

Courage My Friends Podcast Series III – Episode 7
Who's Hungry... and Why?:
Food Banks, Food Insecurity, and Ending Hunger for Good

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*. *Needs No Introduction* is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

[music transition]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we're all caught in the vortex.

STREET VOICE 1: I was already worried about my job, food and housing. So now I have to worry about healthcare as well?

STREET VOICE 2: Seems like we wanna jump back to normalcy so bad that we're not even trying to be careful at this point.

STREET VOICE 3: This is a 911 kind of situation for global climate crisis. This planet is our only home and billionaires space-race is not a solution. The earth is crying for survival. It is time for action.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: Why are more people accessing food banks and who are they? Is growing hunger the problem or symptomatic of something deeper? How do we find our way out of the bleakest period of food insecurity we have ever faced? And how do we secure food as a human right?

I'm your host, Resh Budhu,

And in this episode of The Courage My Friends' podcast, *Who's Hungry... and Why?: Food Banks, Food Insecurity, and Ending Hunger for Good*, CEO of the Daily Bread Food Bank. Neil Hetherington and Director of Development and Communication for The Stop Community Food Center, Maria Rio discuss the current state of food

insecurity in Canada's largest city, how we got here and what we need to do to end decades of hunger.

Maria and Neil, welcome. Thank you for joining us.

NEIL: Thank you so much for having us.

MARIA: Yeah. Thanks for having us.

RESH: To begin, Neil, what do we mean by food insecurity?

NEIL: Essentially it's that people's right to food is not being realized. That individuals do not have what is provided to them through declarations at the UN, that Canada has signed up to, where they have the means to be able to provide for the food that they need. That it's appropriate from a health perspective, from a cultural perspective, from an ethnic perspective. And we are seeing food insecurity at alarming rates across the country, with the last numbers being at about 5.8 million Canadians being food insecure. There are different levels of food insecurity as you can imagine. But in total, we certainly have a national crisis when it comes to food insecurity that's been exacerbated by inflation.

RESH: That's alarming because the Canadian population is only about 38 and a half million. So over 5 million is a huge percentage.

NEIL: It is. It's frightening. And the trend is appalling. We have seen that in the Toronto area where, prior to the pandemic, there were about 60,000 client visits a month.

And that on its own was a crisis that we should never have tolerated. And then during the pandemic, it doubled to 120,000 client visits. And this past month, that just ended in November 2022, 200,000 client visits. So up from 60,000

RESH: Right. and those numbers really came out in this year's annual Who's Hungry Report, which is on food insecurity in Toronto and is produced by your agency, the Daily Bread Food Bank, along with North York Harvest. And as you say, it paints a really bleak picture of what has been happening in just a year.

But when we're talking about these numbers, just to clarify, is this due to the same populations using food banks more frequently or is it new food bank users adding to those populations already using it? Or is it a combination of both? What's happening?

NEIL: Well, so there's certainly more use of the food bank required. So people are having to come more times during a month. But what is startling is the fact that there are over 9,000 new registrants to the Foodbank system in the Toronto area, served by Daily Bread and North York Harvest each month.

So almost 10,000 people are putting up their hand and saying, "I am in a position where my income does not meet the expenses that I have and I need to rely on food charity this week or this month. So they're coming to food banks. And we're seeing the faces and the portrait of people who are coming to food banks. It paints a picture now of individuals who are employed.

Prior to the pandemic, 15% of the people that came to the food banks were employed fully. That number has doubled to 30%. And just around 50% of Foodbank users have a post-secondary education. And so people have done what we told them to do growing up. Go get an education, grab a job and you'll be fine. You'll get that house with a white picket fence. And that's not the reality.

RESH: Right. But when we're looking at those numbers, and just to be clear, this is only in terms of food bank users, but not all those who are food insecure. Because every person who's food insecure is not necessarily turning up at a food bank. So as you said, the food insecurity numbers are quite high, right? The 5.8 million, I think Statistics Canada says it's one in seven people in Canada, which is about 14% of the population.

NEIL: That's right. And yes, there are different levels of food insecurity. People who are making use of food banks are at more chronic levels generally. There's about four different levels of food insecurity in terms of depth of need. And so yes, there's a whole population that don't make use of food banks that are still food insecure.

People that worry about, where their next paycheck or income is coming from. People who worry about whether or not they're going to be able to make ends meet for all of the food that they require. So there are different levels. And food banks are there to support those who need it.

But I think more importantly, we're there to advocate to change those numbers from 5.8 to cut that in half as we promised in the 2030 commitments to reduce poverty by that year.

RESH: So right now we have more food insecure populations that are swelling the numbers of those who are accessing food banks. Food banks have to respond by putting out more food. Maria, how is The Stop Community Food Center doing this, especially during a period of a supply shortage and food inflation, increasing food prices?

