



## Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2026 Federal Budget

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# Building Healthy Rural Communities Through Poverty Reduction

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force urges the Government of Canada to take immediate action in Budget 2026 to address rising poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, and economic inequality in rural communities. Across Grey and Bruce Counties, local organizations are facing unprecedented demand for emergency food programs, housing supports, and financial assistance while families struggle to keep up with the rising cost of living.

Rural communities are increasingly being asked to compensate for gaps in public policy through charitable food programs and emergency supports. While these programs are vital, they cannot replace strong income security systems, affordable housing, accessible childcare, and equitable social supports.

Food insecurity, homelessness, and poverty are not caused by individual failure. They are the result of inadequate incomes, unaffordable housing, low wages, and insufficient public investment in social infrastructure. Budget 2026 presents an opportunity for the federal government to strengthen Canada's social safety net and ensure that all Canadians can meet their basic needs with dignity.

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force recommends the following federal priorities:

1. Reduce household food insecurity through stronger income supports and investments in equitable food systems.
2. Strengthen the Canada Groceries and Essentials Benefit.
3. Increase the Canada Disability Benefit to end disability poverty.
4. Simplify and expand eligibility for disability-related federal benefits.
5. Invest in affordable childcare and the early learning workforce.
6. Expand affordable and supportive housing in rural communities.
7. Improve transportation and employment opportunities for youth.

## Food Insecurity Is a Poverty Issue

Food insecurity in Grey Bruce continues to rise despite growing charitable food programs and community meal services. Local organizations are now operating at emergency levels year-round.

Between 2021 and 2023, 18.3% of households in Grey Bruce experienced food insecurity, an increase from 17.5% in 2020. At the same time, the cost of groceries has become unaffordable for many families. In 2024, a family of four required approximately \$1,250 per month for groceries alone.

The increasing reliance on food banks and meal programs reflects deeper structural issues:

- Low wages and precarious employment
- Rising housing and utility costs
- Inadequate social assistance rates
- Barriers to healthcare and disability supports
- Rural transportation challenges

Community organizations are carrying the burden of these systemic failures.

The Grey County Family Assist Market, launched in 2024, now supports more than 425 families every week, including approximately 600 children. Many of these families are employed but still unable to afford food and household essentials.

OSHaRE Community Food Centre served more meals in early 2026 than during the entirety of 2019. From 2013-2022 (10 years), OSHaRE served 457,057 meals; from 2023-2025 (3 years), served 686,546 meals. In March 2026 alone, the organization distributed approximately 34,000 meals — a 42% increase over March 2025. These programs depend heavily on volunteers, fundraising, transportation systems, infrastructure, and staff capacity.

Food charities cannot replace public policy.

The federal government must recognize food insecurity as a direct consequence of poverty and inadequate incomes. Canada must adopt a human rights-based approach to food policy grounded in the right to adequate food.

## Recommendations

- Establish national targets to reduce household food insecurity by 50%.
- Strengthen and permanently expand the Canada Groceries and Essentials Benefit.
- Support universal school food programs.
- Invest in local food systems and Indigenous food sovereignty.
- Increase federal income supports for low-income households.

## Income Security and Disability Poverty

Current income support systems are failing to keep pace with the cost of living.

In Grey Bruce, the 2025 living wage is \$24.60 per hour — one of the highest living wages in Ontario — while many local jobs continue to pay significantly less. Wage inequality also remains severe, with women earning substantially less than men on average.

Provincial social assistance rates are far below what is required for basic survival:

- Ontario Works: approximately \$733 per month for a single individual
- Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP): approximately \$1,408 per month

These amounts do not reflect the realities of housing, food, transportation, and healthcare costs in rural Ontario.

The federal government has demonstrated during the pandemic that direct cash transfers can significantly reduce poverty. Budget 2026 must build on those lessons by strengthening Canada's income security system.

Particular attention must be paid to disability poverty. Many individuals continue to face barriers accessing federal disability supports due to restrictive eligibility criteria and overly complex application processes.

The current Disability Tax Credit definition excludes many people living with disabilities, while lengthy and technical applications create unnecessary barriers for vulnerable Canadians.

