

Appreciating the essentials



April 14, 2020 By Nate Smelle

In the past few weeks we have been hearing, reading and seeing expressions of gratitude for the workers who are putting their lives on the line to provide people with services that our provincial government has listed as "essential." On this list we find businesses that primarily sell food, beverages and "necessary" consumer products, such as supermarkets and grocery stores, convenience stores, discount and big box retailers, take-out restaurants, beer, wine and liquor stores. Looking further down the list we also find pharmacies, gas stations, hotels, motels, pet food stores, hardware stores, and yes, even though our office is closed to the public, newspapers. While looking through the list a report put out by the Hastings Prince Edward Poverty Roundtable last year came to mind, in which it was established that a living wage for a full-time worker in the counties was \$17.35 per hour. Thinking of the thankfulness being shared publicly for the service of the "essential" workers making sure that people are able to access the food, medicine, shelter, fuel, alcohol and information we need to survive, I wondered how many of these individuals are actually working full-time, and earning a living wage. Sadly, after searching online for the average salaries people are earning in some of these occupations, it appears that the majority of these "essential" workers are working part-time for less than a living wage. For example, on average, gas station attendants and grocery store cashiers in Canada earn approximately \$14 per hour, bringing home about \$27,000 a year. On average, retail workers are also bringing in less than a living wage in Hastings and Prince Edward counties, earning approximately \$15 an hour and \$29,000 a year. Although not mandatory, some employers are expressing their gratitude for the service of their "essential" workers by boosting their wages during the pandemic. Commonly known as "hazard pay," such an increase is meant to compensate workers for performing hazardous duties or work involving a risk to their own health and safety. Recognizing the contributions these individuals are making to our communities by putting themselves at risk during these uncertain and dangerous times; and, how that risk will continue to exist for a long time after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I question whether there will ever be a time again when we are free of such workplace hazards. As Premier Doug Ford said on April 2 during his daily media briefing on the situation with the pandemic "nothing is worth more than a life." If we truly value the lives and service these front line workers are providing, the gratitude we share with them as a society must go beyond mere words. Sure, words are nice, and at times can be very effective in conveying an important message, however, the best and most genuine way to show these individuals we appreciate their service is by fairly compensating them for the work they do.