity and mental health and addictions.

- **We encourage the province to support a wide range of wraparound services and supports** including hiring mental health and addiction workers, providing harm reduction services, safe supplies, medication assistance, and crisis intervention and prevention services.

Inflation and lockdowns are driving more households to food banks and community meal programs. In Grey County and Bruce County we have seen a 300% increase in the number of community meals served under the pandemic. We track local household food insecurity at FoodBruceGrey.com and it is disturbing to see the rise of both household and community food insecurity.

While the public and private funding has been generous to purchase food for food banks and community meals, there is a critical need for support to charities to keep their doors open. As the pandemic continues, we have seen an increase of middle-class families accessing these services. The numbers of people served are being restricted by a lack of funding for the staff who procure, cook and distribute the food.

- **We encourage the province to support the non-profit/charitable sector** to ensure they can keep their doors open and staff the programs that are feeding and housing people in our communities.

Food insecurity is a symptom of income insecurity. It can be changed with policy decisions. For those who work in retail and other basic services their pandemic pay has not been seen in 2021 or 2022. Employment Insurance entry levels have returned to normal, and have not been lowered under the latest lockdown as was experienced in previous years.

- **We encourage the province to reduce precarious work conditions** by supporting a liveable wage, align wages to cost of living index and pandemic conditions, increase sick days to allow families to isolate with COVID and reduce employee turnover by allowing people to return to the workforce when healthy.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of quality child care services to support Ontario's pandemic recovery. An estimated 225 additional ECE workers are needed to support the demand in Grey County and Bruce County.

- **We encourage the province to support a comprehensive approach to address the acute shortage of licensed staff** in the child care sector.

Social assistance (OW and ODSP) rates are not enough income to afford shared room rentals in Grey County and Bruce County. The lack of rental availability exists not only for people with low income but increasingly for double income families looking to move to our communities. Competing in the same rental housing market makes it impossible for people on social assistance to find homes.

- **We encourage the province to ensure people can afford their housing and basic needs by increasing social assistance rates** and reducing claw backs to allow people to keep more money from jobs.
- **We encourage the province to add cell phone and telephone bills to the “utility” listings** for OW and ODSP shelter allowance.
- **We encourage the province to partner or provide WIFI** in social housing complexes, at no cost to residents to ensure access to social services, employment and education opportunities.

Grey County and Bruce County have a small collection of public transit options that reach a small portion of its region. While volunteer drive programs have provided affordable non-emergency medical and social transportation to seniors, many of these programs have closed under the pandemic.

Rural communities need innovative approaches to delivering and funding services, including bringing services to people rather than people going to services. This also includes rethinking how we maintain and fund transportation infrastructure, as well as services like long-term care and paramedicine

- **We encourage the province to invest in more rural innovations in programs such as the Grey Bruce Mobile Health Services Pilot** to serve homeless people in rural communities.
- **We encourage the province to invest in a regional rural public transportation system** that contributes to climate change reduction, connects workers to job & employment opportunities; and ensures seniors, persons with disabilities and people with low income can access healthcare services.

Yours Sincerely,

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