



# SUSTAIN

Alliance for healthy, just and sustainable food & farming  
Working across Indigenous Territories / Ontario

## Poverty Reduction, Workers' Rights and Housing

### Food Insecurity in Ontario:

- **Food insecurity** has been rising, with **22.9%**<sup>1</sup> of individuals reporting some level of food insecurity in 2023, the highest on record.
- Food insecurity results from **inadequate financial resources**, unemployment and precarious employment, lack of affordable housing, rising prices of food which limit access to food.
- Policies must address the root causes of food insecurity: **insufficient income, inadequate levels of social assistance, income instability, and a lack of access to assets, credit, or other resources to buffer against periods of financial hardship, high transportation costs, limited availability of viable transportation options, lack of affordable housing and food price inflation.**

### Workers' Rights and Housing

- **Exploitation of migrant workers**, including tied work permits and unsafe conditions lack of protections, inadequate pay, poor law enforcement, loss of healthcare, and inadequate compensation for injuries or other issues
- Ontario is experiencing a **housing affordability crisis**, rising homelessness, and high rents - all of which contribute to food insecurity
- **Zoning issues** cause urban sprawl to encroach on farmland

### Recommendations below include:

- Aligning social assistance and minimum wage rates to cost of living for each region
- Revising municipal zoning laws to facilitate affordable housing
- Protecting the economic rights and occupational safety for food production workers.
- Mitigating exploitation of migrant farmworkers through reforms in work permits, access to essential services, and enforcement of employer standards
- Increasing safe and affordable housing stock, supporting community housing developments, and strengthening rent control and affordability programs

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<sup>1</sup> PROOF. (2024, April 26). *New data on household food insecurity in 2023*. PROOF.  
<https://proof.utoronto.ca/2024/new-data-on-household-food-insecurity-in-2023/>

## **About this Document:**

Sustain is a province-wide, cross-sectoral alliance of organizations that work through collaborative action towards productive, equitable and sustainable food and farming systems that support the health and wellbeing of all people in Ontario/Indigenous Territories. These policy recommendations have been developed through a participatory process between September 9, 2024 and February 7, 2025 engaging 90+ organizations, as well as academics who contributed expertise, across Ontario/Indigenous Territories.

This is not a finished product. It is being shared based on the election being called.

The process to date has included:

- A survey of food and farming organizations about policy priorities
- A policy grey literature review
- Multiple meetings among organizations in Sustain-facilitated networks
- 2 rounds of review by Sustain network organizations
- Review by academics working in respective policy areas

Sustain is sharing out this work widely, educating voters for the Provincial Election 2025, knowing there is more work to do.

## **Next steps:**

Sustain will continue to gather expertise and solutions in the months to come, building increasing participation and consensus on priority recommendations.

Importantly, Sustain will facilitate network engagement across organizations to work with all MPPs who form the next provincial government, and staff, to implement these recommendations over the next four years. Sustain recognizes and looks forward to elevating the leadership and expertise of organizations to do this policy work from within the networks.

To join this network, please email Rosie at [networks@sustainontario.com](mailto:networks@sustainontario.com)

## Income-based Solutions to Food Insecurity

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### Key Issues:

- Food insecurity in Ontario results from inequalities like inadequate income and lack of economic security.
- High inflationary pressures on food, shelter, and utility costs continue to outpace wage increases.
- Cities across Ontario, like Kingston, Toronto, and Mississauga have declared states of emergency due to sharp increases in food insecurity.
- Charitable organizations responding to food insecurity are under-resourced, cannot meet the demand, and can not address the root causes of the issue.
- Policies addressing food insecurity must focus on improving income and economic security, especially for low-income workers, vulnerable populations, and those reliant on precarious or seasonal work.
- As incomes rise, rates of food insecurity decline.
- Critical need for policies that ensure wages and benefits keep pace with the rising cost of living.
- Current minimum wages, social assistance rates, and income support programs continue to place people far below the federally-established poverty line in every province and territory, including Ontario.
- Despite recent positive changes to ODSP, there is a disturbing lack of improvement to OW, and rates for both programs are deeply inadequate to meet basic needs
- Stigmatization of those relying on public assistance persists.
- To combat food insecurity, policies should focus on improving income levels, financial relief for low-income workers, and ensuring equitable access to essential resources.