MARIA: The Stop is a mid-level organization, so we only have 50 staff. And through COVID it's been exceptionally difficult because we rely on the help of many volunteers.

So to accommodate social distancing, we had to go down on the number of volunteers and then we had to increase the number of staff because of the increased need.

So we have a food bank where we also have a Drop-In Meals Program and we went from around 50,000 meals pre-pandemic to last year, 80,000 meals. So there's a significant need in the community. But not only that, there's been a lot of additional issues that are really impacting our organization currently. So I used to call it a double-edged sword until more and more issues started cropping up.

The first one is more people are experiencing food insecurity. So more people are coming to us, they can't make ends meet anymore.

The second one is our donors who give less than a thousand dollars, they're also experiencing increased inflation, grocery costs. So the donations under a thousand dollars have drastically dropped off. And last year we were \$100,000 under in that portfolio, which we're able to make up in other portfolios.

But another thing to consider is the third aspect that's impacting our organization right now, and others across Toronto, are major donors. So donors who give more than, in our case, \$5,000, their assets are all in stocks. So someone who was giving \$30,000 last year might give \$10,000 this year, or wait another month to see if the value will be the same return on investment as it was last year.

Additionally, The Stop is also being hit by inflation. So not only are we paying more for food because there's decreased food drives and all those things. There's more people coming to our services and inflation, so we're paying more. For example, romaine lettuce went up 160% over the past three years, and almost every single item that we use in our Drop-in and, in our Food Bank has gone up significantly.

So for Food Bank hampers, last year it cost us \$44 for one hamper. This year it's costing us \$55, so it's around a 20% increase in cost. And that's really significant because last year we could provide 12 hampers for \$500; this year we can provide nine. And that's not including the other inflationary costs like rent and staff, keeping the lights on, operating as regular.

So it's been an exceptionally challenging time. We've had to make really difficult decisions around how do we keep serving our community but not go into an extremely unsustainable position as an organization? We have to remain open next year. So how do we continue to meet the need and meet the demand with very limited government funding. We don't receive that much government funding as an organization. While there was a lot in 2020 when COVID started, we've seen that crisis escalate since then. For example, in one of our programs, 45% of the people in that program had lost income in 2020, and the year after was 65%.

So as more and more people run out of other options, such as friends or using credit cards or predatory payday loan services, they're turning to us and we're kind of left scrambling to meet the need with less volunteer help, with less energy than we had two years ago and strain on our resources because our donors are also feeling the pinch.

RESH: Right. So it's shaping up to be a difficult holiday season, I would imagine.

MARIA: So for the holidays, we're expecting things to get more difficult as inflation and recession continues to hit our community members, our donors and our own budget. So it's a little bit unpredictable because even looking back at our previous two years when it comes to service users, when it comes to donations. The last two or three years have been completely different from each other. Everything has been so unpredictable with lockdowns and PPE costs and are we doing seated meals or takeout meals? Are we bringing people back into the food bank? Is it safe to do so? So it's a little bit unpredictable to know how things will shape up after the holidays and through the holidays. Hopefully just the next few weeks we can continue to be there for our community as much as possible.

When we shut down for Christmas and Boxing Day we actually provide gift cards for grocery stores nearby that people might be able to also utilize, so there's no day where they're left hungry.

RESH: And Neil what's happening at the Daily Bread? What are you looking towards this holiday season?

NEIL: Well, I hate to say it. I think I'm coming across as the Grinch that stole Christmas because it's not good news. It really is rather grim.

We are looking at a difficult time for the people that need food banks. And for us to support that need, we've had to increase both food and fundraising dramatically.

Prior to the pandemic, we spent about one and a half million dollars a year on food. That number this year is \$18 million.

RESH: Wow.

NEIL: So we have had to raise huge amounts of money to be able to meet the demand that has more than tripled. And we're hit on the one side where you've got food prices that are escalating, and so that drives more people to the food bank. And then on our side of things, our cost to be able to feed that need, is increased as well at some 11.5% annually for food inflation. So it is difficult.

But you know, this also is a season of hope. And I think we need to remember that and constantly, even though it's very difficult for us to do that. It's a season of hope and so I think we do need to take some hope in the fact that we are speaking about this. There is a podcast about this. That we are talking about issues of justice. That we are starting to have conversations at the political level in this last election about disability rates being untenable and against the values we espouse. And we're talking about affordable housing.

And these are the types of conversations that do give me pause for hope. Where the first action of our mayor was to set up an affordable housing directorate and really work as hard as the city can, trying to punch above its weight in terms of a local government to be able to develop affordable housing. Because it's only when you get

that done, when you get decent income supports in place. And we start to reduce the amount of precarious employment that we have that will start to see change with food banks. So now that the need is, out there, now that people are talking about it, now that it's in the media, now that it's a kitchen-table conversation, my hope at this season is that it will permeate into political discourse and most importantly, into social policy change.

