



Foodbank Victoria



Submission to the Inquiry into food
security in Victoria
July 2024

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Foodbank Victoria would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Land and Waters on which we work, produce, and distribute the food that nourishes our community.

We pay our respects to the Elders both past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.



Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the Victorian Government adopts the 18-item United States Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) as a food security measurement tool in future Victorian Population Health Surveys and commits to adequate resourcing to regularly monitor Victorian household food security.

Recommendation 2

That the Victorian Government prioritises healthy, green-rated food when distributing funding for food relief and other initiatives designed to promote food security.

Recommendation 3

That the Victorian Government explores a Food as Medicine approach to proactively support food insecure people living with chronic health conditions.

Recommendation 4

That the Victorian Government continues to support the School Breakfast Clubs Program and explores increasing food access to family foods/pantry items through schools.

Recommendation 5

That the Victorian Government invests in more purpose-built food system infrastructure that can house initiatives such as social supermarkets, community gardens and food literacy programs and support community connectivity.

Recommendation 6

That the Victorian Government supports the National Food Donation Tax Incentive to reduce food waste and facilitate food donations into the emergency relief food system.

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Introduction

Foodbank Victoria welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria being undertaken by the Legal and Social Issues Committee. Foodbank Victoria's commentary is through the lens of a food relief charity responsible for sourcing and distributing food to vulnerable Victorians year-round, including during times of natural disaster. We discuss food insecurity in Victoria in relation to the Terms of Reference, in particular what we know from our Feed It Forward survey and provide evidence-based recommendations for solutions to food insecurity in Victoria. We would be pleased to provide additional evidence at a later date should it be of use to the Committee.

For context, Foodbank Victoria is using the United Nations definition of food security, that it is an experience "when people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." (1)

About Foodbank Victoria

Foodbank Victoria is the state's largest food relief organisation providing vital food relief to vulnerable Victorians for over 90 years. Our vision is Healthy Food for All. To achieve this, we source and rescue a range of fresh food and groceries from farmers, manufacturers, retailers and public donations, and distribute them to almost 500 front-line charities who support community members seeking food relief.

Foodbank Victoria currently feeds more than 65,000 people a day across the state, many of whom are seeking food relief for the very first time. The increasing cost of living continues to drive more Victorian households into severe food insecurity. Demand for our service has never been higher and almost all our partners are reporting increased demand, some by as much as 200%.

We also deliver the School Breakfast Clubs Program on behalf of the Department of Education, which supports school-aged children and their families through breakfast clubs, snacks, lunch, take-home packs and cooking classes currently in more than 1,000 schools across the state. This will expand to all Victorian Government schools by the end of 2026.

Foodbank Victoria plays a key role in times of disaster as the Victorian Government emergency food relief provider. We provide essential supplies to support emergency services and first responders as well as ongoing assistance to affected communities. Foodbank Victoria delivers food literacy programs for students and disadvantaged communities at purpose-built Community Food Centres in Ballarat and Morwell, which have been supported and funded by the State Government Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH).

The impacts of food insecurity

Food Insecurity in Victoria

Food insecurity is a complex phenomenon and although insufficient food is the outcome of food insecurity, it almost always requires more than food to support people to become food secure. There are six pillars listed below that are essential for food security and must be considered in the development of evidence-based initiatives to reduce food insecurity (1).

1. **Availability:** the reliability and frequency of food supply and the quality, variety and price of foods available.
2. **Access:** the physical and economic ability to access the food supply and foods required.
3. **Utilisation:** the ways people use their physical, social, cultural and human resources to transform procured food into meals.
4. **Stability:** the consistency and sustainability of food availability, access and utilisation.
5. **Advocacy:** the capacity of people to feed themselves with dignity and to relate to and shape their food systems.
6. **Sustainability:** the ability of food systems to provide food security and nutrition in a way that does not compromise food security and nutrition for future generations.

Food security exists along a continuum, ranging from food security to severe food insecurity. Marginal food insecurity might present as uncertainty regarding ability to obtain food, with moderate food insecurity leading to individual and households compromising on food quality and variety, reducing food quantity and skipping meals, and severe food insecurity will mean individuals and households are not able to access food for a day or more or, in extreme cases, several days (2).

Measuring food insecurity in Victoria

The 2022 Victorian Population Health Survey (3) estimated 8.1% of the population had experienced severe food insecurity (food insecurity with hunger) in the previous 12 months. It highlighted staggering inequality between rural and metro communities' experience of food insecurity, with 11.6% of rural responders indicating they had experienced severe food insecurity compared to 7.2% of metro responders. The report also found that severe food insecurity was felt more by people aged under 35 years old with 18–24 year olds reporting the highest prevalence, experiencing severe food insecurity at a rate of 11.8%.

