

For Immediate Release

March 6, 2008

Ontario Special Diet Allowance to be Reviewed for Human Rights Violations

(Toronto) – The human rights case against Ontario's Special Diet Allowance program has taken a decisive step forward, announced advocates and a complainant at a press conference at Queen's Park today.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission has found sufficient grounds to refer 77 cases alleging discrimination on the basis of disability to the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario. The Tribunal will now determine whether or not the provincial government's Special Diet regulation violates the Ontario Human Rights Code.

"We're one step closer to a declaration that the provincial government is violating the human rights of persons with disabilities," said Lesli Bisgould, member of the litigation team. "The government's regulatory changes restricted the Special Diet allowance to a rigid and arbitrary 'meat chart'. This has caused preventable suffering to people whose medical conditions necessitate extra dietary support."

In 2005, the Ontario government changed a long-standing program which gave Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW) recipients extra financial support for special diets prescribed by their health care professionals. The changes left hundreds of people with disabilities unable to afford the diets they relied on to maintain or improve their health. Numerous complaints were filed with the Ontario Human Rights Commission alleging the program changes are discriminatory.

"I could keep my health stable when I was getting the allowance," said Julie Sauvé, who has multiple sclerosis and receives ODSP benefits. "But since it was cut off, my health has gotten worse. I have trouble with balance and walking straight, my vision is affected, and I struggle to keep my weight up. And I have to fight my own government for the support my doctor says I need to be healthy."

Ms Sauvé no longer qualifies for the Special Diet allowance because the new regulation provides benefits for only 43 medical conditions, and multiple sclerosis is not on the list.

"These changes were hasty and ill thought out," said Nancy Vander Plaats, Chair of the ODSP Action Coalition. "A committee of medical experts was appointed in early 2006 to review the changes, but after 18 months we still haven't seen their report. And meanwhile, people are forced to go through the ordeal of making a human rights claim to get this essential benefit."

-30-

For more information:
Cindy Wilkey, ISAC
416-597-5820 ext. 5152

Backgrounder available
(Toll free in Ontario: 1-866-245-4072 ext. 5152)