RESH: Right. So the *Who's Hungry Report*, as well as *The Hunger Report* from Feed Ontario and *Hunger Count* from Food Banks Canada, is very much making that point; that food insecurity is not the core problem, but is symptomatic of these deeper issues. And there are many.

So you talked about housing. What does housing look like through the lens of hunger? Could you say a bit more about how it is actually a hunger issue?

NEIL: Absolutely. If you look at who is making use of food banks, the average food bank user after paying for the rent and utilities, has \$8 and 1 cent a day to survive on. You can barely pay for public transit to get to and from a food bank with that amount of money. So the cost of living, the cost of housing has put people in a precarious situation which results in them being chronically food insecure.

So housing should be about 35% of your income. And yet in one in five food bank homes, people who are making use of food banks, in their homes they're spending 100%. This just mind-blowing. They're spending 100% of their income on rent and utilities.

That means they are completely dependent on friends, family, and charity to be able to pay for food, clothing, transportation.

And so again, one of the things that I think food banks have been good at is we will continue to make sure that people have the food they need this week. But we are unrelenting in looking upstream in poverty, to be able to say, okay, here's the systemic causes of it and here are the policy solutions, which we can help government walk back from the branch that they're out on a limb on. And here are those solutions so that we can start to reduce the lineups outside of food banks all across the country.

RESH: And in terms of who's hungry, what populations are we talking about? Because there's always a disproportionate impact on different communities. So Maria, could you talk about that? What are some of the populations that you are seeing coming into The Stop?

MARIA: So we did a survey last year just to track. We do track by household how many individuals. So we see a lot of people who are living alone, who just can't make ends meet. In Canada, it's actually 1.3 million people who live in poverty and also are single, living alone. That's a really big community that we see.

In addition to that, we see 67% of our service users accessing social assistance rates. So ODSP, OW, anything like that. And out of the people who use our services as well, 62% of them spend more than half their income on housing.

So it's something that is an incredibly big challenge for them. And it's a lot of people who are using social assistance rates. More and more of them coming to use our services. People who live in Toronto Community Housing, seniors, underhoused individuals, those are the main populations that we've been serving.

RESH: So we're seeing income earners and people also who are on social assistance. It is interesting that more and more food bank users are actually people who work. So why are working people needing food banks?

NEIL: Yeah, I mean, the rate increased from 15% to 30% in one year.

There's a variety of reasons for that. First of all, their living circumstance, they are paying a disproportionate amount of their income on rent. And then inflation, it's hitting individuals when it comes to what they're able to afford, just the basics. And then the third part would be, as we look to reduce the challenges associated with inflation and increased interest rates, many of those people had or do have debt repayments that they may have occurred during the pandemic.

I think you also need to look at, well, what does full-time employment even mean nowadays? So for many people, full-time might mean full-time hours, but it's two or three jobs cobbled together without benefits. So in that scenario, you might have a single parent who is making difficult choices on dental care for their kids or rent, or prescription medications or rent. And so that puts them in a precarious situation.

Again, the days of you get a full-time job, you work there for 30, 40 years, you get a gold watch, you had a pension and a benefit package throughout your career, are long gone. And we're seeing the results of precarious employment. And we're seeing the results of decisions that were made in the nineties to remove ourselves from federal deep investments in cooperative and affordable housing across the country.

RESH: So what you're actually witnessing is the growth of the working poor, which is a painful and more frequent irony. If you're working, why are you poor? But working or not, income is not keeping up. So as you mentioned, the incomes people are earning at their job or jobs more likely because of this precarity, but also social assistance payments are not keeping up, as you mentioned as well, Maria.

Now Maria, in a recent New Canadian Media article, you also speak about the disproportionate impacts of food insecurity among racialized, Indigenous and newcomer communities. So how does hunger intersect with race?

MARIA: That's a big question because we need to look at hunger as an effect of poverty. So hunger is not just something that happens to you, it's a direct result of not having enough income. And then when you start looking at why people don't

have enough income, you have to take a lot of intersecting identities into consideration as well. So for a lot of people who are most exploited by capitalism, who have the least amount of opportunities, who are pushed and marginalized, those are always the populations that are gonna be the most impacted.

So the city of Toronto has that information. Stats Canada has that information when it comes to how each individual race is impacted by food insecurity. A lot of Black individuals, Indigenous, Arab, Chinese communities, they're the ones most impacted across Canada by food insecurity. But it's not just race, you have to look at disability cuz that's another huge contributing factor.

So a lot of the different categories, for example household size, race, immigration status X, Y, and Z are combined with other categories to make your access to food even more precarious. So that's something that we definitely always have to keep a look out for. And it's something that a lot of organizations don't have a capability to do themselves. And something again, that the government tracks, but they don't track a lot of intersecting identities.