This evidence is based on a single question “In the last 12 months, were there any times that you ran out of food and couldn’t afford to buy more”, which only assesses the impact of food affordability on food insecurity and fails to provide insight on the impact of food access, availability and utilisation. It also fails to understand food security across the continuum. It is a blunt tool that underestimates the total number of households experiencing food insecurity and the nuances associated with it (4). This data is unreliable (5).

Currently Foodbank Australia publishes some of the most cited and robust data on food insecurity across Australia in its annual Hunger Report. This report uses the more sophisticated and reliable United States Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) methodology (6) since 2022. However, collection and analysis of important data on food security is the responsibility of Government (5).

We call on the Victorian Government to invest in a comprehensive measurement framework and commit to regular monitoring of household food security, such as the use of best-practice survey instruments including the USDA 18-item food security survey to better understand community and resource allocation needs in Victoria. Some changes may need to be made to account for the Australian population context – for example, tailoring questions to better represent the experiences of diverse populations including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations and the disproportionate barriers faced as well as the culturally significant coping mechanisms and household dynamics (7).

Recommendation 1

That the Victorian Government adopts the 18-item United States Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) as a food security measurement tool in future Victorian Population Health Surveys and commits to adequate resourcing to regularly monitor Victorian household food security.

Food insecurity from a Foodbank Victoria perspective - What we do know

Foodbank Victoria has a unique perspective to understand the Victorian food relief system through both sourcing and distributing emergency food relief. We work with over 600 food growers, producers and manufacturers, almost 500 charity partners, more than 1000 schools and sit on 25 local Emergency Relief networks across the state. We hope the data provided below provides insight for the Committee into the impacts of food insecurity on poverty and hardship as well as the health and wellbeing of everyday Victorians.

“Feed it Forward” – the Foodbank Victoria charity partner survey: insights from community food relief services across Victoria

On 1 July 2024 Foodbank Victoria rolled out the first annual “Feed it Forward” charity partner survey. The purpose of the annual and subsequent quarterly surveys is to understand any changes in the Victorian food relief system through our charity partners. The survey, sent to 502 charity partners, has gathered information such as the type of food relief model used, demand, program changes, new cohorts of people accessing food relief, patterns and trends. Note this information is reported by organisations with first-hand experience in food relief, however we have not surveyed community members accessing food relief directly. The intention is also to be able to share some of the data collected back with charity partners so they can learn from and identify gaps in their local communities. The data below is based on 324 responses.

Preliminary results show:

- Charity partners are seeing many people attending their food program for the first time, with 15% seeing 50 or more new people a month, see Figure 1 below.

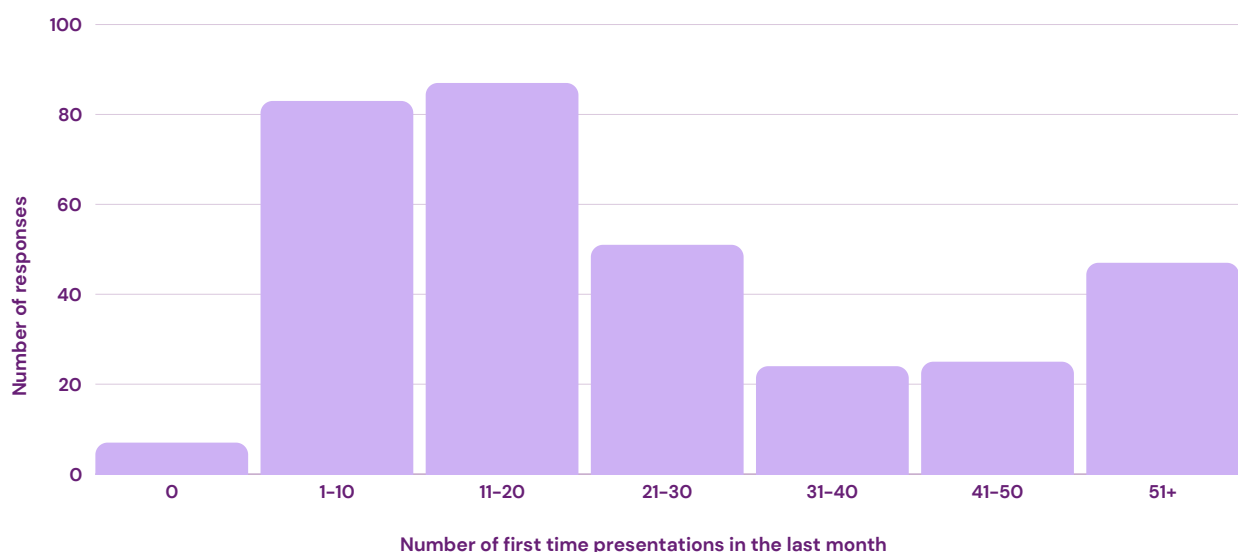


Figure 1. People accessing food relief for the first time.

