

## **Essay by Latoya McIntosh – Recipient of the Marie Trembly Student Award**

This essay explores my perceptions of food banks and how my understanding evolved through direct experience. Initially, I held misconceptions about food banks, believing that these nonprofit organizations operated with unlimited government support and primarily catered to unemployed individuals or newcomers needing help to settle. It never crossed my mind that food banks themselves face significant struggles or that many working individuals in our country live below the poverty line. However, my 14 weeks of volunteering at a food bank served as a profound reality check, challenging my assumptions and providing me with insights into the pressing issues of food insecurity and poverty.

One statistic struck me deeply: a 32% increase in food bank usage within just one year. This meant that 133,494 additional people turned to food banks to make ends meet. Such a stark rise in food insecurity highlights systemic problems our country faces in supporting vulnerable communities. At the same time, food banks themselves are grappling with their own challenges, including a decrease of 1,000,000 pounds in food donations from 2023 to 2024 and the impact of inflation and rising food costs. Despite these obstacles, organizations like the Daily Bread Food Bank have demonstrated resilience and adaptability, striving to meet the growing needs of their clients.

One of the aspects that impressed me most about the Daily Bread Food Bank is its innovative approach to empowering clients. Rather than distributing pre-packaged hampers filled with unfamiliar items, the food bank allows clients to shop for the food they need, preserving their dignity and promoting autonomy. This approach ensures that clients receive

food that aligns with their preferences and dietary restrictions, fostering a sense of respect and agency during challenging times.

My time working in the INR (Information and Referral) department further revealed the breadth of support food banks provide. Beyond food, these organizations connect clients to vital resources such as Ontario Works, clothing banks, furniture banks, and government-funded programs offering financial relief. Food banks serve as more than just sources of sustenance; they are community hubs that address a wide range of needs and empower individuals to rebuild their lives.

One particular experience during my volunteering stood out to me. I assisted a gentleman with a mobility disability who had run out of food after his personal support worker stopped showing up. Despite the -12°C weather, he made his way to the food bank wearing light clothing and using a mobility device. We provided him with essential items such as socks, gloves, and a hat, and connected him with the Red Cross delivery service. Seeing the relief on his face as he left not only with food but also with one less worry on his shoulders was deeply moving. It underscored the vital role food banks play in addressing both immediate needs and larger systemic challenges.

Witnessing the struggles of so many people opened my eyes to the challenges faced by our community—including the working class. The reality is that the living wage often falls short of covering the cost of living, leaving many individuals and families in need of additional support. This experience has inspired me to connect with organizations advocating for basic human rights and social change. Moving forward, I hope to use the knowledge I've gained to

contribute to initiatives like rent control, tax cuts for single-family households, and increased funding for newcomer programs.

The fight against food insecurity and poverty is complex and ongoing, but I am determined to be a part of the solution. My time at the food bank has equipped me with a deeper understanding of these issues and a renewed sense of purpose. I now see food banks not only as lifelines for those in need but also as powerful symbols of hope, resilience, and the collective effort to create a more equitable society.

---

## References

Daily Bread Food Bank. (2024). *Annual Report: Impact of Food Donations and Community Support*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailybread.ca>

Government of Canada. (2024). *Statistics on Food Insecurity in Canada*. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca>

Ontario Works. (n.d.). *Financial Assistance Programs Overview*. Retrieved from <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-works>

Red Cross Canada. (n.d.). *Community Programs and Services*. Retrieved from <https://www.redcross.ca>

Campaign for Living Wage Canada. (2024). *The Gap Between Living Wage and Cost of Living*. Retrieved from <https://www.livingwagecanada.ca>

