

The Special Diet Allowance: Why The Program Is Changing

On November 30, 2010, the Ontario government announced they had decided to keep the Special Diet program instead of cancelling it. But, they said, they were going to make some changes to the program. This backgrounder explains why these changes are being made and gives some of the history behind this decision.

Why was the government going to cancel Special Diet?

On March 25, 2010, as part of its 2010 budget, the Ontario government announced that it would cancel the Special Diet Allowance Program and replace it with a new program.

The new program would be much smaller and only cover people with “severe” medical conditions. There was also a danger that it would not give people money but give coupons or nutritional supplements instead. This decision mostly happened for three reasons:

1. In February 2010, the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario said the Special Diet program was discriminating against people with certain medical conditions. They ordered the government to fix the problem.
2. In December 2009, the Auditor General said it seemed like the program wasn't being used properly by some people, and that government should make sure there is no fraud.
3. The budget for the Special Diet program had increased a lot – from \$6 million in 2006 to almost \$250 million last year. The government said this increase was “unsustainable”.

The government said ending Special Diet and starting a new program would solve these problems.

Groups and individuals told the government this was the wrong decision

The 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction, the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, and the ODSP Action Coalition worked hard to convince the government that it made more sense to keep Special Diet.

These groups pointed out that the government is just starting a Social Assistance Review, where all the parts of Ontario Works and ODSP are going to be looked at to see how they can work better. They said it didn't make sense to get rid of Special Diet before the review.

Other groups and individuals around Ontario held rallies and wrote letters to let the government know how much people depend on Special Diet.

On November 30, the government announced they would keep the Special Diet program. But they said they had to change the program to fix the problems raised by the Human Rights Tribunal and the Auditor General.

Why this was a victory

- People will continue to get money. This is very important. People will get money to buy what they need, instead of being given coupons or supplements.
- More people will get the new Special Diet program than if a brand new program had been created. Even though the list of medical conditions is changing, the new list is not limited only to "severe" conditions, like the new program would have been.
- People with certain kinds of conditions will get more money than they get now. (For more information on this, see our backgrounder on how to reapply – the link is below.)
- The changes will help end the perception that people on Special Diet are “cheaters”.
- The decision shows that, when advocates and people living in poverty get together to make good arguments against a decision, it’s possible to change the government’s mind.

For more information, check these websites:

ISAC’s backgrounder on how to reapply for the new Special Diet program:

- Look under “What’s New” at www.incomesecurity.org

Ministry of Community and Social Services website information about special diet changes:

- http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/programs/social/special_diet_change.aspx

PDF copy of the Special Diets Expert Review Committee report:

- http://www.accession.ca/documents/en/mcss/social/publications/special_diet_en.pdf

ISAC’s Social Assistance Review website:

- www.sareview.ca

ISAC will provide updates as more information is available.

Visit our website at www.incomesecurity.org.