- The cost of living and financial stress are the main reasons why community are accessing food relief, see Figure 2. Additionally, the majority of partners have seen an increase in people accessing their food program in the last 12 months and over half can not meet the demand for food.

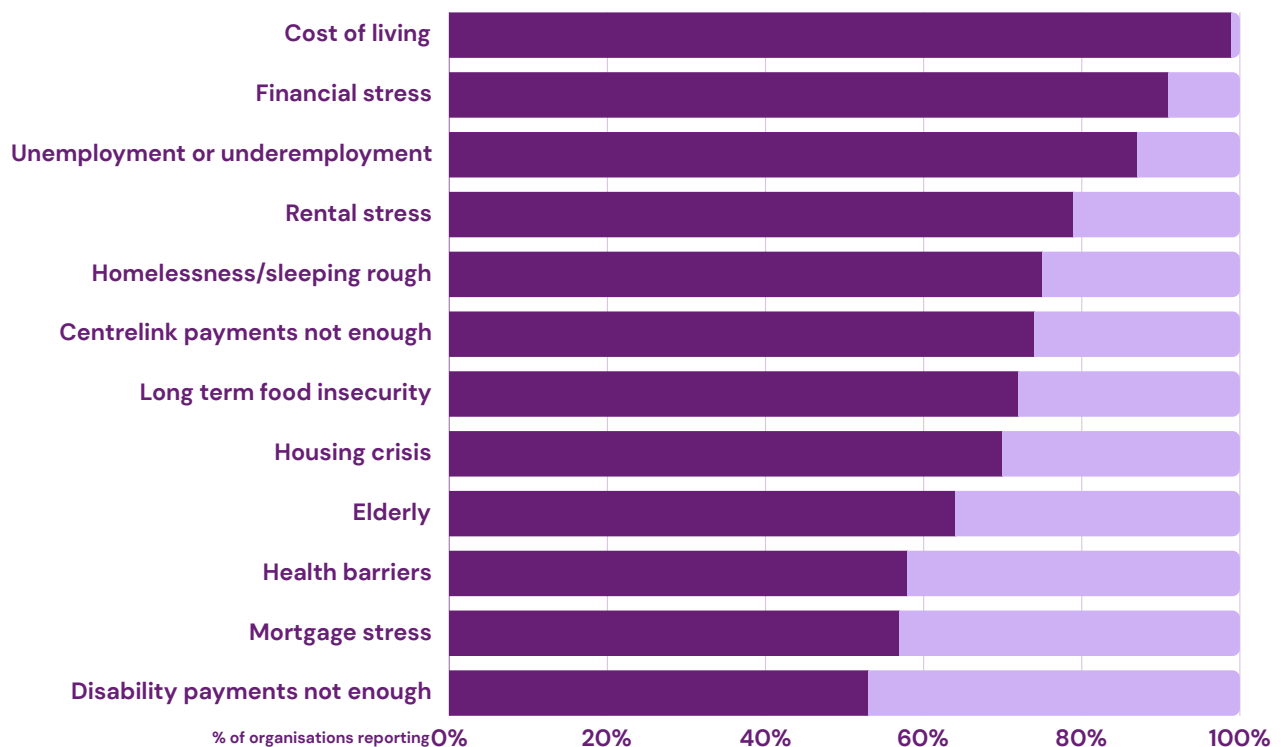


Figure 2. Reported reasons for community accessing food relief.

“

I get Centrelink, spend \$600 on rent and that leaves \$25 for food for the fortnight.

– Tertiary student shopping at Ballarat Community Food Centre social supermarket.

”

- Barriers to accessing food relief include (Figure 3 below):
 - Community members are not necessarily aware of services available to them, especially those who have not accessed food relief before.
 - The stigma attached to receiving food relief.
 - Limited availability of local food relief organisations
 - A lack of services available on weekends (especially from non faith-based organisations) and/or after hours.

