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 Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

### Feds face deadline to restore refugees' health-care benefits

Justice calls cuts 'cruel and unusual'

By: **Carol Sanders**

Posted: 11/4/2014 1:00 AM | Comments: 14 | Last Modified: 11/4/2014 7:07 AM | [Updates](#)

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The Federal Court of Appeal decision Friday to uphold a ruling from earlier this summer demanding the Conservative government remedy its "cruel and unusual" cuts to refugee health care by today should be good news for people such as Marie Sifa.

"When I go to school, I can't see small letters," said Sifa, who needs eyeglasses. As a privately sponsored refugee who arrived in Canada since the federal government killed extended health benefits for certain classes of refugees, she isn't covered and can't afford them.

"It's difficult to read," said the 19-year-old refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo who arrived in December and is attending full-time classes at Gordon Bell High School. Advocates for refugees such as Sifa hope the federal





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Refugee Marie Sifa cannot get the glasses she needs due to the Harper government's cuts. (MIKE DEAL / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS) [Photo Store](#)

government will honour the court's decision and restore benefits to them under the Interim Federal Health Program.

Whether or not the federal government heeds the Nov. 4 deadline remains to be seen, say advocates for refugee health care.

"If they don't come up with anything, they're in contempt of court," said Winnipeg's Dr. Mike Dillon with Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care, one of the groups that challenged the 2012 cutbacks to the Interim Federal Health Program. He has been treating newcomers for more than 20 years and for more than two years has been rallying against the federal government's cuts to extended health-care benefits for privately sponsored refugees and refugee claimants.

*"If they don't come up with anything, they're in contempt of court"*  
-- Dr. Mike Dillon with Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care

In July, Federal Court Justice Anne Mactavish denounced the cuts as "cruel and unusual" treatment. Cuts to health benefits for some refugees violate a section of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Mactavish wrote in her decision.

"It puts their lives at risk and perpetuates the stereotypical view that they are cheats and queue-jumpers, that their refugee claims are 'bogus,' and that they have come to Canada to abuse the generosity of Canadians.

"It serves to perpetuate the historical disadvantage suffered by members of an admittedly vulnerable, poor and disadvantaged group."

She gave the federal government until Nov. 4 to "remedy the situation." The federal government appealed the decision and asked the court to postpone the Nov. 4 deadline. On Friday, the Federal Court of Appeal refused to postpone the deadline to remedy the situation.

A spokesman for Citizenship and Immigration Canada issued a statement on Monday saying it's disappointed and is appealing the court's decision, but wouldn't say what it plans to do about today's deadline.

"We will announce the details of our reaction to that decision shortly," the statement said.

Dillon isn't expecting they'll have a change of heart.

"It would appear they are digging their heels in again and will likely go down other avenues to further delay the implementation of changes ordered by the Federal Court," he said.

The cuts are holding people back from getting settled and contributing to the community, said Karin Gordon, executive director of settlement at Hospitality House Refugee Ministry. Without coverage for prescription drugs, eyeglasses and other extended benefits, privately sponsored refugees struggle.

"A young woman has parasites and can't be treated until we get the medical treatment," she said.

The Province of Manitoba's promise to provide benefits to refugees who the feds cut off takes months of wading through bureaucracy, she said.

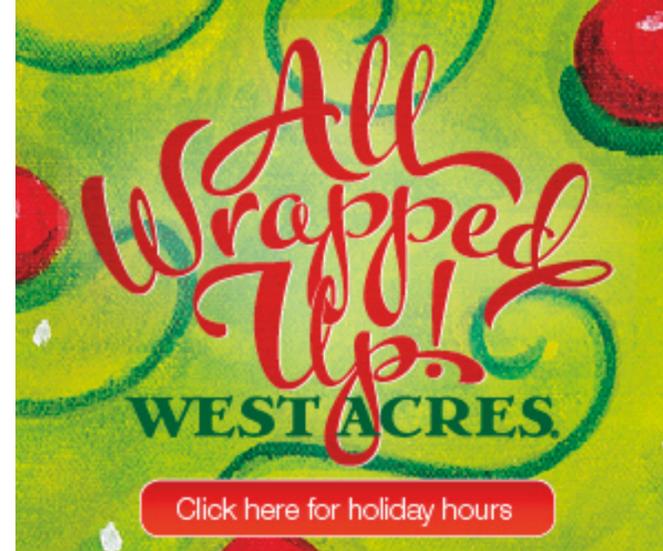
"It used to be so simple," said Gordon, who recalled taking refugees sponsored through Hospitality House to fill out an Interim Federal Health Program application. "Within a week, you were off to the races."

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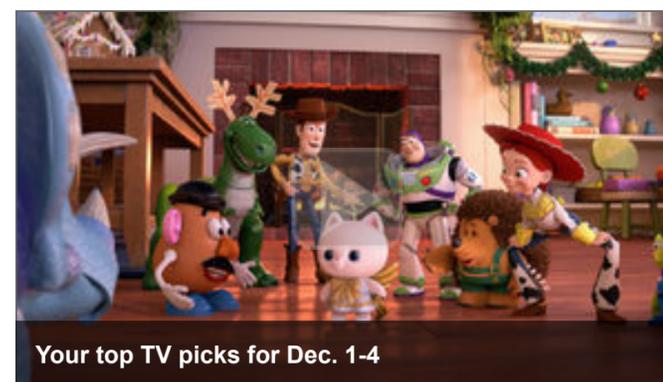
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## HISTORY

Updated on Tuesday, November 4, 2014 at 7:07 AM CST: Replaces photo



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