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NDP calls Ont. government cruel for scrapping special diet allowance

By Keith Leslie (CP) – 19 hours ago

TORONTO — Ontario's Liberal government was branded "cruel and heartless" Thursday for scrapping a special diet allowance of up to \$250 a month for people living on social assistance.

About 135,000 people who rely on welfare or disability-support payments received the allowance after a doctor certifies they have a medical condition requiring a special diet.

However, the Liberal government recently announced it would scrap the program and replace it with something yet to be determined, after the auditor general suggested the system was being abused.

Connie Harrison, a Toronto mom who gets \$72 a month to buy fresh vegetables to help her diabetes and high blood pressure, said she is being forced to take drastic steps.

"I've cancelled my insurance policy that was going to pay for my burial and I will use that for veggies now," Harrison told a news conference.

"I guess the money I was going to use to bury me, well, I guess they can pay for it."

In question period, the New Democrats went on the attack.

"There are words to describe this government's actions: cruel and heartless and mean come to mind," said NDP critic Michael Prue.

"Back in 2007, when this premier was looking for votes, he said reducing poverty was his top priority, but three years later - without any consultation - his government is cutting a basic allowance that provides up to 30 per cent of the income for social-assistance recipients struggling with medical conditions."

The cost of the special allowance ballooned from \$6 million a year in 2002 to \$250 million last year, and could swell to \$750 million if something isn't done, Premier Dalton McGuinty said.

"We have a responsibility not only to those individuals who are in need of special nutritional support, we also have accountability to taxpayers to make sure this is run as efficiently and effectively as we can."

Harrison said the lack of information about the new program that will replace the special diet allowances is a huge concern, especially because people fear they will simply be cut off.

"We're all getting very, very nervous because this is our health," she said.

"They need to really think about this because it's people's lives on the line."

The auditor general raised concerns about abuses of the diet allowances after he found eight to 10 members of the same family had each been diagnosed with the same multiple medical conditions so each could get the maximum \$250 a month.

Some families were receiving up to \$30,000 a year in diet allowances.

Dr. Gary Bloch of Toronto doubts fraud is behind the increase in the number of people getting the allowance.

"What we're seeing is what's absolutely expected, which is that people who live in extreme poverty and have medical conditions ... have increasingly become aware of the existence of the supplement available to them."

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