

Sick, poor left out of food grant talks

Groups say province promised consultation on new program

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SOCIAL JUSTICE REPORTER

Health and social advocates say they are still waiting for promised government consultation on the design of a program to replace the special diet allowance that helps about 165,000 people on social assistance.

Many are worried the new, more restrictive program announced in last spring's budget has already been designed — without community input — and may be unveiled as early as next month.

Many of the province's most vulnerable are fearing the worst.

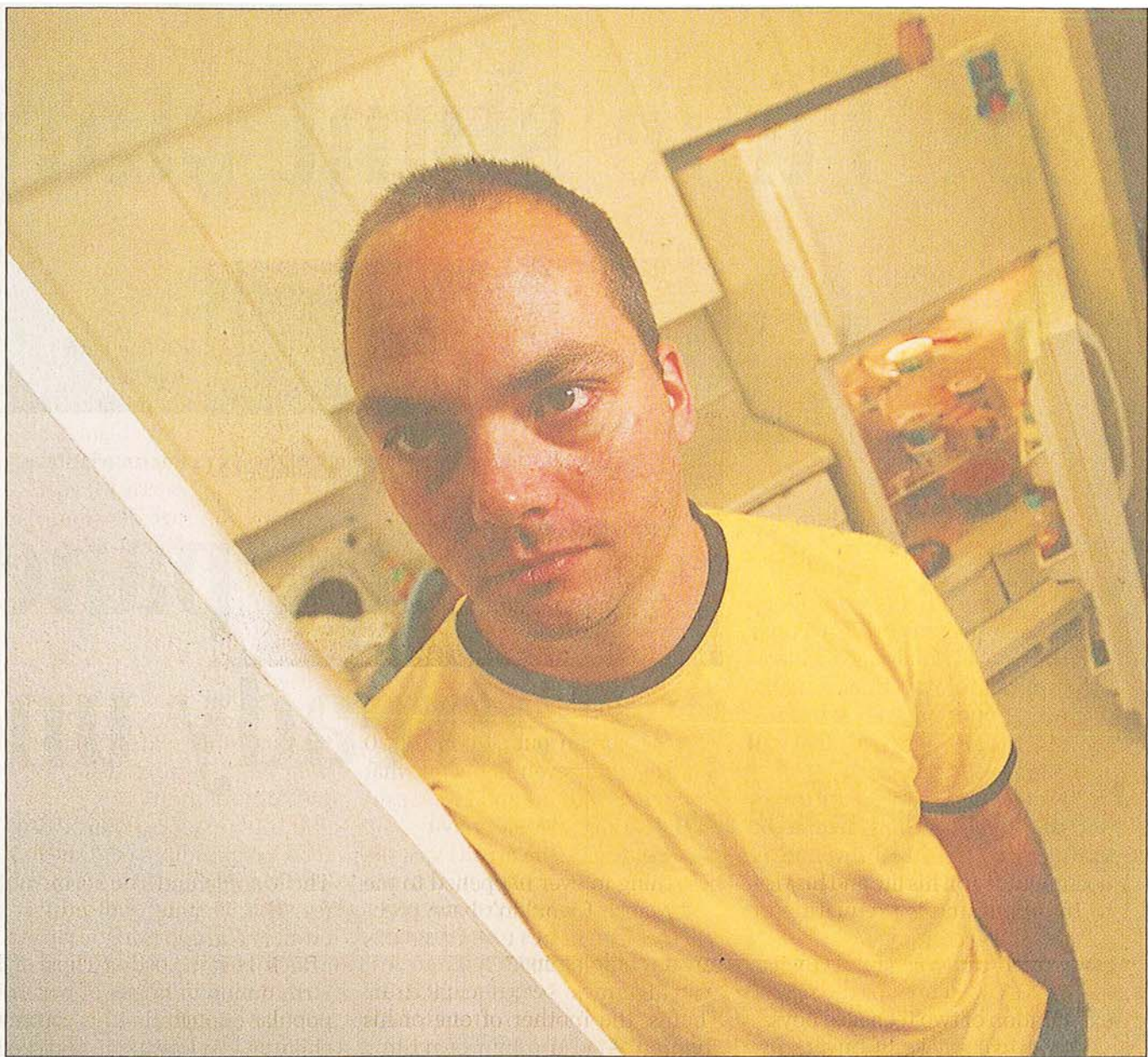
"No one has been consulted as far as we can tell," said Vani Jain of the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario, who is in contact with patient-support groups, nurse and physician associations and anti-poverty organizations.

