

October, 2018

No one can survive without food.

That is why I was not surprised to learn that Inuit left the federal government's Indigenous Working Group on food security, nor was I surprised by the comments made by Shylah Elliott, a health policy analyst for Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), who called the working group "tokenism and optics" during an interview with CBC on October 19, 2018.

I happened to sit in on a working group in Kuujuaq, the capital of Nunavik, an Inuit land claim area located in northern Québec and can attest to the claim that Nutrition North Canada (NNC) officials had trouble grasping the issues being discussed by Inuit and other northern stakeholders. Whenever I have discussed the issue, the message that I have received loud and clear is that Inuit want food security, something enjoyed by the majority of southerners, and they want to be able to enjoy more of their traditional foods, known as country food.

I had the opportunity to discuss this topic earlier this year with Graeme Dargo, a partner of Dargo and Associates Consulting Firm, which reviewed the Food Mail Program that NNC would eventually replace. The review and report was tabled in August of 2008. Mr. Dargo found that although the Food Mail Program was necessary for access to affordable and nutritious foods, he believed the program had lost its focus and "vastly exceed[ed] the budget available" further predicting that "the current Program costs will continue to soar and with limited program performance results" (Dargo, 2008, p. 4). He had made several recommendations including that the eligibility criteria for communities and foods or goods be reevaluated, that management systems be put in place to provide retailers with compensation for the subsidies they would provide, that the base budget of \$27.6 million be revised, and that a market-based system be introduced and replaced with a new delivery model co-created in partnership with northern retailers.

Mr. Dargo discussed an interesting concept that he had originally proposed but that had not received much traction: what if the cost of basic food items such as milk, eggs, and so forth be subsidized in a way that ensured prices were consistent throughout all communities under the program? It would be a subsidy that enabled a liter of milk, for instance, to cost the same in Nain, Labrador and Grise Fiord, Nunavut, with prices comparable to those in southern Canada.

I find this particular concept very appealing.

I also hosted a roundtable in April of 2018 that brought together small, independent northern retailers to discuss their experiences with the NNC program. Additionally, I had conversations and received submissions from communities, local Hunter and Trappers Organizations, and NTI, the organization that represents Inuit beneficiaries of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement.

Many common themes emerged from these discussions and inspired me to table my own recommendations for change with the federal government. These recommendations were submitted to the Minister's office and I intend to continue to push for the change that those I have spoken with describe as the way forward.

Retailers have asked me to push for changes such as a set freight rate based on consultations with all retailers, unannounced inspections of retailers to ensure program compliance, the revision of guidelines to enable fresh meat from reputable butchers to be brought up, that more funding and support for consumer awareness be put in place and that capacity support and funding for smaller retailers be made available to counter the bureaucratic burden placed on them.

Meanwhile, Inuit that I have engaged with have identified a new approach that is primarily focused on recognizing the traditional and preferred diet of Inuit and Indigenous peoples in the North, and ensuring that all policies on health and nutrition are designed to support sustainable hunting and harvesting.

I have heard time and time again that Canada cannot dictate to the North what healthy and nutritious food is. Inuit need to be at the table to help develop the food baskets that make sense to them and no program imposed on the north, without this kind of input, will be successful at addressing food insecurity.

To read my full report with recommendations, please visit: www.dennispatterson.ca