



Debbie's story

15 October 2018



Debbie Leyland is a voluntary member of CPAG's Wellington network, and community health campaigner. Speaking recently at CPAG's Summit, [Rethinking the Welfare System if 21st Century](#) Debbie shared her experience of being a beneficiary, and what it's like to live on a low income. Debbie has kindly allowed CPAG to reproduce her talk for the [Welfare Fit for Families](#) campaign.

Every week after I pay rent power and bills I am left with \$70 a week. The sad thing is, among my friends I'm considered rich. My \$70 covers my weekly food, transport, medication and doctor's fees. It's really hard. Most weeks I'm also helping out my family – putting \$10 into my daughter or son's account, or buying them a top up card or whatever they need.

My daughter has carpal tunnel syndrome which affects her hands so she can't work. She has a baby who is only 8 months old. She and her partner are on a benefit, and they are left with just \$102 a week after power and rent, to support two adults and my 8-month-old grandchild. \$102 for food and everything else including nappies.

A while ago my daughter was over, and I found some money under the bed. I asked her what we should buy as a treat, and we both said peaches! It was like we'd won lotto. Who can afford to buy fruit? No one that I know. I haven't seen a full fruit bowl, in the house of anyone I know, for years.

We bought some cauliflower and we were in heaven, it was like Christmas. I'd love to be able to fill my cupboards with fresh vegetables and food so when my family come I could feed them a really wholesome meal. My fridge is empty. I've got a can of baked beans and a can of tomatoes. I haven't bought a block of cheese for months. It's too expensive.

I'm on the invalid's benefits because I suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder due to things that happened during my childhood. I suffer from depression and anxiety. It's very difficult but I'm at a level now where I'm well and I can maintain my life. But sometimes I can't afford my medication, because I don't have enough money, and then I become really unwell.

I feel like being on a benefit has impacted on my life hugely. The saddest thing for me is the reaction when I'm working out in the community. There's a lot of people who, when you say you are a beneficiary, think you are either a bludger, or lazy, or whatever. The second part is the financial restraints – it is nearly impossible to live on that amount of money. People frame being on the benefit as a choice. I didn't wake up and think: "I'm going to go on the benefit and live in complete poverty for the rest of my life." I didn't ask to be here.

Every day I have to make choices. Do I go to the doctor or do I feed the kids? It's an ongoing battle. I used to go out and about, and now I don't. The last time I actually went out with my friends was two-and-a-half years ago. I can't do things that people take for granted like going out as a family for dinner, or going out to entertainment. It's really hard.

It was my granddaughter's birthday the other day, and I just didn't have enough money to buy her a present or even to go out to Porirua to see her. I just had to ring her and say "happy birthday". I'd like to be able to take my daughter or grandchildren for a walk through the town belt but they can't afford the train fare from Porirua, and I can't afford to get out there. Being on the benefit really creates distance within families.

Being on a benefit and being in a Housing Corp house creates a community of fear. If something happens in my house, nothing ever gets done. After the big earthquake, my bedroom door fell off. They haven't come to fix that. The toilet upstairs leaks, my windows have mould all over them and I have to wash them every few days. You can't lock the front door – it's been like that for about a year. I had my granddaughter over here two weeks ago, and she kicked a ball through the window. I rang Housing Corp and they sent someone over to board up the window. It's been three weeks and they still haven't fixed it. But you don't want to kick up too much fuss because there's a constant worry that they might throw you out.

I hate going to Work and Income (WINZ). There's nothing more humiliating than having to go to WINZ and ask a complete stranger for money. It's horrible. When I went to WINZ to get some help with a washing machine, my appointment was at 2 o'clock, but I didn't get to see my case manager until 3.30. People think that if you are on the benefit your time is not important and you have nothing better to do. What about the people who have to pick up their kids from school? My local WINZ in Kilbirnie has moved to Newtown, so if you need assistance or a grant or medicine you have to walk to Newtown. That has affected so many people. We just don't go now. It's too far to walk.

Not having enough resources affects everything - it makes doing things you might take for granted more difficult. For example, I went to the doctor with a friend who was unwell. It had been put off for ages because they couldn't afford to go, but they finally got to go. Only our bus was late so we were 10 minutes late for the appointment, and they cancelled our appointment. My friend still had to pay for the missed appointment, and couldn't really afford to make another one.

I'm asking the Government to increase benefits. By increasing the benefit and providing fairer income support it would mean that I could actually partake in society. I could spend more time with my family, I would be able to eat a healthy diet. I could go to the doctor when I need to. I could have some dignity. Getting a special benefit or an emergency benefit, for example a food grant, as cash would make life so much easier. It would mean I could buy veggies at the Newtown market, cheap Indian grains at places like the Spice Market, and shop around for cheap heaters that I want. Plus, the cards that WINZ gives you are only valid for three days. So in the middle of winter when it's pouring with rain, you have to walk in the rain to the shops and back with your shopping – all because your card can't be used on the bus and you don't have spare money. It's a real struggle.

Debbie Leyland is the co-founder, coordinator and spokesperson for [United Community Action Network \(New Zealand\) or "UCAN NZ"](#) - a coalition of NGOs focused on improving health services in Aotearoa. Debbie is a volunteer member of the steering group of the

Equality Network and has served on the Board of the Newtown Union Health Service for the past five years.