



The Honourable Dalton McGuinty
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building
Queens Park
Toronto, ON
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Thursday, April 29, 2010

Dear Premier McGuinty,

We are writing to express our grave concern about the decision of your Government to cancel the Special Diet Allowance for Ontario residents who are in receipt of Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) benefits. This change targets the most vulnerable persons in our society including those without personal financial resources to acquire medically sanctioned special dietary needs.

The evidence is indisputable that poverty is a key social determinant of health. The high volume of use of this important program underscores the well-known and well-understood relationship between poverty and an increased vulnerability to severe and debilitating chronic disease. It is unacceptable that our most vulnerable citizens are being forced to give up a medically prescribed nutrition allowance designed to maintain their health.

The removal of this necessary component for the prevention of serious health conditions will inevitably result in the diversion of primary health care resources with added costs to the health care system. These are resources that could be better spent meeting the health needs of Ontarians as a whole.

The requirement of access for all Ontario residents to a proper diet needs to move beyond the creation of a special diet and nutritional supplement benefit. As a vital partner with your Government in Health Promotion, we call on the Province to implement healthy public policy which includes increasing OW and ODSP rates to a level which enables people to maintain a decent and healthy life. At a minimum, we are asking the Province to re-instate the Special Diet Program to enable health professionals to prescribe a medically-sound special diet to promote health, manage conditions and prevent disease.

In 2006, Somerset West Community Health Centre wrote a letter to the Ministry of Community and Social Services Minister, Ms. Sandra Pupatello, expressing our concern that there was no flexibility in the revised Special Diet Program. It was our position at that time that clinicians require the flexibility to adapt diets to the needs of individual patients. Clinicians on the front line are in the best position to know the needs of their individual patients. Our position on this issue remains unchanged.

We emphasized the fact that primary care providers had an obligation to encourage all patients to eat a healthy and balanced diet as is outlined in the Canada Food Guide. We stated that we could not fulfill this professional obligation to patients because OW and ODSP rates were inadequate and clinicians had to wait until a patient developed a new "diet qualifying diagnosis". This new "diet qualifying diagnosis" may have been fully preventable with earlier access to proper diet and nutrition.

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The Government's policy of underfunding the Ontario residents most in need of diet and nutritional subsidies undermines our Centre's health promotion work. It also substantially increases health care costs to taxpayers due to increased rates of chronic disease; increased visits to primary care providers and specialists; increased hospitalizations; increased use of medications; as well as increased loss of productive workers in our economy.

We believe that our health promotion work with OW and ODSP recipients has been further compromised by the limitations on access to proper nutrition created by the implementation of the Nutritional Supplement Program to replace the Special Diet Program.

We do support your decision to have this program administered by the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care as it acknowledges that good nutrition is a vital social determinant of health. However, we believe that it is short-sighted of the government to offer this new program only to residents with "severe medical conditions". This is a step backwards in health promotion.

The absence of a provision for a health professional to prescribe a fully funded, medically-sound special diet supplement program to promote health, manage health conditions and prevent the deterioration of health is of serious concern to our Centre. Of further concern is the fact that our health professionals will be in a position where we will be observing patients deteriorate until their conditions becomes sufficiently "severe" to access this new Nutritional Supplement Program. In this context, our health promotion efforts are undermined with a system that forces our health care providers to merely provide lip service when tangible needs are left wanting. Telling people what they should eat is hollow advice when they cannot afford to buy that food.

It is our position and recommendation that immediately reinstating the Special Diet Allowance is essential to health promotion in Ontario and to reducing future health care costs. It is also our position and recommendation that increasing OW and ODSP rates to levels that permit people to live a healthy life is an essential health policy action for the Province to take to achieve this government's goals established in the Poverty Reduction Strategy. The evidence is clear that poverty makes people sick and we ask your government to truly make poverty eradication a top priority.

Sincerely,

Nancy Douglas
Chairperson
Board of Directors
Somerset West Community Health Centre

CCs:

Tim Hudak, Leader, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC MPP (Niagara West--Glanbrook)
Andrea Horwath, Leader of the NDP, MPP (Hamilton Centre)
The Honourable Madeleine Meilleur, Minister, Ministry of Community and Social Services
The Honourable Deb Mathews, Minister, Ministry of Health LTC
Christine Elliott, Critic, Health and Long-Term Care, PC MPP (Whitby--Oshawa)
France Gélinas, Critic, Health and Long-Term Care, NDP MPP (Nickel Belt)
The Honourable Margaret Best, Minister, Ministry of Health Promotion
Yasir Naqvi, Member of Provincial Parliament, Ottawa Centre; President, Executive Council, The Ontario Liberal Party



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