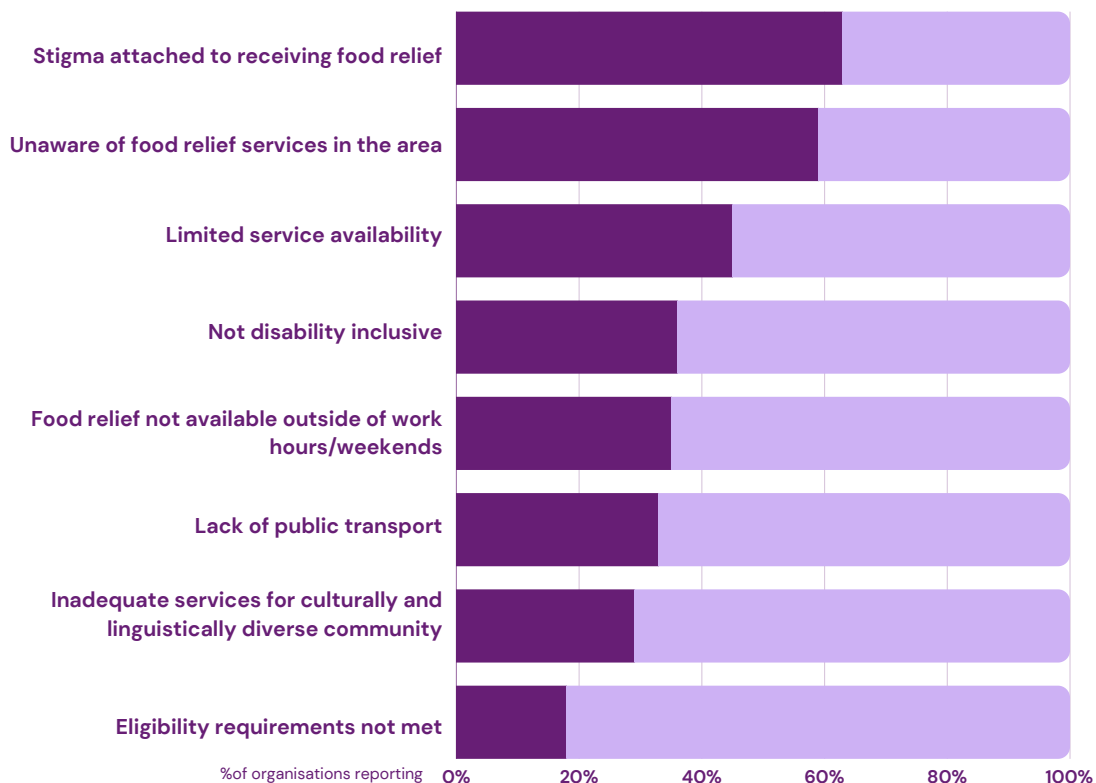


Figure 3. Reported barriers to accessing food relief from a charity partner perspective.

“

[A] community member spoke to our team about how they are struggling to access food at the moment. She has a physical disability, a debilitating medical condition, PTSD and is a victim of family violence. She finds it very challenging to cope physically and emotionally with lining up in a queue with strangers to access food relief, which makes it challenging to access the food support she needs. As a community member she would like to see services looking at different models to suit a variety of people’s needs (quieter, less busy, after-hours access).

– Foodbank Victoria charity partner

”

- Internal funding constraints and a lack of external funding opportunities are two of the most common challenges charity partners face running their food programs, see Figure 4.
- For organisations that access food from sources other than Foodbank Victoria, partners largely rely on community-based donations and otherwise purchase food at retail prices to support their program.