So sometimes you can see a study that has those intersections, but not always. So it's really hard to get a clearer picture of the most affected. You definitely know it's these groups. because you have stats here and there, and you're able to see that in your own frontline services.

RESH: Right. Now, in terms of painting that picture though, Maria, you really understand food security, obviously from the agency side, but also as someone who was once a food bank user. So could you speak a bit about what it's like to live hungry in Canada?

MARIA: Sure. So just a little bit about me personally. I came to Canada as a refugee when I was nine years old. I lived in a World Vision refugee shelter with my mom and my sibling for around six months. And then my mom's education, work experience, all those things, like most immigrants didn't transfer over. So single mom, two kids, she's working a job during the day. She's working in insurance. And then she's also working at night doing cash jobs to try to make ends meet.

So for two teenagers at the time, we didn't have a lot of supervision or after-school support and we weren't able to get haircuts, go to the dentist, go on field trips. So there was a lot of like little barriers like that. In addition to the bigger ones, like accessing food.

So when I was like 16, 15, I would skip school to go to the food bank because my mom couldn't do it. She's at work. My sibling is two years younger than me, so you're not gonna send a 13 year-old to do it.

I lived near Dufferin and Bloor and there is a basement over there that has a food bank.

And when I went, I would take my cart to try to bring everything home. I would take it down the stairs of a church basement. And it felt a little dark and it felt a little scary, but it's something that kind of had to be done. And the thing that really called my name when I joined The Stop was that The Stop lets you pick the stuff that you actually take.

So you can pick things that are culturally appropriate, that are nutritious, that your family actually enjoys to eat. Not every food bank has that capability cuz it is more expensive for the food bank to do. So when I was going to food banks and emergency food access services, like other church drop-ins, it would be just bring it home.

So even things that weren't culturally appropriate that there was no way you could get two teenagers to eat; I was bringing that home.

The other thing that I vividly remember in regards to this when I was younger was when they would do food drives at school. So they would do a food drive and we would be expected to, and I was a little bit shamed into you have to bring you know, a bag of pasta or something. And it's something that we really couldn't do. So we would take the food that we wouldn't eat from the food bank, that they had given us and just put it back into the system. So you end up kind of like cycling through food that people don't want. And that's just something that is not dignified, that doesn't work, work that can impact you long-term.

And I've just experienced food insecurity for a large part of my life and I definitely understand a lot of the long-term impacts that has had on me personally. So always feeling like you're gonna run out of something even though you know you can afford to buy another one.

For example, I'm Mexican, I love limes. I put limes in absolutely everything. So limes when I was younger were 10 limes for a dollar, and now they're almost a dollar each. So even though I know I can afford my next line, I'll save that one just in case. Just in case. Right?

So you still have a lot of, long-term impacts when it comes to mental health and when it comes to physical health. And when it comes to a sense of belonging. A lot of people who access food services, they feel shame. They feel like they're not succeeding. Right. Everybody kind of feels like poverty is a personal failure when it's not, it's a systemic issue

RESH: Right

MARIA: It was difficult, but I'm glad that I can share that story so people understand the multifaceted effects of poverty.

I was talking to someone yesterday and saying like, even getting a haircut. I learned how to cut my hair at a young age and I haven't gotten a haircut professionally done

many times in my life because of that kind of resilience and resourcefulness that you have to put yourself through when you're experiencing poverty.

RESH: Yeah. And grow up pretty fast as well, right?

MARIA: Mm-hmm.

NEIL: Can I just say, Maria, thank you so much for sharing that personal experience. It's in that lived experience that you are able to see first-hand and understand more clearly why we need to make the decisions that we make when it comes to policy initiatives. And from an advocacy perspective, so much more effective. I just want to express my gratitude to you for sharing.

RESH: Yeah, thank you. Maria. Because it's important that we do see the human face and the individual experience of what this means.

MARIA: Yeah, absolutely

NEIL: You know, Maria talked about a shopping model versus hampers. And back when food banks came out, there were a lot of hampers that were provided. It doesn't matter what you like, here's your box of 20 pounds worth of food, whether you like it or not. And I'm really pleased to say that most of the food banks in the city now are shopping models. And it interestingly, is less expensive.

And the reason that it's less expensive is because - I don't know about you guys, but I don't go through a jar of peanut butter every single week. And yet we would hand a jar of peanut butter in that hamper kind of model. And so allowing people to shop for what they need is proven to be much more dignified in the experience, low barrier and more economical.

RESH: You know, we've been hearing about, and both of you have spoken about some of the other disproportionately impacted, groups. We're seeing more seniors and certainly we've been seeing it in terms of gender. We know that females among the genders are on the front-lines of every crisis as well. That with this recession, people are more and more calling it a *she-cession*. So they're coming to the food banks in greater numbers.

What surprised me when I was reading the Hunger Report is the growing number of younger adults, those in their 20s on their way to their 30s. So what's happening here?

