To: Chair and Members
Social Services Committee

From: Joe-Anne Priel
General Manager
Community Services Department

Date: March 27, 2006

Re: Impact of Ontario Works 2005-06 Transition Directive relating to the Special Diet Allowance (SSC06008) (City Wide)

Council Direction:
This is for information only and outlines the impact of changes to the Ontario Works program as a result of regulation amendments for Special Diet Allowance.

Information:

On November 4, 2005, the Ministry of Community and Social Services made changes to regulations and directives under the Ontario Works Act concerning Special Diet Allowance for Ontario Works participants.

The intent of the special diets policy under the Ontario Works program is to provide additional funding to recipients who require a special diet as a result of a medical condition such as diabetes, cystic fibrosis or a kidney disease. Benefits may be issued up to $250 per month for each member of the family. Special Diet Allowance is issued in addition to the amount for basic needs and shelter.

A new Special Diet Schedule was issued that lists the qualifying medical conditions and the dollar amount for the associated diet. A new application form – Applications for Special Diet/Pregnancy Nutritional Allowance must be completed by an approved healthcare professional to confirm eligibility.

The new rules require approved healthcare professionals to confirm that a special diet is required for a medical condition, and to state the medical condition. The former rules only required an approved healthcare professional to indicate that a person required a special diet and to sign a statement setting out the special diet required.

As a result, approved healthcare professionals sometimes confirmed special diets for non-medical conditions.
Between November 2005 and November 2006, all Ontario Works participants who currently receive Special Diet Allowances will be provided with the new application form and will have 90 days to have their healthcare professional complete the form and return the completed form to the Ontario Works office.

Recipients who have a medical condition that is listed in the new Special Diet Schedule will receive an allowance according to the amount in the schedule. Recipients who were receiving an allowance for a non-medical condition will no longer be eligible for the allowance. No overpayments will be incurred as a result of the review.

Concerns have been raised by community poverty advocates, legal clinics, individual physicians and healthcare professionals that social assistance rates are not adequate and that all recipients should have access to the Special Diet Allowance whether or not they have a medical condition that requires specific foods. In fact, advocates including some healthcare professionals feel that poverty is a medical condition unto itself that warrants a Special Diet Allowance. The groups maintain that reduction in benefits for those who are no longer eligible for Special Diet Allowance will cause great hardship. Campaigns continue to take place throughout the province to protest the changes to the Special Diet regulations and directives.

Both in Hamilton and province-wide, expenditures related to Special Diet Allowance have increased since 2004. In Hamilton in 2004, $1,036,648 ($207,330 net) was issued for Special Diet Allowance. In 2005, costs increased by 64% to $1,607,621 ($321,524 net). The budgeted amount for 2006 is $1,100,000 ($220,000 net). It is expected that there will be a decrease in expenditures due to the aforementioned measures.

Joe-Anne Priel
General Manager
Community Services Department