

# Linda

## **Tell us about yourself.**

“I work part-time as a Peer Counselor at CAMH (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health). I’m on ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program) but they take out half of my check because I work, and the other half goes to rent. I moved into my home in TCHC (Toronto Community Housing) in 1996—before that I was living on the street and in hospitals for over 30 years. Just having a roof over my head has helped me so much, given me so much courage, I feel like I can do anything now.”

## **How much do you spend/week on food?**

“I don’t go by the week. At the beginning of the month, I pay my rent, my hydro, my phone bill. After that, I maybe have \$100 leftover, and whatever is left I use for hygienic products and food. By the end of the month I have absolutely no money left, and I am living completely off the food bank. I’m one step behind on my bills all the time. I used to food stipend you gave me for this photo project to pay my late Hydro bill. *There’s never enough money to buy food.*”

## **Describe what it’s like to eat on your budget.**

“I eat potatoes—it’s all I can afford. In the morning I have fried potatoes with onions. For lunch I have boiled potato dumplings with flour and paprika—that gives it some flavor, and they fill you up. For dinner I have mashed potatoes—maybe I can put a can of pineapples or corn on that if I get one from the food bank.

I get full on the food I eat but it’s only starch. I can’t go to bed with my stomach growling, so I eat cookies from the food bank before I go to bed. *I’m diabetic and that makes my sugar go up, but it’s the only food I have, and it’s the worst thing in the world to go to sleep with your stomach growling.*

If I could bring my sugar down, the doctors said I might be able to reverse my diabetes, but if I don’t turn it around, they said it will kill me. They’ll pay for pills to get my sugar down, but they won’t give me any money for healthy food. It would be so nice just to have real food—all I want is lettuce and some vegetables.”



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### **Do you ever access food banks or drop in meal programs?**

“I started a food bank in my building four years ago. Every two weeks we get a delivery, and anyone from the building can come down and take whatever they need. But the food bank just gives junk, there’s never any healthy food, no vegetables. *There were three kinds of icing and cake mixes at the food bank today, but no milk or eggs to make a cake with. They give us syrups and vinegar, but never any food to put them on.*”

### **Where do you get your food? How often do you shop?**

“Every month I buy a bag of potatoes, some onions, a bag of flour. Almost everything else I have I get from the food bank downstairs. Occasionally I try to afford something in Chinatown.”

### **What do you think the government should do to address food security?**

“We don’t need more food banks—all they have is junk food. We need money to buy our own food. They’re paying a lot more money on our hospital bills because all of us are getting sick off of this diet. They haven’t raised our checks in years, even though the price of food and rent keep going up and up. *Food costs more now, but we don’t have any more money, so we just don’t eat.*”



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# Wayne

## **Tell us about your living situation.**

“I’m receiving ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program). I’m grateful for the support, but it also leaves me living below the poverty line. Eating healthy for the entire month is really challenging, if not impossible. In the last ten days, I’ve been scrambling around, because I’m out of food. *Food is the number one issue in my life. The money we get is glaringly not enough.*”

## **How much money do you spend on food?**

“Half of my money goes to food. For the first few weeks I’m spending about \$100, and then it runs out and I have to use food banks.”

## **Do you ever use food banks or drop in meal programs?**

“I qualify for one food bank in my catchment area [where you can get an emergency 3-day food supply once a month]. I’ve dropped into six other food banks, but they only let you go once if you’re not in their catchment area. And when you go to the food bank you’re already hungry, so you eat it all in 24 hours. *When my food runs out in the last week of the month, I have to come to the drop-in meals at The Stop every day for breakfast and lunch.*”

## **Describe what it’s like to eat on your budget.**

“It’s fine for two weeks at the beginning of the month. *And then when it runs out it’s scary. Fear. Desperation. Just scrambling around trying to find something to eat.*”

## **Where do you get your food? How often do you shop?**

“I go to No Frills and Price Choppers, looking for deals. I shop 2-3 times a month.”



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### **What factors influence what you food you eat?**

“I want to eat food I like, healthy food. *I exercise and try to maintain my good health, but at the end of the month it’s impossible.* The food I get at the food bank has no protein—just junk carbs. I gained 5 pounds this week, from all the crap I had to eat.”

### **What does food security mean to you.**

“Food security means not going hungry. *Food insecurity means: I’m hungry and I don’t have anything to eat. And I’m out of ideas of where to get it.*”

### **What do you think the government should do you address food security?**

“Increase the amount of money to people on social assistance. Or just increase the amount of food money. Food coupons for No Frills, or food vouchers, or something—anything. *They have to ensure that we have enough money for food.*”



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# Gary

## **Tell us about yourself.**

“I’m 28 years old. I just moved to Parkdale because it suits my income—I’m only working 30 hours a week, \$16 an hour, doing landscaping—seasonal work. I recently switched to a vegan diet for health reasons, so I’ve been cooking a lot more recently, trying to eat as organic and local as possible.”

## **How much money do you spend on food?**

“Between \$75 and \$100 a week. It varies, because some weeks I am stocking up on extra things in bulk.”

## **Describe what it’s like to eat on your budget?**

“It’s manageable and I feel well-nourished. It’s hard to go out to eat because I’m a vegan, and I tend to have the same things for lunches and breakfasts. But it’s good.

