

Strengthening public health nutrition practice: Findings from a situational assessment to inform system-wide capacity building in Ontario

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Introduction: Public Health Ontario (PHO), a provincial organization that provides scientific and technical guidance to the public health field, has identified healthy eating and food environments as a priority area. In Ontario, 35 public health units (PHUs) are tasked with implementing the Ontario Public Health Standards, which recommend promoting healthy eating behaviours using evidence-informed practices.

Objective: Conduct a situational assessment to understand the current state of public health nutrition (PHN) practice in Ontario and identify provincial-wide priorities for scientific and technical support from PHO.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive study was conducted with 21 semi-structured key informant interviews (n=51 participants) and three visits to PHUs (July-December 2018). Participants (PHN dietitians/practitioners, managers/directors, medical officers of health, researchers, and other stakeholders) were purposively recruited through snowball sampling. Notes from interviews and visits were analyzed concurrently with data generation using content analysis.

Results: Five themes were generated: (1) *Current PHN Practice* was defined as broad and complex, transitioning towards upstream interventions, collaborative, and coordinated through a voluntary provincial NGO (Ontario Dietitians in Public Health) within a decentralized provincial public health system. (2) *Data/Evidence* were reportedly not available, accessible, and/or applicable to PHN needs. (3) *Guidance* for PHN practice was present, absent, and sometimes contradictory depending on the topic (e.g. nutrition guidelines exist for school but not recreation). (4) *Resources/Capacity* for PHN varied across PHUs although were reportedly insufficient overall. (5) Participants perceived opportunities to improve the *Understanding of Nutrition Expertise in Public Health* by others (colleagues, PHU leadership, governments, NGOs).

Conclusion: PHN practitioners experience several challenges related to the complexity of PHN, limited data/evidence, mixed guidance, limited resources/capacity, and misperceptions.

Significance to the Field of Dietetics: Findings will inform useful province-wide scientific and technical support. With the field, PHO will prioritize needs for action to build capacity for public health dietitians to be leaders in promoting health.