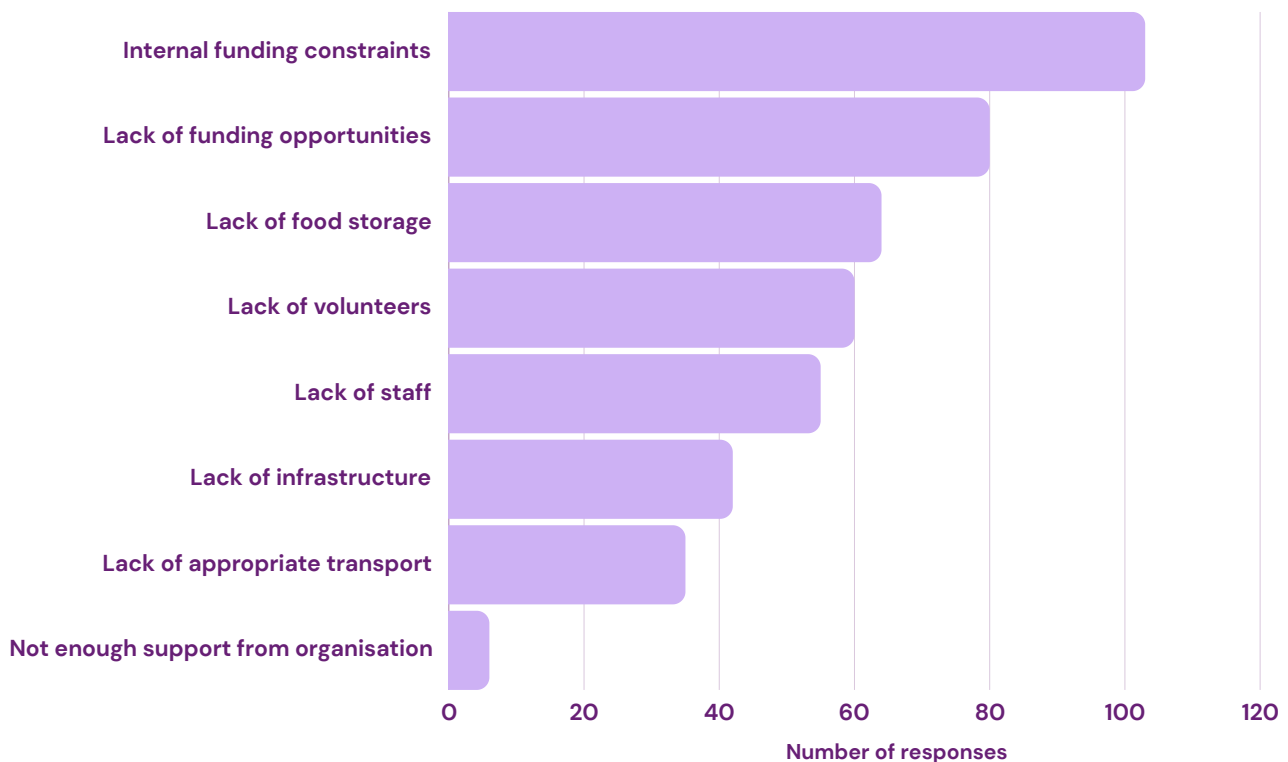


Figure 4. Limiting factors to running a food program.

- Over 85% of charity partners offer wrap-around services in addition to food relief. Examples include case management, financial counselling, material aid, referral services and a variety of education opportunities.
- A significant number of charity partners indicated they would benefit from further educational resources guidance on their food programs.

Physical and mental health

The consequences of experiencing food insecurity are wide reaching and can be long lasting. Physical and mental health are often impacted (8), both of which are exacerbated by a diet with limited nutritious foods which is common for people experiencing food insecurity (9). The Foodbank Australia 2019 Hunger Report found that 70% of food insecure Australians experience high or very high levels of psychological distress compared to only 13% of the general population (10).

“

Organisations [in the local government area] have been reporting demand is higher than the supply available for the local community. Many local services working in the refugee resettlement space are seeing an increased vulnerability in newly-arrived refugees including physical disabilities and more severe mental ill-health. These barriers reduce their capacity to engage with key services.

”

- Emergency relief network member

Additionally, nutrition knowledge and other resources to access and consume healthy foods are also compromised with food insecurity (11). Some common impacts on physical and mental health, across the life course, are noted below:

- Food insecurity during pregnancy is associated with antenatal depression, gestational diabetes, anaemia (12).
- Food insecurity in children has both short- and long-term consequences and is associated with poor developmental and academic outcomes (13).
- Food insecurity among tertiary students is associated with physical and mental ill-health, as well as lower academic grades and high rates of course withdrawals (14; 15).
- Food insecure adults have an increased risk of developing chronic illnesses including type 2 diabetes, kidney disease, cardiovascular diseases and mental health issues (16).
- Older people experiencing food insecurity are more likely to be malnourished (17) and have poorer mental and physical health, and quality of life (18).

“

[We are seeing an] increase in students needing to access the basic necessities coming from industries and the kind of demographics we haven't seen before, so lots of our students are coming in accessing food and welfare support, counselling as well, just to get through the needs of day to day life. We are seeing students working two or three jobs and trying to juggle that once easy balance of being a student and working casually. Now students are working twice as hard and \$50 doesn't last as long as it used to. Noodles are becoming the one meal of the day or for two days, we can't have our students live like this. We need our students bright and able to focus on class rather than worrying about eating and where they are getting money from next week.

”

–Tertiary organisation charity partner

Foodbank Australia has previously researched and mapped the positive impact of food relief on the lives of food insecure people (19). This work indicated that the provision of adequate and appropriate food relief and learning how to cook can lead to outcomes in relation to improved physical health, increased confidence, reduced isolation, improved quality of life and, for children, better performance at school with all the long-term benefits that flow from that. For people experiencing food insecurity, the value of a dignified experience and accessing healthy foods cannot be underestimated. Cooking classes delivered by Foodbank Victoria as part of the Department of Education funded School Breakfast Clubs Program demonstrate gains in knowledge across a variety of food, nutrition and cooking topics, and families cooking more together at home over the course of the program.

