

T.O.'s \$4.1M pork diet

Monthly cost of 'special diet allowance' balloons thanks to "fraudulent" same few doctors

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The Toronto welfare worker calls it the city's "dirty little secret."

In a recession when welfare rolls are soaring and the city's reserves are running dry, he doesn't understand why Toronto is still turning a blind eye to thousands of recipients abusing a loophole that gets their family members up to \$250 a month in a "special diet" allowance that most don't really need -- with many of their forms suspiciously signed off by the same few doctors.

"It's fraudulent," charges the caseworker, who refused to give his name for fear of reprisal from his bosses. "Everybody knows it's happening but nobody will do anything about it."

And it's costing us a bundle. Only seven years ago, the special diet subsidy cost \$2 million a year. According to Toronto's projected 2009 operating budget report, it's now costing an astounding \$4.1 million -- a month.

The special diet allowance was intended to help people on social assistance who need to buy certain foods because of their medical condition. It was a little known benefit until 2005 when it was publicized by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty. Arguing that welfare payments were too low, they said that every Ontario Works recipient should be eligible for the full \$250 diet fund as a top-up to their meagre monthly cheque.

With the help of sympathetic doctors and nurses signing their forms, the number of Torontonians receiving the controversial allowance jumped from 5,300 in 2002 to 31,000 in 2007.

Alarmed by the increase, the province -- which funds 80% of the cost -- stepped in and tried to tighten eligibility to specific medical conditions: Celia disease, HIV, cancer, liver failure and other chronic illnesses. But also included on the 41-item checklist is money for people who say they have chronic constipation or food allergies -- allowing more wiggle room, it seems, for sympathetic health providers who believe welfare recipients deserve more cash.

The city whistle-blower says he now sees entire families who come back with signed forms from a certain Chinatown doctor saying that each member suffers from the same long list of ailments. For a family of five, that can amount to an extra \$15,000 a year.

"Every single family member has the same allergy to wheat, milk and soya?" he asks in disbelief. "I see dozens and dozens of them from the same doctor. Why would people who live in the north part of the city go all the way down to Spadina?"

From speaking to his fellow caseworkers, he believes his experience is being replicated in the other 13 welfare offices in Toronto. The numbers certainly would seem to back him up.

According to the 2009 Toronto budget, "demand for the special diet supplement has continued to increase. The program is projecting the annual cost to increase by \$15 million to \$55 million."

It notes that last December alone, the special diet allowance cost \$4.1 million -- up \$1.2 million, or 41.4% more than the \$2.9 million it cost in December 2007.

Social services director Brenda Nesbitt insists she is not aware of any abuse of the diet subsidy among the 17,000 families currently receiving it. "It's not up to us to determine their medical condition," she explains. "It is up to the medical professional."

'VERY CAREFUL'

In his own practice, Dr. Gary Bloch, founder of Health Providers Against Poverty, says the new, stricter provincial checklist has actually disqualified many of his poor patients from the special food allowance they need, so he finds the city worker's charges surprising. "We're very careful to follow the regulations as it stands," he says.

But obviously not all of his colleagues are following suit.

Councillor Doug Holyday believes there should be a crackdown, especially if certain health providers seem to be approving an unnaturally high number of special dietary allowance forms. "The last thing we need is another abuse," he says. "We don't even have enough money to pay the anticipated increase of the welfare caseload. Heaven knows where we're going to get the money next year."

For the city whistle-blower, it's frustrating to go through diet subsidy form after diet subsidy form for medical conditions he finds suspect, all signed by the same few doctors.

The Chinatown physician he identified couldn't be reached for comment.

What especially enrages him is that working families are just scraping by, while some of those on welfare are using a loophole to scam the system.

"Everyone's doing it now," he says of his pile of special diet forms. "It's clearly a pattern we're seeing. All the caseworkers know it and it's driving them crazy. Somebody needs to do something."

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