NEIL: We definitely are seeing that. We see that with international students. The cost of housing has resulted in food banks being set up on most college and university campuses across the city.

And when I went to university many, many years ago we didn't have that. I'd like to think it was because it wasn't needed. But perhaps it was needed and we just

refused to do something about it. But it certainly is needed now. And also from a demographic perspective, again, we do see systemically disproportionate numbers of individuals from certain oppressed groups. So Toronto is 1% Indigenous population and yet the Indigenous population is 5% of food bank users. The black population in Toronto is 8%, and yet three times that number 24% are having to make use of food banks. So there are some tough systemic questions that we need to be asking and systems that need to be challenged.

RESH: And along that we've had a growth in the conversation around systemic racism, systemic ageism, sexism and whatnot, and from what you're saying, food insecurity is very much part of those systemic oppressions.

In terms of this growing younger demographic. And I agree. I was reflecting on this when I was at university and yeah, there was not a food bank in sight. I work at a college now, and they have become fixtures across colleges and universities right across the country. And these are also people who are going to be, they're supposed to be the next generation of our economy, the power behind our growth and development. And yet so many more of them are accessing food banks. So this is incredibly worrying.

NEIL: You start that first job, right? And you're probably not making a lot of money. Now you add on the debt from coming out of university. And then the prospect of can I ever move into a situation where perhaps I can own my own home.

About three weeks ago there was a study indicating that it's gonna take about 26 years for the average person to save the down payment for a home. And then the 25 years after to be able to pay for that. And that does not allow for capital accumulation at all. What it does and what we're seeing is that it further exacerbates the divide between those who have and those who do not have. And so I'm very concerned about that fundamental variance that we've got in society in terms of asset accumulation.

RESH: Are there newer issues that have been created by the pandemic itself, that you are having to deal with that you didn't have to deal with before the pandemic?

MARIA: I'm not sure if we've seen newer issues. We've definitely experienced newer challenges as an organization, because we have been navigating things that we've never seen in our professional or personal lives. So that has been extremely difficult. Just trying to navigate, that and be nimble and be agile and stay on top of our community members' needs has been a top priority and very, very difficult. But when it comes to the service users and our community in general, I think the biggest changes that we've seen are mostly due to inflation. We definitely saw the impact of people through COVID when it came to sick days and not being able to take a day off. Or feeling really guilty about taking time off to heal because oh, I won't be able to pay for this for my son, or I won't be able to access this other thing that is needed for my other child. So we've seen a lot of stress, we've seen a lot of mental health challenges.

But I think it's just the perfect storm for people in our community. People who are already struggling, experiencing social isolation, living alone. Living far from family in different countries or in different parts of Canada that they can't see or connect with.

Even with some of our programming, some of the people who access our services, they don't speak English. So just that increased isolation. That increased lack of connection if you don't have access to a phone or the internet or anything like that, was a really big impact of COVID on our service users.

But with inflation and mental health challenges, rising across the country and a lot of additional challenges, it's been very difficult.

NEIL: Whether you're coming to a food bank or not, you kind of notice it. At least I do, whether I'm at Canadian Tire or driving, that people are on edge, people are struggling a little bit more. So we certainly see that at the food bank in terms of people who are in a distressed situation. That'd be the first on an individual basis.

The second that the pandemic highlighted that remains of great concern is, again, Maria talked about it, but isolation. The United Kingdom has a Ministry of Loneliness where they tackle this problem because the problem is severe. We, in our *Who's Hungry Report* asked about the number of individuals who had nobody to turn to; no friends and no family. And the number of food bank users who put up their hand and said, "yeah, that's me," was startling. It was some third, I believe, of the number of respondents. So there is a sense of loneliness in our city, hidden in apartment buildings. And so when we had to create delivery programs for food bank users, the food arriving at that door of that apartment, was not just food arriving, it was a smile and it was a social interaction.

That's why the Daily Bread started community meal programs during the pandemic. It was an opportunity particularly for seniors, for families as well, to come out and to have a really good nutritious meal. It wasn't just about the nutrition that they are getting at the table; it's the discourse and dialogue that they're having with people maybe that they haven't met before, that is so needed.

Yes, of course there's the economics and there's the depth of food insecurity that's out there. But it's the lack of social interaction and its effect on mental health that really has been highlighted for me during the pandemic as a learning. It's a difficult situation for too many Torontonians and people across the country

RESH: So though it has been worsened by the pandemic, food insecurity in Canada has actually been a growing issue since at least the 1980s, which is when food banks were brought in to address this need. And just going back to you, Neil, what has been happening over the last four decades?

NEIL: Recently we had an uncelebration of a decade milestone in Ontario. So in Ontario we hit a 30-year mark of Feed Ontario. And so we looked back at that and said, okay, well, is that anything to celebrate? And the answer is absolutely not.

