

Hunger a top health issue, says top doc

Toronto's chief medical officer called on the Ontario government yesterday to "put food in the budget" to improve the lives — and life-expectancies — of the poor.

"This is an important public health issue," Dr. David McKeown said as about 150 people sipped soup at an anti-poverty rally outside the legislature.

Organized by the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC), the Monday - Thursday rallies target the province's budget, due March 26.

A \$100 monthly healthy food supplement for all needy adults is proposed by Ontario's medical health officers, McKeown said.

In annual surveys since 1999, he said, they found "a gap between the cost of eating food — basic, healthy food — and what people have at their disposal who are living with social assistance."

Those with the lowest incomes have much poorer health, smaller babies, higher disease rates, are more likely to end up in hospital "and they die younger," McKeown said.

"Those differences are unacceptable in our societies, which value equity in health," he said, warning with the recession deepening and job losses increasing, "more and more people are turning to social assistance as their prime source of income."

"That is why this is such a vital issue," McKeown said.

Grandmother and breast cancer survivor Cheryl Smith, who gets benefits from the Ontario Disabil-



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SERVING IT UP: Jade Dunlop of FoodShare doles out soup to people at Queen's Park yesterday as community agencies gathered to call for a \$100 healthy food supplement for all adults on social assistance.

ity Support Program, said the extra \$100 is "reasonable and necessary."

"To deny us again is a crime," said Smith, one of several anti-poverty speakers.

Tyler, who served soup as a

Foodshare volunteer, said social assistance helps him survive and stay honest.

"I had to live on scraps and had to do some under-the-table things to survive," he said.

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