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TORONTO -- An 11-cent increase in the daily food allowance for elderly residents of long-term care facilities falls woefully short of what's required from the Ontario government, advocates say.

The increase, which kicked in on Canada Day, brings the funding to \$5.57 per person per day, an amount that's supposed to cover the cost of buying three squares, plus snacks, a day.

"It is quite serious," said Leslie Whittington-Carter of Dietitians of Canada.

"The current funding is really inadequate in order to ensure adequate nutrition. There does need to be a major increase."

Those involved with seniors praise Premier Dalton McGuinty's government for being responsive to their concerns, noting the \$5.57 is now 33 cents more than the \$5.24 the government was paying when his Liberals took office in October 2003.

But all are adamant that it's not enough.

"It desperately needs increasing," said Pat Prentice, executive director of the Ontario Association of Residents Councils.

Part of the problem is that the current allowance fails to account for food waste, the need for texture modified foods, or the nutritional supplements many seniors require.

Critics also argue the amount ignores the requirements of ethnic diets among the province's 72,000 institutionalized seniors.

Comparisons with other provinces are difficult because, unlike Ontario, most do not break out the cost of meal ingredients.

In an extensive analysis last fall, the dietician group advocated raising the allowance to Ontario's 615 long-term care facilities to at least \$7 by this October.

That's the minimum needed to meet both the rigorous requirements of provincial rules that mandate, for example, offering residents two choices of meal and the complex nutritional needs of many seniors, the group said.

Such an increase would mean the difference between spending 10 cents for a breakfast serving of peanut butter versus six cents for jam; providing fresh broccoli for 28 cents instead of a marinated vegetable salad for 15 cents at lunch; or a banana for 29 cents rather than 26 cents for 125 millilitres of canned pear slices.

Health Minister George Smitherman was not immediately available to discuss the issue, a spokesman said.

Liberal Peter Fonseca, who's been lobbying internally on the issue, said Smitherman has assured him that a "significant increase" to the allowance is in the works.

"I don't know how much that would be," Fonseca said.

"(But) moving it to \$7 seems like the right thing to do and that's what I've gotten behind."

At the very least, says an organization which speaks for 185 of the long-term care facilities, the allowance should be raised immediately to \$6.07.

"A little bit more would make a huge difference," said Margaret Ringland, a director with the Ontario Association of Non-Profit Homes and Services for Seniors.

While it may seem astounding that anyone can eat well for that kind of money, residents of long-term care facilities tend to be frail and don't need as much, she said.

Still, feeding them properly, both from a nutritional and a taste perspective, gives a whole new twist to the concept of stretching a food dollar.

To cut costs, facilities buy in bulk and try to find creative cooks to produce palatable, healthy meals. Often that means a dearth of fresh fruit or vegetables, or real juice for example.

"That's how most of us survive," said Debra Cooper Burger, executive-director of St. Joseph's at Fleming in Peterborough. "It's definitely an ongoing problem."

Even so, many facilities spend more than the province gives them, meaning they cannibalize other important programs.

In some cases, they rely on further subsidies in the form of municipal or county handouts. That means taxpayers are paying provincial and property taxes and still coming up short when providing food for seniors.

Tired of the bellyaching from fed-up residents, relatives and friends have started a petition that has garnered more than 19,500 signatures from 428 communities across the province.

They are also stepping up lobbying efforts in the run-up to the provincial election in October.

"The issue of food is a very emotional one," said Angela Shaw, acting family council chairwoman for the Mississauga and Halton region.

"It's probably the most exposed issue as far as family members are concerned."

A sample of menu costs:

Lunch
175 ml beef noodle soup: \$0.22 Ham salad sandwich: 0.51 125 ml marinated vegetable salad: 0.15 125 ml pear slices: 0.26 125 ml 2 % milk: 0.17
200 ml tea/2 milkettes/1 sugar: 0.08
Total: \$1.39

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