There are individual milestones that you can find some threads of joy in. The fact that people can rely on the food bank and the systems across the city in terms of, okay, if I'm struggling, I can reduce my stress a little bit, knowing that the food bank will be there for me, for this week. That is helpful from a reduction of anxiety perspective.

What we have set out to do over the last number of decades is remind people that food banks are not the answer to food insecurity; we've never claimed that we are. But we do make food available this week for people.

And where we do claim that we are fighting to end hunger is around our advocacy efforts and taking a leadership position. Because it's in the close contact that we have with now hundreds of thousands of people every single month and hearing their stories, relaying the statistics and developing social policy that allows us to use that expertise to be able to guide government. And so that's where we really work hard to fight to end hunger.

To be perfectly frank, it's a really challenging situation. I wish we were further ahead. I wish that our advocacy had resulted in a reverse trend in food insecurity. But I do know that there have been glimmers of hope.

The food bank was instrumental in a guaranteed income for seniors. And that reduced the number of seniors requiring food banks dramatically when it was introduced. The food banks have been, working alongside our affordable housing providers and advocates. And that has become a coalition of folks that have instilled in law people's right to housing.

So I do see the opportunities for advocacy changes. I would like to see more significant results. I'd like to see disability doubled. I'd like to see us move towards a basic income across the country. These are things that I do believe that we can get to if we continue to push from a policy perspective, leveraging the research work that has been done by food banks.

RESH: Now in terms of again, this question about what's been happening over the last 40 years. And so you've had advocacy that really frontline food banks have been part of the leadership of that. But I was speaking to Paul Taylor, who heads up FoodShare I think last year, and what came up was that, food banks, their history runs parallel for good reason to the history of the development of neoliberal erosion.

Right? So we've seen more privatization, we've seen cuts to social welfare as you're talking about, people's incomes, whatever they, are not keeping up with the rising cost of living. So 40 years of neoliberal policy has made 40 years of food banks necessary. And this month The Stop is in fact celebrating its 40th anniversary.

So Maria, do you also feel that this is sort of a bittersweet moment for your agency?

MARIA: Yeah, absolutely. We started as a little drop-in at the basement of a church run by a priest and his wife in Kensington Market. And to know that 40 years later we're serving more meals than ever. We're looking at the policy regarding poverty reduction and the food strategy for Canada. And it just doesn't even come close to addressing the things that need to be done. So, coming onto our 40th, it's been great to look back at, you know, all the pictures of the individuals that we've been able to help, even if it's marginal support with their immediate needs. So it's not like we can help people retire or go on vacation or it changed your living situation, anything like that. But we can provide social connection in a meal. So it's been difficult looking back and knowing that so little has changed in the last 40 years and feeling, as Neil was saying earlier, hopeful for what is to come in the future.

I was actually doing some research earlier around the poverty reduction strategies and the food policy for Canada and just seeing has this been done before, what consultation was needed? How was this implemented? And I looked all the way back to like 1966 when Canada first signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights at the UN, where they ratified the right to food, right to adequate food, clothing, and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.

And to know that we've been talking about this issue for so long, we've had so many consultations at all levels of government. And so not much has changed. Like we've known for a really long time that social assistance rates are abysmally low. That it's a lot of newcomers who are experiencing these barriers. Racialized people, people with disabilities and an intersection of all those identities. We've known that for more than the 40 years that The Stop has been around, or food banks have been around. But I don't know why there's such a resistance to actually implement a lot of the consultation material that they keep collecting.

RESH: Right. And there hasn't really been, to my knowledge as well, a national food security policy. I don't think we've had a Federal Ministry of Food Security. Hey, maybe that's an idea, we could integrate. But again, going back a bit into the history as well, when food banks were introduced, they were only meant as a temporary measure to meet short-term emergency food need. But since then, they have become permanent fixtures that have proliferated across the country. So have we actually institutionalized instead of good food policy, have we institutionalized a food emergency in Canada? And Neil, do you wanna speak to that?

NEIL: Oh, wow. There's so much in there. Well, first of all, I would fundamentally disagree with the history that when it comes to neoliberalism and food bank usage, and having the direct correlation between the two, or causation between the two.

I think you need to go back in history and start talking about when neoliberalism really started to, emerge in the 1940s, not the 1990s. And what systems have reduced poverty as much as uh, possible.

There's so many things that you've baked into that question in terms of the institutionalization of food banks. I'm not sure if it's necessarily about a national food

security strategy so much as it is about implementing our poverty reduction strategy. And we do have a national poverty reduction strategy and it takes under its umbrella housing and income supports and a whole host of different pillars that make that up. Because food insecurity is just a symptom of poverty. And so I would be hesitant to actually set up a food security ministry of our government because in many ways it's the failure of other ministries. I actually hate the fact that anything associated with food is only in the Ministry of Agriculture and quite frankly, we don't receive government money. The Daily Bread doesn't. And that allows us to be able to articulate clearly policies without any fear of repercussions from articulating our particular viewpoints on that.