### Policy Recommendations:

1. **Ensure** social assistance programs, **Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) provide enough support** for Ontarians to access a basic standard of living. See [Feed Ontario](#) policy recommendations
  - **Increase OW rates** to align with, at minimum, the Market Basket Measure (MBM) with special attention to the cost of living in Northern Ontario.
  - **Index OW rates to inflation.** OW rates have not changed since 2018, and the purchasing power of the benefit has eroded by 21% over the past 6 years of inflation.
  - **Increase earning exemptions for OW** recipients from \$200 to \$1000, in alignment with ODSP, with a plan to re-evaluate exemptions and other employment interactions for both programs to support social assistance recipients' increased participation in the the labour market.
  - **Ensure that ODSP recipients have enough income** to afford additional costs associated with **living with a disability, including special diets** that help to minimize chronic disease, hospitalization, and dependency on

the healthcare system (see [Disability without Poverty](#)). Recent ODSP rate increases and the benefit being indexed to inflation are welcome changes, however, the maximum amount is **well-below the official poverty line** and for people in some places, below the Deep Income Poverty threshold (see [Welfare in Ontario](#))

- o **Provide regional increases to ODSP**, particularly in high-cost areas like Northern Ontario, to ensure individuals with disabilities can afford basic needs.
  - o **Ensure that the Canada Disability Benefit is not clawed back** from provincial support programs, reserving the full benefit for recipients.
2. **Adjust minimum wage legislation to align with current cost of living**, including cost of food prices, ensuring low-income individuals have enough disposable income to afford food and other basic needs.
- o **Index minimum wage to inflation** with annual adjustments based on the **Consumer Price Index (CPI)**, with a proposed increase of CPI plus 1% annually, as seen in **Nova Scotia**.
  - o **Ensure that minimum wage calculations** represent **Living Wages** that account for regional price variations to ensure workers across Ontario have access to adequate income for basic needs (see [Ontario Living Wage](#)).
  - o **Increase enforcement of minimum wage compliance** to ensure all employers are adhering to the law and that no exemptions are allowed.
3. **Work with the federal government and other provincial governments to co-design, implement, and evaluate a Guaranteed Basic Income (GBI)** for working age Ontarians that is reliable, and adequate for meeting basic needs and complementary to other facets of the social safety net.
- o **Consider GBI models** proposed and studied by other provinces like PEI, which suggests a new program that integrates with social assistance to ensure responsive financial support throughout the year while reducing the need for existing emergency supports.
  - o **Ensure that GBI design** (i.e., amounts, thresholds, clawbacks, etc.) regularly adjusts to the cost of living – indexes to inflation. Account for varying living expenses across Ontario.
  - o **Provide eligibility to migrant farm workers, entrepreneurs, and workers with disabilities**, ensuring that basic income is accessible to all.
  - o **Pair the GBI with investments** in programs that **reduce barriers to employment**, including education, childcare, housing, public transit, job training, internship opportunities, mental and physical health, and pathways to citizenship.

4. **Re-evaluate existing tax rates and credits** for low-to-moderate income Ontarians to provide more adequate and reliable financial support and economic resilience.
  - o **Increase the benefit amount and income threshold of the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB)** and re-examine clawback rates to better support families with children. Currently, OCB provides up to \$1,680 per year with 8% clawback after family incomes over \$24,542.
  - o **Increase Ontario's Low Income Workers Tax Credit (LIFT)** to provide more support for low-income workers, considering family size and regional cost of living.
  - o **Make LIFT a refundable tax credit**, as seen in the Quebec Work Premium Tax Credit, to support labour participation and ensure that the lowest-income workers can still benefit from this credit.
  - o **Provide support to tax filing clinics and community outreach** to ensure people receive the tax credits to which they are entitled.

### Existing Examples:

- **Nova Scotia's [Minimum Wage Review](#)** adjusts the minimum wage based on the CPI plus 1%, ensuring that wages remain aligned with inflation and addressing the lag inherent to indexation.
- **PEI's [GBI Proposal](#)** integrates basic income with existing social assistance programs to offer more responsive support.
- **Quebec's [Work Premium Tax Credit](#)**, a refundable tax credit, provides significant benefits to low-income workers, allowing them to retain more of their earnings.

