

Change in special diet allowance under scrutiny

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Some social assistance recipients who get a special diet allowance will be cut off when the program is revamped, Community and Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur says.

There are 136,250 people — 97,219 on welfare and 39,031 on disability benefits — who get up to \$250 a month extra to buy food to meet special nutrition requirements.

NDP MPP Michael Prue on Thursday raised the concerns of several recipients who fear losing access to funds they say help keep them healthy.

Meilleur said the new program will be developed in consultation with medical experts and the Ministry of Health.

"There is a transition period — nobody will be cut off before the next program is in place," Meilleur told the Ontario Legislature. "Not everyone on the program now will be transferred to the new program because this new program is a nutritional supplement program."

Toronto mom Connie Harrison said the \$72-a-month she gets in special diet allowance allows her to purchase fresh vegetables that have brought her weight down by 60 pounds, keeping her out of a wheelchair.

"I was costing the system a fortune in home care and all kinds of doctors visits," Harrison said at a Queen's Park media conference. "I think it's incredible that just a few dollars worth of vegetables can accomplish these miracles."

Harrison, a breast cancer survivor with diabetes and high blood pressure, said people's lives are on the line.

Dr. Gary Bloch, who cares for a number of welfare recipients, said the government is insinuating that fraud is rampant in the program, but he's unaware of any cases.

"My patients really rely on these funds to keep themselves healthy, to afford even the basics of a nutritious diet," Bloch said. "I'm scared for what will happen. I know that I will have people coming into my office in tears over the loss of this money."

Provincial Auditor General Jim McCarter has flagged unusual patterns in the program, raising concerns that many people receiving the allowance are not entitled under the existing rules.

The program costs have risen to \$250 million in a few short years, threatening to reach \$750 million by 2015-16, the provincial government says.

Meanwhile, 10 Torontonians including Medical Officer of Health Dr. David McKeown plan to highlight the limits of social assistance rates by living on a typical food bank hamper for a week.

The "Do The Math" campaign will get under way Tuesday.

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