So your question is, have we institutionalized food banks. And food banks are present and food banks have been used more and more, we see those trends. And we're not happy about those trends. And we have also seen a rise in our advocacy work to be able to change things.

But let's go back to any charity model that has been present in our country's history. So whether it's hospitals, those were founded out of charities, they were founded out of empathetic concern for the community. That's how hospital work got developed. Education and the education system.

And slowly over time we realized, wait a second, we've gotta move away from a charitable model into instilling a right to health, a right to education. And they became the duty bearer. The government said, yeah, this is something that we need to make happen.

And so my hope is yes, we do have this charitable model, but if we are firmly committed to advocacy and articulating clearly what those policy changes are that have to be moved, then we hopefully will instill the right to food across the country and reduce food bank usage.

But until that time happens, the charitable model is in place and will continue to be in place and serve in a good way to those that need food this week.

RESH: But that's interesting, right? The charitable model versus the rights-based model. Charity comes from a really good place, but it's not necessarily sustainable.

Not too long ago, the mayor of a Canadian city who was retiring, decided to donate gifts he had received over the years to a local food bank. And I was reading about this in the newspaper. And as I was reading, I thought, you know, on the one hand, this is really lovely, right? What a generous way to exit office. And obviously the food bank is quite grateful for this as well.

But then on the other hand, Here we have the leader of municipal government, a powerful policymaker over a city with obvious food insecurity. But instead of instituting or turning to good food policy, a donation was made to a non-governmental food charity.

So have food banks, despite what they want, have food banks and food charity been in a sense used by government to absolve themselves of their food security obligations?

MARIA: I would definitely think so. I think the government relies on a lot of organizations to provide social services that they should be providing. And I think that's one of the biggest issues in our sector. Because charities have to get funding. So we have to work with a lot of different partners. We have to be in a lot of the senses, donor-centric and thank people for things that might not be the best use case.

So if someone wants to donate, you know, like a used mattress, that's not something that will help. Or something that The Stop would be willing to accept at all. But definitely there's been this reliance on non-profits to not only fill the gap but be the entirety of services and try to piecemeal, solve a systemic issue.

So it's an impossible task. And it's just something that is very prevalent and that ends up exploiting nonprofit workers because a lot of nonprofit workers are underpaid. It's an exploitation of our passion for the cause. So, people with lived experience who experience barriers and who want to get involved in this work might see that as an additional reason not to. And it also creates an overreliance on volunteer support, which is a huge unpaid workforce.

But if the government was providing these services, wouldn't we all be paid well? Wouldn't we all have a great pension? Wouldn't this be a systemic approach instead of piecemeal organizations tackling different pieces of the effects of poverty?

It's a very big problem in our sector, I would think.

RESH: And Neil, again, the same question to you. Have food banks and food charity been used in place of food policy?

NEIL: Well, it is an interesting question. I don't think anybody knows the answer to that. There's no evidence to suggest that if food banks shut our doors for a week or a month or a year, that there would be a change in policy.

What would be affected would be the tens of thousands of people that need the food that week. So I haven't seen that evidence. And if that was the case, then I would say we'll shut down. Let's make this happen.

I am hopeful however, that given the proximity of poverty, that many in our city and province are feeling, that that will in itself be a catalyst for government to listen and to change policy.

You know, on one hand we're saying food banks aren't sustainable. On the other hand we said, well, wait a second, they've been here for 40 years. But is it the

sustainability that we want? And the answer is no. We don't want to have to have a food bank in the city at all.

We want to make sure that people's right to food, that they can purchase their own food for themselves with the incomes that they have been provided, is realized. We want to see that happen. Until that time, we will continue to make policy recommendations and demands of government that will hopefully reduce lineups,

RESH: So, as you say, food banks, not only do they provide emergency food relief, and they have been doing so for decades. But they have also become powerful frontline advocates for food justice, anti-poverty policy, everything that's connected to these issues. So again, you are essentially, really working towards putting yourself out of business. I mean, You don't want to be doing this, but you do it because it needs to be done.

Maria, you have described food insecurity as " Not a personal failing, but a policy choice." And we've been talking about policies throughout this. So food insecurity is just a matter of absent or bad policy across a number of issues.

So again, Maria, what good policies could bring an end to food insecurity and hunger in Canada? I know there are many, but what are some of the priority policy areas that you would like to see addressed?

MARIA: So just based on the information from the community members that we serve in Davenport West, we came up with a few different policy recommendations.

The first one would be to increase social assistance rates to be in line with the cost of living in each city; instead of just one single rate across the province. So that rate doesn't align with the reality of what it's like living in Toronto, for example. And the additional costs that come with that.