Poverty and hardship

Across Victoria we have seen the demand for food relief increase significantly – in the last 12 months particularly. The Find Food (10) service hosted on the Foodbank website is an online directory of food programs and food relief outlets available to the general public. Figure 5 shows the number of clicks recorded on the Find Food service, specifically for the Foodbank Victoria website. Note this is not representative of the total number of people seeking food relief, rather an indication of the number of people looking to find a food relief service. A steady increase is noted across the 2023/24 financial year with significant peaks around Christmas and our current highest monthly usage averaging 305 clicks per day in June 2024.

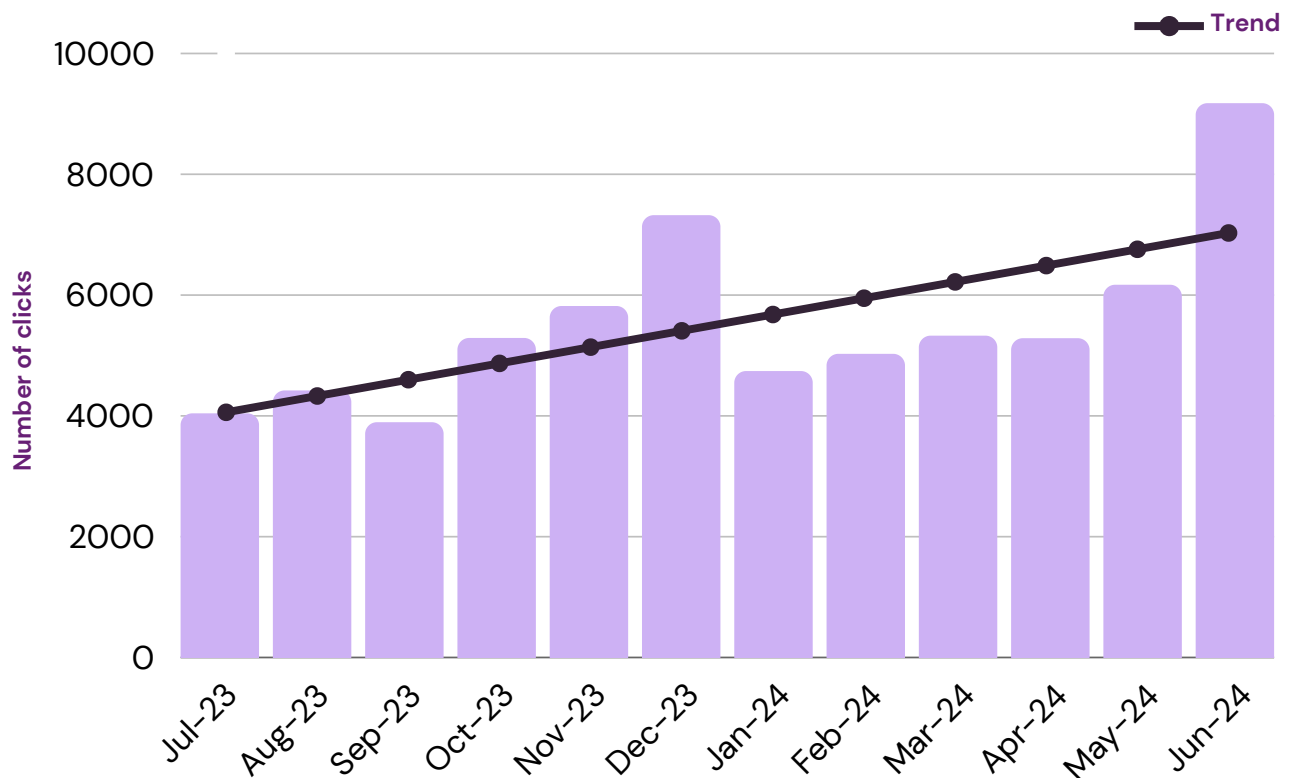


Figure 5. Demand for Find Food service.

“

[We are] definitely seeing an increase in demand, 50% increase in the last twelve months. Lots of homeless women in their 50s who are struggling, who have been carers with no super. A lot of people love the fruit and vegetables.

People are now desperate for food.

”

-Foodbank Victoria charity partner

The increase in users of the Find Food service demonstrates how significant the demand for food relief is in Victoria. This is reflected in the amount of food we are distributing – in the 2023/24 financial year, Foodbank Victoria saw 9.3% growth in distribution to Victorian families.

