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Timeline: Ontario eliminates Special Diet Allowance for social assistance recipients

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March 2005 The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) informed social assistance recipients on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) that they may be eligible for the little known Special Diet Allowance – an additional payment of up to \$250 per month. Over 100 healthcare professionals and experts signed a letter saying that all OW and ODSP recipients should be entitled to the full \$250 per month supplement on a permanent and ongoing basis due to the inadequate welfare rates.

May 2005 The Toronto Daily Food Bank endorsed OCAP's Special Diet campaign, calling on physicians, surgeons, dieticians, midwives, and nurses across Ontario to support the campaign, pledging to sponsor signup clinics and making information packages available at all their food banks.

June 2005 Some welfare and ODSP offices tried to deny the Special Diet Allowance to individuals whose applications have been approved by a medical practitioner.

July 2005 The City of Toronto tried to force qualified applicants to re-apply for the Allowance on a new municipal form that could only be completed by doctors. Later in the month, the City backed down. By now, almost 10,000 low income people received the supplement.

August 2005 The City decided to create a bureaucratic nightmare for those applying for the supplement by forcing applicants to have two forms completed by a medical provider, both of which must be obtained from their own welfare offices with their names written in by welfare officials. The City also decided to embark on a review of all special diet cases.

September 2005 OCAP announced a Special Diet signup clinic on the front lawn at Queen's Park to be held on October 3rd. Over 1,000 people signed up for the clinic.

October 2005 OCAP announced that the McGuinty Liberals planned a major cut to the Special Diet Supplement.

November 2005 After the Liberals quietly cut the Special Diet Supplement, OCAP marched to the office of the Minister of Community and Social Services Sandra Pupatello. The Belleville-Intelligencer reported that Trenton-based doctor Sara Wiesenberg "is concerned the Ontario government is threatening the ability of local families to eat healthy, nutritious meals." The Medical Post reported that "doctors are divided over signing form that gives welfare recipients extra 'special diet' money."

As of November 18, "the Ministry amended Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works regulations with a new form which requires health providers to reveal specific health conditions, including such socially charged conditions as HIV, and send this information to social services." Dr. Gary Bloch of St. Michael's Hospital "filed a complaint with privacy commissioner Ann Cavoukian regarding the new application form for the Special Diet Supplement available to recipients of social assistance."

The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) endorsed the Special Diet campaign.

December 2005 A group of violence against women activists attending the provincial government's "Finding Common Ground: Working Together to Reduce Domestic Violence" called on Premier Dalton McGuinty to immediately reinstate the special diet allowance.

The Ontario AIDS Network opposed the Special Diet cuts.

December 2006 OCAP resumed Special Diet clinics after health care providers realized that the new form didn't prevent (just made it harder) poor people from obtaining the monthly supplement.

December 2007 The Toronto Sun reported that approximately 31,000 people received the Special Diet Allowance in August 2007 compared with 5,300 in 2002.

September 2008 The City of Toronto forced Special Diet applicants to sign a form that entitled OW to access their medical records, including psychiatric reports, sexual history, or any other private information that their doctor had on record.

OCAP reported that people called their office with Special Diet problems on a regular basis because they were refused the application forms, cut off without notice or only issued a portion of the allowance they were entitled to.

December 2009 OCAP occupied the municipal welfare office at Metro Hall, claiming that people entitled to receive the Special Diet Allowance are being denied the benefit.

March 2010 OCAP crashed a Liberal fundraising event, claiming that the Liberals are doing all they can to eliminate Special Diet access.

On Thursday, the Finance Minister announced that the Special Diet Allowance would be eliminated and replaced with a nutritional supplement program administered by the Ministry of Health. That evening, OCAP confronted the Finance Minister during a live interview on TVO's The Agenda.

On April 15, OCAP plans a rally and march to Queen's Park, demanding that social assistance rates be restored to 1995 levels (indexed for inflation) before they were cut 22 per cent by the Harris Conservatives.

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