

# Anti-poverty health group urges province to increase welfare rates in budget

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TORONTO (CP) - The province needs to address social assistance rates in the upcoming budget if it hopes to curb the harmful effects of poverty on the health of those living on welfare, anti-poverty advocates said Wednesday.

Health Providers Against Poverty, a group comprised of doctors and nurses, is urging Ontario to increase welfare rates by 40 per cent when it tables the budget March 22. "Our bottom line is that we are looking for the government to raise the rates to reflect the real cost of living in Ontario in 2007," Dr. Gary Bloch, a family physician and one of the founders of the group said.

"At the moment, the average family on social assistance is forced to live on less than they did in 1995, if you account for inflation."

With less money in hand, many have little choice but to neglect their health, Toronto Street Health nurse Drew Kostyniuk said as a special diet clinic commenced in an adjacent room..

"Every day I see clients on social assistance with diabetes and other chronic illnesses," he said.

"Many manage to pay the rent, but then they are forced to make poor food choices which have a significant impact on their health."

The diet clinics, which take place on an irregular basis and are run by members of Health Providers Against Poverty, are meant to assess whether those on social assistance are eligible for a special diet supplement.

People with specific illnesses or conditions like AIDS or cancer can receive an allowance of up to \$250 if a health professional confirms that they have the illness.

But for other minor conditions, the allowance may be just a few dollars a month or nothing at all.

Hibu Aden, 25, a single mother of three who came to the clinic for the first time, isn't sure how much she will get, even though two of her young children suffer from asthma and allergies.

"If you get \$600 a month in welfare for three kids, your rent and for food, it's not enough, especially if you have a sick child," said Aden, who came to Canada from Somalia 12 years ago.

"These days if you want to buy anything, you need money, but if you don't have the money, how can you buy healthy things for your kids?"

"We need more help, we want social assistance to increase to help single parents... how does the government expect us to survive on so little?"

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