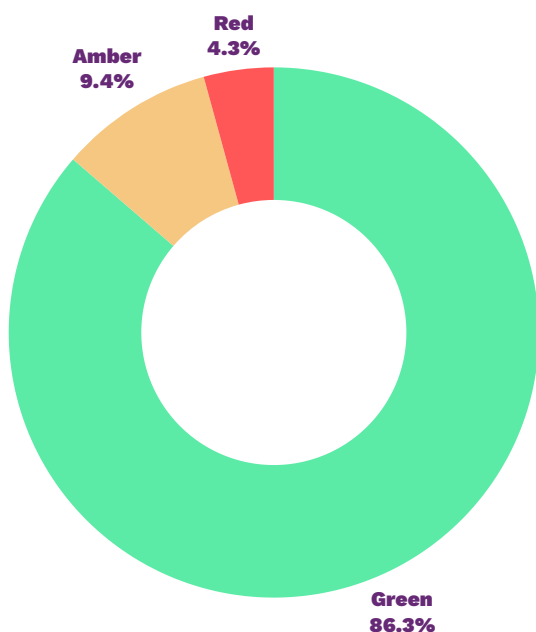
“

Imagine not even being able to use your washing machine because you don't have enough money to run it? Families are struggling coming into winter and struggling to run their washing machine to wash for their children. Foodbank food really helps people to feed their families and allocate other funds to things like power bills.

”

-Foodbank Victoria charity partner

Healthy food relief - It is possible



Nutritious food is embedded in the very definition of food security, and Foodbank Victoria is committed to Healthy Food for All. In practice, this means in July 2022, we implemented a healthy food basket approach to food procurement. A minimum target of 70% of food distributed is green rated, as per the Healthy Food Relief Guidelines for the Victorian Food Relief Sector (in draft) and we offer a range of culturally appropriate food options. In the 2023/24 financial year, green-rated foods made up 86% of food distributed to the Foodbank Victoria charity network, see Figure 6.

Figure 6. Foodbank Victoria healthy food distribution.

However, there is a perception across the food relief sector that any food is suitable food relief. The 2022 Victorian Population Health Survey even commented on the impact of long-term food relief access on the health outcomes as “calorie-dense, obesity causing” foods prevalent in food relief as a likely cause (3). While acknowledging the current gap in quality fresh food and healthy pantry staple provision in food relief, Foodbank Victoria rejects this status quo and prioritises fresh produce in our food sourcing activities, declining donation offers that do not align with our healthy food basket model.

“

It is so good to be able to get fresh produce. The produce from Foodbank is so fresh, I can wrap the vegetables up and it will last for a month.

–Shopper at Foodbank Farms to Families market

”

Research continuously demonstrates that people accessing food relief prioritise accessing healthy foods. A study undertaken recently in the Ballarat Local Government Area highlighted healthy food as important when accessing food relief, especially fruits and vegetables (23). This is reflected in the demand for fresh produce seen by Foodbank Victoria and a subsequent 18% increase in fresh produce (representing over 700,000 kilograms) distributed via our charity partner network in the last financial year.

“People appreciate the fresh fruit and vegetables most. A lot of the people attending are employed, but they say that they can save \$30–50 a week by receiving the fresh food at the Foodbank market.”

–Foodbank Victoria charity partner

Alongside prioritising healthy foods, the availability of and access to culturally appropriate foods is an ongoing barrier to food security. We know that some culturally diverse communities are disproportionately impacted by food accessibility barriers and that some multicultural community members will travel long distances to access support suitable to their needs. Foodbank Victoria compiled data on requested products from our charity partners over a 12-month period and found that, particularly in highly cultural diverse local government areas, the products most requested were foods that would allow these communities to cook their cultural and familiar foods in the home.

Charity partners who work directly with culturally diverse communities across Victoria have found that some cultures find it more challenging to reach out for food relief. Stigma and shame play a huge part in the reluctance to access available food relief. Creative, innovative ways of distributing healthy foods to families have included informal markets, discreet open pantries, linking into schools, shared cooking and distribution and bringing food to weekly cultural activities. Diverse perceptions of health can also influence community experience of food relief and food insecurity. For example, items such as canned food, which are very common in food relief programs, are perceived as unhealthy and there is a preference for fresh or dried items in their place.

Recommendation 2

That the Victorian Government prioritises healthy, green-rated food when distributing funding for food relief and other initiatives designed to promote food security.

What can the Victorian Government do?

Food as Medicine

Food as Medicine is a relatively new concept in Australia, although it has been in use and researched in America and Europe for some time. Food as Medicine sits at the intersection of nutrition and healthcare and could include medically tailored meals and groceries to meet a person's specific needs, and fresh produce prescriptions written by healthcare professionals. Produce prescription programs are associated with increased consumption of fruit and vegetables per day and other clinically significant improvements in chronic disease markers, especially in settings where people have limited access to and knowledge of nutritious foods (20). They typically have a nutrition education component to the programs as well (21). Recent US research into the economic impacts of produce prescription programs demonstrated that as well as generating long-term health gains, they can be highly cost effective: "Accounting for the food and administrative costs of the program, the intervention was highly cost effective from a health perspective" (22).

