

March 22, 2010

**TO:** Hon. Madeleine Meilleur, Minister of Community and Social Services  
**CC:** Hon. Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario  
Hon. Deb Matthews, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care  
Hon. Dwight Duncan, Minister of Finance  
Members of the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council

**RE:** Maintaining the Special Diet Allowance

Dear Minister Meilleur,

We urge you to maintain the Special Diet Allowance. Despite its shortcomings, it is essential to the health of social assistance recipients in Ontario.

Income is the key determinant of health. Countless studies demonstrate that poor people have worse health. Part of this relationship is food insecurity, a devastating reality for Canadians living in poverty. People who are food insecure eat less fruits, vegetables and dairy products, have low fiber intake, and have increased consumption of energy-dense foods<sup>1,2</sup>. Being food insecure is a risk factor for diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular diseases<sup>3-7</sup>.

The main cause of food insecurity is poverty. More than 40% of low-income people experience food insecurity<sup>8</sup>. At particular risk are people living on social assistance who have been shown to be at the greatest risk of food insecurity<sup>8-10</sup>. Social assistance rates in Ontario are grossly inadequate to maintain food security. Costs of Nutritious Food Baskets, reported to your government, highlight the stark gap between welfare incomes and what a healthy diet costs. For example, in Toronto, the gap for a single person on Ontario Works is over \$400 per month<sup>11</sup>.

Despite your stated commitment to reduce poverty, you have taken little action to improve the incomes of adults on social assistance since you were elected in 2003. You have refused to implement the recommendations of the Special Diets Expert Review Committee, which you convened in 2006 and which reported in 2008. You issued a memo on December 18, 2009, encouraging administrators of Special Diet Allowance forms to question the decisions of health professionals. Following the recent report of the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal, you have been unclear about the future of the Allowance<sup>12</sup>.

Eliminating the Special Diet Allowance would be a major cut to social assistance, disproportionately impacting those with existing health conditions. Tens of thousands of poor Ontarians need the Special Diet Allowance to maintain their food security and their health.

***We, the below organizations, call on you to:***

1. Maintain the Special Diet Allowance and implement the recommendations of the Special Diets Expert Review Committee and the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal,
2. Commit to implementing the recommendations of the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council,
3. And raise social assistance rates to meet the basic requirements of healthy living.

**Sincerely,**

Andrew Pinto MD and Anne Egger RNEC on behalf of **Health Providers Against Poverty**

Jill Alston, on behalf of **Canadian Doctors for Medicare, University of Toronto**

Michaela Beder MD, on behalf of **Health for All**

Gary Bloch MD, on behalf of **Inner City Health Associates**

Dale Gunter MD, on behalf of **McMaster Family Practice, McMaster University**

Gordon Guyatt MD, on behalf of the **Medical Reform Group**

Rosanna Pellizzari MD and Michael Rachlis MD, on behalf of the **Ontario Physician Working Group on Poverty**

Jennifer Loo, on behalf of the **Public Health Interest Group, University of Toronto**

Sheila Braided, on behalf of **Regent Park Community Health Centre**

Doris Grinspun RN, on behalf of **Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO)**

Malika Sharma MD, on behalf of **Residents Without Borders**

Celia Fernandes, on behalf of the **Right to Healthcare Coalition**

Lori Regenstreif MD, on behalf of the **Shelter Health Network**

Bev Leaver MD, on behalf of **Stonegate Community Health Centre**

Ritika Goel MD, on behalf of **Students for Medicare**

Nick Saul and Jonah Schein, on behalf of **The Stop Community Food Centre**

Cathy Crowe RN, on behalf of **Toronto Disaster Relief Committee**

Mike Creek, on behalf of **Voices from the Street**

## **References**

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