

Cancelling Special Diet: WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS DECISION?

Cancelling Special Diet is a Cut to Welfare Rates

Last year, the Special Diet program invested more than \$200 million to give dietary support to people on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) who have special food needs due to their confirmed medical conditions.

But this year, the government intends to eliminate the program entirely.

This decision means that \$200 million will come out of the pockets of people on OW and ODSP. For single people with disabilities who get the maximum allowance, this will mean a cut in benefits of up to 20%.

And because of the way benefits are calculated, some people who get income from other sources (like federal disability benefits) may be cut off OW or ODSP entirely.

'Equality With a Vengeance'

The government was recently ordered by the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario to increase allowances for people with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and obesity – which are widely known to put people at risk for heart disease – and to add low blood protein to the list of conditions covered.

This is because the Tribunal found that the program was discriminating against people with these conditions. But instead of complying with this order, the government is ending the discrimination by eliminating the program entirely.

Eliminating the program does mean that everyone will be treated equally – because everyone will get nothing. This is equality, with a vengeance.

Support for Poor People – But Not Too Much

The government says it is cancelling the program because costs are too high. In 2006, the Special Diet program cost \$6 million. Now it costs \$200 million. They say costs have risen too much, too fast, making the program “unsustainable”.

What this means is that poor people shouldn't take advantage of the government programs that were created to meet their needs.

It is well known that people living on low incomes are much more likely to have serious health problems, because of the link between poverty and poor health.

And because they have a harder time working full-time, people with serious health problems are much more likely to need support from social assistance.

So it's no surprise that, after government itself began promoting the program in 2003, people began taking advantage of the support it offered.

But now that this support is “too costly”, government is ending the program.

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Incompetent Program Management

The government also defends its decision to cancel Special Diet by saying that the program is “not achieving the intended results”.

They point to the auditor general's December 2009 report, which insinuated that many people who receive support – and their doctors, nurses, and dieticians – are purposely abusing the program.

In any other government program, abuse is investigated and, if confirmed, dealt with directly. Entire programs are not cancelled because of claims of abuse.

The recent eHealth scandal is a case in point. In that instance, the government fired senior executives and fixed the way the funds were administered. It was so extreme that the Minister of Health was forced to resign.

But the government didn't cancel the eHealth program altogether. That's because there is still a need for the program.

It appears the government has another standard of fairness when it comes to programs that serve poor people.

Punitive Program Means No Other Source of Support

The incomes of people who get OW and ODSP are dangerously low. Too low to afford the nutritious food it takes to maintain good health – and far too low to properly treat health conditions.

The government knows this. Public health authorities know this. The people who struggle to survive on these programs know it best. But they have nowhere else to turn.

Current OW and ODSP rules make it illegal for people to get enough money from other sources to live a life of health and dignity. If you work at a job, half your income gets deducted from your benefits. If you get financial support from family or friends, that support is deducted. If you take out a loan, it's counted as income and it's deducted.

Rules like this condemn people on OW and ODSP to live in poverty, on incomes that have been demonstrated – in report after report – to lead to increased risk for chronic disease and serious health conditions.

Eliminating Special Diet means more people will end up in hospital, long-term care, or worse. All because the government won't pay for them to eat healthy food.

What Should Be Done?

- ▶ Government must maintain the \$200 million in direct financial support for people with special dietary needs, and increase support as need grows.
- ▶ Government must make sure that everyone on OW or ODSP who needs dietary support to maintain their health gets that support.
- ▶ Government must ensure equality in its programs by raising the standards for all.