## Recommendations

- Increase the Canada Disability Benefit to a level that lifts people out of poverty.
- Replace the restrictive Disability Tax Credit definition with a broader and more inclusive eligibility framework.
- Automatically qualify individuals already receiving provincial disability benefits.
- Replace current application systems with streamlined, plain-language forms.
- Ensure federal benefits can stack without clawbacks.
- Expand access to benefits for vulnerable families and low-income non-tax filers.

Federal action on income adequacy would reduce pressure on food banks, emergency shelters, healthcare systems, and municipalities.

## Affordable Childcare and Women's Economic Participation

Affordable childcare is essential economic infrastructure.

Canada's national childcare program has significantly improved affordability for many families while increasing workforce participation, particularly among women. However, the long-term success of the program is now at risk due to insufficient funding, workforce shortages, and limited childcare spaces in rural communities.

Ontario families were promised average childcare fees of \$10 per day by March 2026. That commitment has not been achieved, and many families continue to face uncertainty regarding future costs and access.

Without sustained federal investment, rural childcare systems will continue to struggle with:

- Long waitlists
- Insufficient childcare spaces
- Workforce shortages
- Low wages for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs)
- Limited infrastructure funding

When childcare is unavailable or unaffordable, parents — particularly mothers — are forced to reduce work hours or leave the workforce entirely, increasing financial insecurity for families and weakening local economies.

## Recommendations

- Continue and expand the Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund.
- Increase federal transfers to support affordable childcare expansion.
- Invest in rural childcare infrastructure and workforce recruitment.
- Improve wages and working conditions for RECEs.
- Ensure equitable access to affordable childcare across all communities.

Sustained investment in childcare improves affordability, strengthens workforce participation, and supports long-term economic growth.

## Housing and Homelessness in Rural Communities

Grey and Bruce Counties are experiencing increasing housing instability and homelessness driven by rising rents, low vacancy rates, insufficient incomes, and growing mental health and addictions pressures.

Encampments are now appearing in rural communities that historically did not experience visible homelessness. Existing homelessness systems were largely designed around urban models and do not adequately reflect rural realities.

Housing affordability cannot be solved through housing construction alone.

Canada must protect existing affordable housing stock, strengthen renter protections, expand supportive housing, and address the underlying income insecurity driving homelessness.

The federal government must ensure that publicly funded housing remains genuinely affordable and rooted in community-based housing models.

## Recommendations

- Update the National Housing Strategy with measurable affordability and homelessness reduction targets.
- Expand investment in social, cooperative, non-profit, and supportive housing.
- Double Canada's community housing stock by 2034.
- Protect existing affordable rental housing.
- Strengthen renter protections and address renovictions.
- Increase rural homelessness and outreach funding.
- Adopt a consistent, rights-based definition of affordable housing.
- Improve accessibility standards in federally funded housing.

Housing is a human right. Rural communities require dedicated strategies that reflect local realities and service limitations.

## Youth Employment and Rural Transportation

Young people in rural communities face significant barriers to employment and education due to limited transportation options.

Without reliable transportation, youth are unable to access:

- Employment opportunities
- Postsecondary education
- Apprenticeships and training
- Healthcare and social services

Transportation poverty contributes directly to youth unemployment, economic instability, and social isolation.

Climate change and rising fuel costs are also disproportionately impacting low-income rural residents who often have no alternative transportation options.

## Recommendations

- Expand federal support for rural transportation and active transportation infrastructure.
- Develop targeted youth employment initiatives for rural communities.
- Support affordable transportation access for low-income households.
- Invest in climate-resilient rural infrastructure.

## Conclusion

The growing pressures facing Grey Bruce are not isolated local issues. They reflect broader national trends in food insecurity, housing instability, disability poverty, and economic inequality.

Community organizations, volunteers, and charities are increasingly filling gaps left by inadequate public systems. While these organizations are essential partners, they cannot replace the responsibility of governments to ensure people can meet their basic needs.

Canada has the resources and policy tools to significantly reduce poverty and improve health and economic outcomes. What is needed now is sustained federal leadership and political will.

Budget 2026 must prioritize:

- Income adequacy
- Food security
- Affordable childcare
- Accessible disability supports
- Affordable housing
- Rural equity and infrastructure

Investing in poverty reduction is not only a social responsibility — it is sound economic policy that strengthens communities, improves public health, and reduces long-term public costs.

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force urges the federal government to take bold action to ensure that all Canadians, regardless of where they live, can access food, housing, childcare, transportation, and income security with dignity.