

Poverty is a medical condition  
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According to the Toronto department of public health, a single mother with two school-aged children needs \$412.70 a month to feed her family properly.

She has to be a thrifty shopper. She has to prepare most meals from scratch. And she has to be able to get to a decent grocery store.

If she is living on social assistance, all of that is difficult. But there is a bigger problem. She has an income of \$1,184 a month. That includes \$582 for housing and \$602 for everything else.

The trouble is, there is no housing in Toronto for \$582 a month. The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,052 a month.

So she has \$132 a month left for food, clothing, toiletries, transportation, utilities and possibly heat.

For this mother and thousands like her the health department's "nutritious food basket" is a cruel joke.

A group of Toronto health-care professionals believes this constitutes a medical and moral crisis.

This week, while MPPs rushed through legislation awarding themselves a 25 per cent pay increase, a handful of doctors, nurses and dietitians held a "special diet clinic" at a community centre in the Davenport West neighbourhood. They filled out forms requesting supplementary nutritional assistance on behalf of about 100 welfare recipients. For most, this will mean an extra \$10 to \$50 a month.

Such clinics infuriate the provincial Liberals.

They sprang up 21 months ago, when the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) discovered a little-known provision of the welfare regulations allowing clients with health-related nutritional needs to apply for a special dietary allowance of \$250 a month.

The lobby group recruited about 30 local medical practitioners to register social assistance recipients for the benefit. Other anti-poverty groups followed its lead. The number of Ontarians receiving the allowance rose dramatically.

Last fall, Sandra Pupatello, who was then minister of community and social services, cracked down. Denouncing the "rogue advocates" behind the scheme, she tightened the rules, making it much harder to get nutritional assistance.

New forms were drawn up, requiring health professionals to specify a client's precise medical disorder. Provincial bureaucrats would then determine whether to top up his or her welfare cheque.

An individual with heart disease would typically get an extra \$10 a month. A person with diabetes would receive an additional \$42 a month. Someone with AIDS could be awarded the full \$250 supplement, provided his or her body weight was falling.

A mother with hungry kids wouldn't qualify for any discretionary help.

"If you don't have conditions that are on the form, it's impossible to get the supplement," said Gary Bloch, a family physician with St. Michael's Hospital who participated in Wednesday's diet clinic. "It's really restrictive."

Most welfare recipients do suffer from chronic conditions: high blood pressure, diabetes, anemia, osteoporosis, arthritis or some combination.

But their real problem is poverty. They can't afford healthy food. They live in substandard housing. They are easy prey for drug dealers and loan sharks.

Jonah Schein, the community worker who organized this week's diet clinic, admits that wresting a few extra dollars out of Queen's Park on a case-by-case basis isn't the answer. Neither are food banks, soup kitchens or Christmas hampers.

What welfare recipients need is enough money to buy life's necessities. As a step in that direction, Schein and his colleagues are calling for a permanent nutrition allowance, pegged to the cost of a healthy diet, as determined by each community's medical officer of health.

In Toronto, for example, the allowance for a man would be \$155 a month (adjusted for age and family circumstances). A woman would be entitled to \$120 (likewise adjusted). A pre-schooler would get \$70 and children and teens would be eligible for amounts ranging from \$100 to \$180.

The chances of Premier Dalton McGuinty implementing this proposal are slim to nil.

Since his government took office in 2003, the real incomes of welfare recipients have fallen. (Social assistance rates have gone up by 5 per cent; the cost of living has risen by 6 per cent.) Food bank use has increased by 7.2 per cent. Queen's Park continues to claw back 75 per cent of Ottawa's child benefit from welfare parents, despite McGuinty's pledge to end the practice.

The Liberals say they are doing as much as they can.

Strangely, they had no trouble finding the cash to offer every MPP a \$22,000 salary increase. That would buy a mountain of fresh vegetables, whole grain bread, meat, fish and fruit for Ontarians who can only dream of such luxuries.

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Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.