

Bitter choice: Shelter or Food

Gary Bloch and Janet Maher

Toronto Star, October 3, 2005

Should poor families in Toronto be forced to choose between food and shelter? Of course not, but this is what Toronto Public Health concludes they must do given the state of Ontario's social safety net.

On Sept. 26, the Toronto Board of Health reviewed the 2005 Nutritious Food Basket, and concluded that a family of four in Toronto needs \$539.60 a month to meet these basic standards. This is an increase of 17 per cent since 1999. Low income Ontarians therefore face a dilemma — should they pay the landlord, or should they buy supper?

Accounting for inflation, assistance rates have dropped by about 30 per cent over the last 10 years. A single person on social assistance (who receives just over \$500 for all her needs) required an additional \$285 per month to purchase the Toronto food basket in 2004. Her shortfall will be even larger in 2005.

For parents, their children's poverty has been compounded by the provincial government's insistence on deducting the federal child benefit from welfare cheques. What these parents know viscerally is that their children's poverty unfairly places them at risk for preventable illness. The evidence backs them up — study after study has shown that poverty is one of the strongest predictors of ill health. As health-care providers, we see the brutal impact of poverty on our patients every day.

Many social assistance recipients in Toronto have resorted to using a little-known provision in the welfare regulations — the Special Diet Supplement — to help shrink the gap between their welfare cheque and their monthly bills. The way the Special Diet Supplement works is this: Health-care providers can authorize up to \$250 in additional funds per month if they feel a patient's medical condition requires a "special diet."

Now you might say that living on social assistance should not warrant a special diet. We would like to agree, but the poverty forced on social assistance recipients by low welfare rates places them at such high risk of ill health and inadequate nutrition that we believe every recipient qualifies for the Special Diet Supplement.

This is why we will be participating today in a "hunger clinic" organized by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, to take place in front of Queen's Park. At the clinic, hundreds of Ontarians who cannot meet their dietary needs will be

prescribed additional funds to combat their poverty.

Recognizing that the Special Diet provisions are not a long-term solution, we hope to persuade the provincial government to increase social assistance rates to a level where a simple nutritious diet is not considered a luxury.

There are other ways the provincial government can reduce the burden of poverty. It could be more aggressive in implementing the recommendations of Deb Matthews, parliamentary secretary to the Ontario minister of community and social services, to address the insecurities inherent in low-wage employment, echoed just a few weeks ago by a Toronto Dominion Bank report. The minister has agreed to reduce the clawback on earned income (the amount a recipient can keep from part-time work while still receiving some benefits) to 50 per cent from 75 to 100 per cent — a positive but tiny step.

If we want to be serious addressing the challenges Ontario families face in trying to adequately feed, dress and house their children, it is time to improve our social safety net.

Social assistance rates need to increase by at least one-third to reflect the prices in the grocery store. We must restore the intent of the national child benefit, to preserve children's health, and stop deducting it from welfare cheques. And a \$10-an-hour minimum wage would bring many poor families much closer to the poverty line.

It is not too late to avert the looming health crisis posed by the erosion of social assistance in our province. While raising rates and easing the process of re-entering the workforce may require increased governmental expenditure up front, we will save in health care and support costs for decades to come. In a country like ours, it is unacceptable that our neighbours must steal from their bread baskets to pay the rent.

Dr. Gary Bloch is a family physician at St. Michael's Hospital and ***Janet Maher*** is a community activist with the Medical Reform Group.