## Workers' Rights

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### Key Issues:

- Migrant farm workers in Ontario face **systemic exploitation**, with their work permits tied to a specific employer, preventing workers from changing employers if conditions are poor, creating a power imbalance, resulting in exploitative and unjust working conditions
- **Insufficient enforcement** of workers' rights exacerbates these issues.
- **Healthcare for foreign workers** is also tied to their work permit, meaning workers lose access to healthcare when their permit expires, and they are forced to pay out of pocket for medical services. Some migrant workers are also compelled to leave because of unsafe, poor working environments, and exploitative employers.
- **Injured workers**, or those exposed to harmful conditions, such as chemicals and extreme heat, often lack sufficient protection and compensation.
- Farm workers, including those in meatpacking plants, are **underpaid, overworked, and poorly protected** by existing labour laws.

- Workers face **housing vulnerabilities** with inadequate protections in rental markets, particularly for the “missing middle” of **cooperative and low-income housing** (often prohibited on farmland, but should be prioritized on non-ecologically sensitive lands).

## Policy Recommendations:

- **Mandate Paid Sick Days in the Ontario Employment Standards Act:**
  - **Implement a specified number of paid sick days** for all workers, including migrant farm workers, ensuring that they do not have to choose between their health and income. This will provide workers with necessary time off to recover from illness or communicable disease without fear of losing their livelihood.
- **Advocate to the federal government for Grant Landed Immigrant Status Upon Arrival:**
  - **Provide landed immigrant status to foreign workers immediately upon arrival**, eliminating the reliance on work permits tied to specific employers and providing workers with better access to healthcare and other rights.
- **End Tied Work Permits:**
  - **End the practice of tied work permits**, allowing migrant workers the freedom to change employers, ensuring they are not bound to exploitative conditions or employers.
- **Ensure Access to Essential Services for Foreign Workers:**
  - Implement policies that **ensure foreign workers have access to essential services**, including healthcare and legal protections, without dependency on their employers.
- **Proactive Enforcement of Worker Rights:**
  - **Strengthen enforcement mechanisms to protect temporary foreign workers from abuse.** This includes anti-reprisal protections, proactive inspections of recruitment agencies, and stricter penalties for employers who violate workers' rights. Fines should be issued for non-compliance, and the names of violators should be publicly disclosed, and prevented from hiring foreign workers in the future, or until issues have been remedied.
  - **Bill 79** and the [Migrant Workers Alliance](#) highlight the importance of holding large employers accountable, not just recruitment agencies.
- **Include Farm Workers Under the Employment Standards Act:**
  - **Remove exemptions** that currently exclude farm workers from minimum wage laws, overtime pay, hours of work, and weekly rest periods. Ensure

that all farm workers, both migrant and resident, are included under the **Ontario Employment Standards Act**.

- **Support the right to collective bargaining** for farm workers, helping them organize and advocate for fair wages and working conditions.
- **Protective Measures for Farm Workers During Heat and Chemical Exposure:**
  - **Add protective measures** to the **Occupational Health and Safety Act**, particularly during heat events and wildfire smoke, and future pandemics, to ensure workers are not exposed to hazardous conditions.
  - **During heat and humidity warnings, mandate paid breaks** in cool shaded areas (for example, 25 minutes every 2 hours), and provide **hazard pay** for workers during extreme conditions.
  - **Ensure migrant farm worker housing is included in heat stress regulations**, as advocated by the Migrant Workers Alliance.
  - **Implement stronger protections for workers exposed to harmful chemicals** in agriculture, ensuring employers are accountable for providing safety measures and appropriate protective equipment.
- **Address Technological Advances and Worker Protection:**
  - **Introduce safeguards** to protect **farm workers' jobs** from **technological advances**, such as automation and AI, threatening their livelihoods.
  - **Ensure that technological tools** do not contribute to **wage theft** or increase **surveillance** and control over workers.
- **Housing Solutions for Workers:**
  - **Reinstate rental controls to all rental properties**, including those used by farm workers, and prioritize the development of **cooperative, low-income housing** on non-agricultural, non-ecologically sensitive lands.

### Existing Examples:

- **Occupational Health and Safety Act (Ontario):** This act includes regulations for heat stress and chemical exposure, which can be expanded to provide additional protections for farm workers during extreme weather conditions and other hazardous scenarios.
- **Nova Scotia's Labour Standards:** Nova Scotia's model for minimum wage increases and protections for farm workers provides a blueprint for Ontario to adopt stronger worker protections in agriculture.
- **PEI's Basic Income Proposal:** PEI's proposal includes provisions for **farm workers** to be eligible for **basic income** programs, offering a model for supporting agricultural labourers and addressing food system inequities.