I thought that being a vegan would be a lot more expensive, but it actually isn’t. I definitely notice a difference price-wise from when I was getting ready-made crap from the grocery store—my bills have definitely gone up since then. But it’s worth it to me. I’m doing physical work all day, landscaping. I have to eat.”

## **Where do you get your food? How often do you shop?**

“I get organic produce from Karma Co-Op once a week. Other things where I’m not concerned about organic—oats, rice, beans, etc.—I get in bulk at No Frills. I look for organic, mostly local food, with whole ingredients. I read all of the ingredients and don’t buy something if I don’t understand the ingredients in it.”

## **What does food security/insecurity mean to you?**

“Knowing that we as a community will always have a safe supply of food if we are going into a food crisis. Having reserves of preserved food.”



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**Are you ever unable to afford the food you need? How often?**

“I’m a seasonal worker—I do landscaping. So that generally happens towards the end of the winter for the last month or so, when I’ve exhausted my savings but don’t want to use my credit cards. Sometimes I do have to use my credit card.”

**Have you ever used a food bank or drop in meal programs?**

“No.”

**What do you think the government should do to address food security?**

“Support community gardens and urban agriculture. There is so much unused land where people could be growing food.”



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# “Margaret”\*

(\*“Margaret” requested that we not use her photograph or name, to protect her privacy.)

## **Tell us about yourself:**

“I’m a musician, a singer-songwriter. I used to be a chef. I’m First Nations—Cree—and my mother is the daughter of residential school survivors.

I’m also on ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program). I can’t get work because of the stigma of mental illness. I have Crohn’s Disease, and I get a special diet allowance\*\* [in my Social Assistance check] because of that.”

## **How much money do you spend on food?**

“I look for special deals and I can usually do it for \$50 or \$60 a week, by making things stretch. I have to have a special, high-protein diet because of Crohn’s disease. I eat good quality food. Everybody needs that special diet allowance\*.”

## **Do you ever use food banks/drop in meal programs? How often?**

“I have friends—a really strong support network. I eat with them a couple of nights a week. If I’m hungry, I let people know and they support me. But I know that everybody doesn’t have that.”

## **Describe what it’s like to eat on your budget.**

“I’m able to eat pretty well—but the only reason is because of the special diet allowance. I’m moving to another apartment because I can’t afford my rent anymore.”

## **Where do you get your food? How often do you shop?**

“I shop every day usually. I look for sales. I shop at corner stores—because it’s fresher, cheaper, nicer, and I like to support small businesses in my neighborhood.”

## **What factors influence what you buy and/or eat?**



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“My bowels. I can’t eat junk. I eat vegetables, onions, meat, spelt bread. I have to eat this high-protein diet because of Crohn’s disease. I used to be a chef, so I know how to shop and I know how to cook and I can make it work.”

### **What does food security mean to you?**

“That I’m eating stuff that will help me maintain my health under stress. Being poor is stressful.

I know what it means not to be poor. I went to school, I practiced law, I had a good job, I owned my own house. I know what that’s like and living in poverty now is so much more stressful, so hard. People have to understand that.”

### **What do you think the government should do to address food security?**

“People on Social Assistance need more money to be able to buy healthy food. We should tax big corporations that are making big profits off of food. All of this stuff on my table is local. If we support local farmers, the profits from the big businesses will go down.

Everybody needs the special diet allowance. Hunger is immediate. We are living this every day.”

\*\*The special diet allowance was a discretionary benefit available to people on ODSP. It allowed doctors to provide up to \$250 a month for people with medical conditions so that they can access the special diet they need. Earlier this year, the benefit was abolished.



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# Kerry

## **Tell us about your living situation.**

“I’ve been living in Toronto for 10 years—I’m from Winnipeg before that. I moved here to study for a Ph. D. from the University of Toronto. I live by myself, I’ve been living in this apartment for six years.”

## **How much money do you spend on food?**

“It varies—I’ve never exactly kept track before this project. I’d say between \$70 and \$75 per week, ranging \$20-\$30 above or below that.”

## **Have you ever used a food bank or drop in meal program?**

“No.”

## **Describe what it’s like to eat on your budget.**

“Food is really important to me. I love to cook, so there are times when I buy expensive ingredients even though I’m on a limited budget, because it’s meaningful to me. I have some frustration that I often can’t afford what I would like to. But I have always in my entire life had enough food to eat.”

## **Where do you get your food? How often do you shop?**

“I enjoy shopping. I buy most of my fruits and vegetables at the greengrocer on St. Clair when I’m going for a walk or running other errands. I also shop at Loblaws for toilet paper, milk—stuff like that.”

## **What factors influence the food you buy and/or eat?**

“Quality. I try to buy locally grown, seasonal fruits and vegetables. I never buy produce out of season because it just doesn’t taste good. Price is also a factor.”



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## **What does food security mean to you?**

“On a personal level, food security is what I’ve experienced my entire life—*that a healthy, tasty meal is always available to me.*

On a societal level, it’s a bit more complicated. It means a commitment by the government to make food available and affordable for all. And it’s not just about availability—everybody no matter what their situation has to be able to access it.”

## **What do you think the government should do to address food security?**

“We need to focus on employment for all, rather than just providing food. *Food banks are an immediate bandage, not a solution.*

We need to make employment a priority of government policies. They also need to support organizations working on food issues—organizations that put their efforts not just into feeding people, but in making people aware of issues surrounding food.”



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