"The lack of information or transparency around this is fuelling all sorts of rumours and causing a lot of anxiety among the people we represent.

"It's awful," she said.

SUPPLEMENT continued on A7

THE STAR'S VIEW: Don't slash funds for those who need them most, A10.



RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR

Medications severely limit the type of food Kevin Reid can eat and he fears losing his grocery supplement.

McGuinty, minister promised 'consultation' on food benefit

SUPPLEMENT from A1

About 80 per cent of the province's estimated 130,000 schizophrenics are too ill to hold full-time jobs and rely on the Ontario Disability Support Program, or welfare for the disabled, Jain said.

Many also suffer diabetes and high cholesterol due to the heavy medication needed to control their schizophrenia.

Until now, they and others on social assistance have been able to access a special diet allowance of up to \$250 a month to help pay extra food costs related to specific medical conditions.

Kevin Reid, 35, worked for 13 years as an information technology expert until complications due to Tourette syndrome, a blood clotting disorder and back trouble made it impossible for him to continue and forced him to rely on federal and provincial disability benefits of just \$922 a month.

Since his medication severely limits the type of food he can eat, he is

grateful for the \$129 a month he receives that helps him pay his higher grocery bills.

"My monthly budget for groceries is about \$160 to \$180," he says. "So losing that money would mean cutting a lot of corners."

Lack of information . . . is causing a lot of anxiety among the people we represent

VANI JAIN, SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

But the government says the program's annual costs, which have spiked from \$6 million to \$221 million since 2003, are unsustainable and could rise to as much as \$750 million within five years.

When the provincial auditor found evidence of abuse in his December report, the government said it was forced to act.

As a result, the March budget said the welfare-based allowance would be scrapped and replaced with a less-costly nutritional supplement program to be delivered through the health ministry. In response to community outrage, Premier Dalton McGuinty told the legislature the program would be developed "in consultation with our partners in the medical community."

Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur promised consultation would also include "partners in the poverty community."

Kevin Cooke, a spokesperson for Meilleur, said the government is still working on the program.

But the groups are still waiting. "We sent a letter to the minister (of health) in April outlining our concerns," said Michael Cloutier, president of the Canadian Diabetes Association. "But to date the association has had no formal response."

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Don't slash funds for the neediest

In March, the province announced that it intended to replace a food supplement program for eligible welfare recipients because it was “not sustainable” and “not achieving the intended results.” Now, Ontario's most needy are waiting to see what the new program will look like when it is introduced as early as next month.

But the government has yet to reach out with any formal consultations among advocacy groups — let alone with the poor who will be directly affected. That has fed fears that Queen's Park is not interested in producing a better program, just a cheaper one.

Such a move would hurt some of Ontario's most vulnerable — those who suffer the twin scourges of poverty and illness — without even succeeding in saving any money.

Ontario's special diet allowance currently provides \$10 to \$250 a month to some 165,000 welfare and disability support recipients, enabling them to buy specialized foods to better manage medical conditions, such as multiple sclerosis and diabetes. Restricting their access to those extra funds by tightening the rules will only make them poorer, and, consequently, sicker. All it does is transfer the costs, plus additional ones, from the welfare budget to the healthcare budget.

One heart attack from diabetes, for example, costs the healthcare system \$18,000, according to the Canadian Diabetes Association. One kidney failure requiring dialysis: \$63,000.

Surely the government recognizes it is better to improve someone's ability to manage their illness through proper diet than it is to sit back and wait for them to arrive in a hospital emergency room.

It is understandable that a government already running a substantial deficit would have concerns about a program whose costs have risen dramatically — from \$6 million to \$221 million since 2003.

But the underlying problem is not the design of the program itself nor the alleged fraud suggested by the provincial auditor last fall in a report the government seized on. It is need.

At \$585 a month for a single person, the current welfare rate is clearly inadequate to keep a roof overhead and buy food — let alone nutritious food. For it to do any good to anyone — including taxpayers — the new program must meet the needs of those it purports to serve: welfare and disability support recipients with medical conditions. It is difficult to see how that can be achieved without the two ministers involved — health and social services — talking to them.