# Housing

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## Key Issues:

- Ontario faces a **critical shortage of affordable housing**, contributing to rising homelessness and increased housing instability.
- Recent revisions to the **Provincial Policy Statement** have allowed urban sprawl to encroach upon farmland, threatening agricultural land and exacerbating food insecurity.
- **Agricultural housing is currently not included under the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA)** or the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), leaving farm workers without the same protections as other renters.
- **High rents** for both residential and commercial spaces drive up food prices as businesses **struggle to afford operating costs**, which accordingly impacts workers' wages and the affordability of food.
- Lack of **affordable housing and food price inflation**, raises food insecurity levels.
- **Urban Indigenous populations** face barriers to gaining secure and affordable housing
- Landlords rarely face penalties for **illegally evicting tenants** or not upholding tenants rights to return to the rental at the same rental rate after renovations.

## Policy Recommendations:

- **Create an Indigenous-led Housing Strategy:**
  - **Develop an Indigenous-led housing strategy** focused on finding appropriate solutions for Indigenous people's housing needs **off-reserve**. While housing on reserves falls under federal jurisdiction, provincial efforts can support off-reserve housing solutions according to Indigenous peoples needs and priorities.
- **Increase Access to Affordable Housing:**
  - **Invest** in the **non-profit and co-op housing sectors** to expand the availability of affordable housing.
  - **Designate provincial lands for community housing development** that remain affordable over the long term, ensuring that affordable housing is available in perpetuity.
  - **Ensure housing development** is located in areas **easily accessible to food and essential services**, promoting sustainable urban planning. Do not develop housing on farmland or ecologically sensitive land, and prioritize higher-density developments.
- **Ensure Long-Term Affordability:**
  - **Guarantee that any new affordable housing** built with public resources remains affordable for the long term through mechanisms such as community land trusts or long-term affordability covenants.



- **Grant municipalities increased autonomy** to develop **Inclusionary Zoning bylaws** that suit their local needs, ensuring more affordable housing is built as part of larger development projects.
- **Limit exclusionary zoning** and legalize **multi-tenant housing** across Ontario, making it easier to create affordable living spaces in existing neighbourhoods.
- Enforce Ontario laws against **illegal evictions and renovations** ([Hamilton Bylaw on Tenant Rights](#))
- **Strengthen Rent Control Policies:**
  - **Reinstate and strengthen rent control policies**, ensuring they are robust and cover all rental units. **Rent control** should complement **basic income** policies by ensuring that increases in social assistance do not primarily go to landlords, which would undermine the effectiveness of poverty reduction programs.
  - **Address recent rule changes to rent control** (in 2018) to create stronger protections against excessive rent increases and ensure more equitable access to affordable housing.
- **Expand and Enhance the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB):**
  - Expand the **COHB**, a federal-provincial benefit that helps households with rental costs in the private market, to support **more Ontarians** needing assistance. The COHB helps fill the gap between a household's income and the average market rent in their area. This program should be expanded to support more low-income households, especially those on social assistance, and the provincial government should negotiate with the federal government to increase funding for Ontario's housing needs.
- **Include Agricultural Worker Housing Under RTA and OHSA:**
  - **Extend protections** under the **Residential Tenancy Act (RTA)** and **Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA)** to **agricultural worker housing**. Agricultural workers should be afforded the same protections as other renters and workers, ensuring decent living conditions and safety on the job.
  - **Introduce penalties or exclusions for employers who fail to comply** with housing standards, ensuring that those who exploit migrant workers and fail to meet housing standards are held accountable.
- **Support Co-Housing and Cooperative Farm Ownership Models:**
  - **Encourage co-housing** and **cooperative farm ownership models** to provide affordable housing and farming opportunities for workers and small-scale farmers.

- **Work with mortgage lenders** to create financing options allowing **multiple signatories** on farming deeds, helping new farmers access land.
- **Address Secondary Dwellings and Farm Worker Housing:**
  - **Revise municipal regulations** to make it easier for **secondary dwellings** to be built for farm workers on agricultural properties. Farm workers should be able to live in proximity to their place of work without facing restrictive zoning laws.

### Existing Examples:

- **Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB)**: The COHB program helps households with rental costs in the private housing market and could be expanded to assist more Ontarians struggling with housing affordability.
- **PEI's Housing Initiatives** – PEI has implemented policies to support affordable housing, including the **Indigenous-led housing strategies** and **community housing development** that can serve as a model for Ontario.

## Recommended or Consulted Sources

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*Policy Recommendations were identified through a participatory process with organizations and groups in Sustain's Network.*

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