The second policy recommendation would be to implement a federally guaranteed living wage, adjusted for the cost of living in each region. So eliminating the working poor, and just moving towards more equitable society.

And then the third one that we have that is very specific to our community, is introducing vacancy control to help people have access to affordable housing and stabilize rental rates. So vacancy control basically means that if you move out of your unit and you've been living there for a few years and your rent is only a thousand dollars, your landlord can no longer jack that up to whatever market rate is. So let's say your unit would now be going for \$3,000. They would only be able to increase it per the annual rate that is put out by the government, so maybe only 2% or 3% maximum.

So those are the top ones that I would recommend, especially the social assistance one based on poverty and food insecurity.

RESH: Right. And Neil, the *Who's Hungry Report* also offers a range and focuses on many policy recommendations that are directed at all levels of government.

You've spoken about some of these, but what are some of the very key recommendations?

NEIL: I really appreciated, Maria's policy recommendations. And saying food bank usage is not a personal failing, but a policy choice, is absolutely bang on.

The *Who's Hunger Report* provides, I think it's about 70 policy recommendations. And you're kind of asking me what's my favorite child, um, and so if I were just to wave a magic wand and like instantly we could do it, I probably would say a guaranteed basic income across the country.

We saw positive effects from CERB. And what was so offensive to me with CERB was that the government says, you know what, just to get by, we're gonna have to give out \$2,000 a month. And yet every single month, somebody on disability receives \$1,200 a month and are underwater by the poverty line by some \$900 each month.

And so if I was going for that one golden policy to me, it would be there in the short term.

In the medium and long term, it's definitely around the development of decent, affordable , housing. And not using a green belt to do that, but rather through intensification and deeply affordable housing.

But we've given in *The Who's Hungry Report*, a menu. Perhaps it's too broad. Maybe it's way too big and we've gotta go to a model where we advocate more succinctly on one sort of main policy as those advocates who made \$10 a day daycare possible did. And look at it from an economic issue across the province.

Poverty costs \$33 billion a year, in the province of Ontario. We can't afford not to do policy shifts that will result in fewer people needing food banks and living in a way that they are not thriving in community as they should.

So it is economically important for us to implement these policies. Social policy is a web, that requires, multiple, different policies.

RESH: And you know, just to mention that we're talking about hunger. We're talking about food insecurity. We're talking about poverty. We're talking about it in the context of one of the richest countries in the world. So again, another painful irony.

NEIL: You're right. The Economist, does a annual study of food insecurity globally. And Canada ranks very well. When it comes to food safety we're good at that. We rank number one out of 120 countries.

Where we do abysmally, is around food waste. We waste about \$50 billion worth of food a year. Now you could say, well, that's because we firmly believe in food safety and we're gonna waste all this food. And it's a safety issue. I'm not sure that I would, get to that point.

But, we also rank very poorly when it comes to affordability of food. Behind Qatar, behind Australia, behind Japan in terms of food affordability. And so I think it's important for us to look at ourselves in the global context, celebrate where we can and change policy where we can't.

But when we rank 26 out of 120 when it comes to food affordability and we know that we don't have income supports in place. And when we know that we have a rise in precarious employment, it's no wonder that we're having to rely on food, charity, and make some shifts there.

RESH: So finally, what would you say to those who are listening to this podcast about how we can all be involved in making food security a permanent, achievable, and a democratic right?

How can we all be involved in pushing for this? And Maria, I'm gonna start with you.

MARIA: I think the short answer would be to vote for the candidates that are actually going to implement the changes that would make the biggest impact. So, increase social assistance rates, affordable housing. Another priority in my community is free or OHIP-paid dental care. So those things.

And not just 2%, 3%, 10%, they need to be very significantly addressed, maybe 200%, 300%. The rates right now are ridiculous. People cannot survive on \$700 a month, especially in Toronto. So I think voting would be a great thing for people to do.

RESH: And Neil, how can people be involved in making food right for everyone?

NEIL: You know, I'm often asked, how can we get involved? And of course, we talk about, well, making a difference now, either through donating food or funds. But we're very quick to say: But if you really want to tackle the problem, then the number one thing that you can do is phone any elected official or write any elected official, because all three levels of government have a poverty reduction strategy. And if you just say to each one of those officials every time you see them, Hey! Today's the day to implement your poverty reduction strategy. That's the single message that we want to drive home. Because it's within those strategies that we have housing, income supports and decent incomes from employment that will reduce food bank usage, and that ultimately will result in people's right to food being realized.

RESH: All right.

And with that, Maria, Neil, thank you so much. It has been a pleasure.

NEIL: Thank you.

MARIA: Thank you. It was lovely being here.

RESH: That was Maria Rio, Director of Development and Communication for the Stop Community Food Center and Neil Heatherington, CEO of the Daily Bread Food Bank.

I'm Resh Budhu, host of the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

Thanks for listening.

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