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Two Meals a Day: Living on Disability Assistance in Vancouver

Fraser Doke, struggling with health issues, describes his daily diet and routine.

By **Cherise Seucharan** 13 Jun 2016 | **TheThunderbird.ca**

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Fraser Doke picks at a bowl of tortilla chips in his West End apartment, trying to make the snack last through the afternoon. He's grateful to have the extra food, left over from a friend's memorial service the day before. Doke's used to making food last for a while -- most days, he doesn't have lunch at all.

Doke, who is 53 and living with HIV and a recent cancer diagnosis, gets by on a little over \$1,000 per month, a combination of disability benefits and a small inheritance from his late mother. He's been living on the benefit for over 20 years, and says that each year, affording to live in the city gets a little harder.

Doke, and many like him who rely on disability assistance, had hoped that there would be some increase in the disability rate when the B.C. government rolled out its 2016 budget in February. At \$906 per month for a single person, the rates have been stagnant for the past nine years.

And the rates did change, somewhat. The BC Liberal government **announced** a \$77 increase starting in September -- while eliminating the \$52 bus pass and other transportation subsidies that the benefit used to provide. For the people with disabilities who depend on

public transit to get around, the increase will be nearly cancelled out after having to purchase the pass.

Doke has been campaigning alongside Raise the Rates, one of many groups in B.C. that is [expressing](#) frustration with below-poverty-line rates. He spoke at a recent [press conference](#) held to release an open letter signed by over 15,000 people, urging Premier Christy Clark to reinstate the bus pass.

But since the release, there has been no move from the ministry to make further changes to the rates. Doke continues to fight for the government's attention, while trying to stretch \$1,035 per month as the cost of everything keeps going up.

Scraping by on a budget

In Vancouver, living on Doke's monthly rate means just scraping by. After paying for rent in his co-op and his monthly bills, his budget for food and household items is tight.

"I would like to eat more. I'd like to do more meat and potatoes," the straightforward Doke says. "But I can't afford meat and potatoes, and vegetables are more expensive."

On a grocery budget of about \$30 per week, Doke eats simply. A normal day consists of two meals, taken alongside his daily medications. For breakfast, he has coffee alongside a bagel or cereal, sometimes with yogurt if finances are good. Dinner is mostly vegetables and "nibbleables" or canned soups his brother helps him buy on occasional trips to Costco.

Making food stretch for the entire month has taken a toll on his health.

"I do have a little thinning out every now and then," says Doke, whose lanky frame stands at approximately six feet. "I'm 150 pounds, which isn't too bad, but my normal is 150 to 170 pounds and, if I go below 150, I get a little bit scared."

Food prices have been rising dramatically, especially produce, which has [gone up](#) 13.3 per cent in the past year alone. According to a recent Statistics Canada report, with inflation, earnings are [worth](#) 2.7 per cent less in B.C. than a year ago.

Doke skimps on buying things that aren't necessities.

"I haven't bought clothing in over 11 years. That is crazy," he says, recalling the time after his liver transplant when he had lost so much weight, he had to ask friends to borrow clothes as none of his would fit.

Doke is in treatment for HIV, seizures, depression and now cancer, which add up to an expensive cocktail of medications that he is grateful is covered by health care. But he pays for everyday medications himself. A package of cold medication, which can run \$10, can take away up to a third of his weekly food budget.

The importance of a transit pass

Now another \$52 will have to come out of his monthly budget, because Doke relies heavily on his bus pass. Like many with chronic health issues, walking or biking isn't always an option for him.

When Doke was in recovery from liver surgery and using a walker, the pass was a lifeline.

"Test out how it feels, having a walker and having to rely on it. It is scary," he says. "It's really, really hard not to have a bus pass. Especially when you're really ill."

But Doke was lucky to have family for support during that time, something many don't have. Three years ago, his brother, Grant McCarthy, took five months off work to help support Doke and drive him around to appointments. He still goes on monthly grocery runs to help keep his brother's pantry from going empty.

"I helped him out that way, and every once in a while he needed food, because he had an unexpected bill that he had to pay or something like that," says McCarthy.

Housing options running out

Like many things in his life, Doke's apartment came out of the kindness of others. The bright space is crammed with furniture, paintings and knick-knacks passed down from friends, and an inheritance from his mother allowed him to add a coat of paint and colourful rugs to make the place feel "like a home."

Doke was lucky to secure a \$475 monthly housing subsidy from the McLaren Housing Society. Without the grant, he would only have been able to afford one of the city's residential hotels, which the ministry recommends to those on assistance. But Doke feared that he would not be able to survive in an SRO for long, due to the unsafe conditions in some that could especially threaten someone with a compromised immune system.

"You have to share a bathroom down the hallway, and there's 20 or 30 other people on that floor, which is a health hazard," he said. "If I went to an SRO, I think I would be dead."

Judy Graves was Vancouver's advocate for the homeless for 20 years, and is a longtime friend of Doke's. Graves has seen the danger SROs can pose for people who are already sick. She has also witnessed an [increase](#) in people becoming homeless after being priced out of housing.

"When the rent goes up, they simply aren't able to find anything else that adequate to live in. And the rent in Vancouver has been going up, over the entire course of my life."

Kim Stacey fields new requests for housing every month. As the executive director of the McLaren Housing Society, she helps provide affordable housing and subsidies for people living with HIV, including Doke. But there aren't many spaces left.

"Our waitlist is over 500," Stacey says. "Maybe through people passing away or people leaving the program, we might get two or three spots coming up every year, maximum."

While the province of B.C. has worked to improve conditions in SROs, the number of total [affordable spots](#) has been slow to increase.

Remaining positive, despite new challenges

As Doke ages, he has encountered more and more issues with his health.

Two months ago, he received a call from his doctor with bad news: he has liver cancer again. He is now undergoing treatment, and the medications make it more difficult for him to remain active. Scraping by

on just over \$1,000 will likely become even harder. But he still counts himself lucky.

"I'm very, very blessed," Fraser says. "I just hope everything keeps positive because I always have to fight for keeping positive."