There is a research project currently underway in Australia, exploring the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of providing free fresh fruits and vegetables to food insecure patients with type 2 diabetes (23). Healthy food boxes will be prescribed to the intervention group once a week for six months. The boxes will contain fruit, vegetables, nuts and wholegrains; and will be accompanied by recipe ideas and Dietitian support for behaviour change. Critical to this project is the commitment from a range of stakeholders, fresh produce supply-chain businesses, government stakeholders and policymakers, healthcare providers and peak bodies for health advocacy.

“ Being able to provide fresh produce is such a bonus to the community...it's been excellent. A man who doesn't cook for himself and usually just eats tinned stuff has been able to be provided with fresh food. The support of Foodbank [Victoria] means we are able to support a large family going through a difficult time with health issues with fresh produce and yoghurt, [this] has made a real difference for them. ”

-Charity partner accessing fresh food at the Ballarat Community Food Centre

The Victorian Government could take a leading role in Australia to explore utilising Food as Medicine programs to improve health outcomes for food insecure people living with chronic diseases in a cost-effective way.

Recommendation 3

That the Victorian Government explores a Food as Medicine approach to proactively support food insecure people living with chronic health conditions.

Food in schools

The Victorian Department of Education funded School Breakfast Clubs Program (SBCP), delivered by Foodbank Victoria, has been running since 2016 and has delivered 45 million meals to primary and secondary student across Victoria. The SBCP provides 28 breakfast and lunch items to schools to make available to students while they are at school, and a home food pack (HFP) with SBCP menu items. Demonstrating their commitment, the Department recently announced an expansion of the program to all government schools in Victoria, with all Victorian Government schools participating by the end of 2026.

In addition to coordinating the procurement and delivery of SBCP food, Foodbank Victoria has a team dedicated to supporting schools to implement their breakfast club programs. Through regular contact with schools across the state we know schools have become a space where families who have never reached out for food relief are presenting as food insecure. Schools offer a unique position of trust and safety for families finding the cost-of-living crisis challenging. During COVID years, schools reported an unexpected number of families approaching them for food relief and these numbers continue to rise. The SBCP has helped by providing child-focussed foods through the home food packs and demand has increased over time, shown in Figure 7.

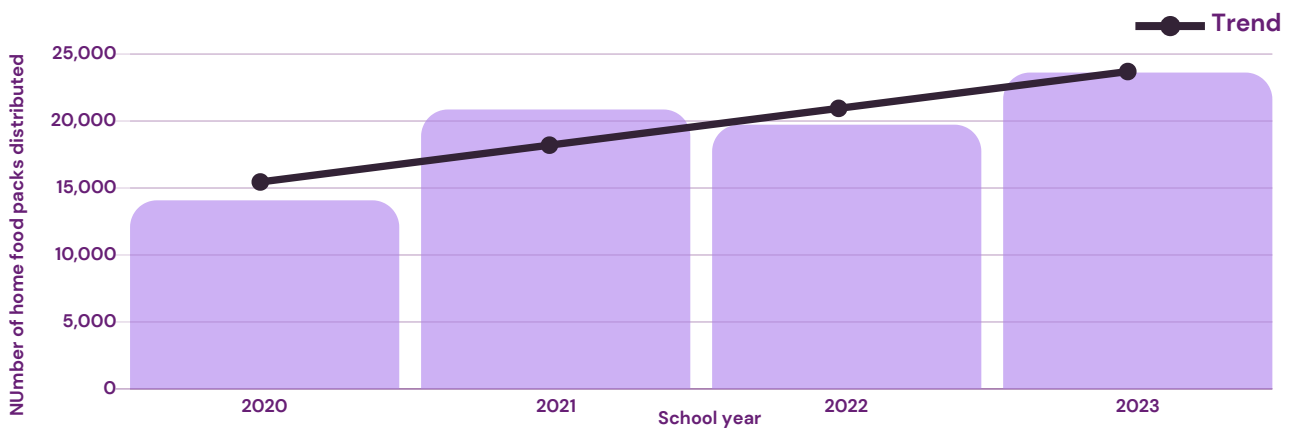


Figure 7. School Breakfast Clubs Program home food pack units distributed.

Many schools have established their own pantries for families to access, based on the 'Give what you can, take what you need' model and some schools have formed partnerships with other organisations to build up the pantry items and distribute to families.

“

The schools run a self-select food pantry for the school community and are well connected to the local community Neighbourhood House who they refer families to.

”

–Emergency relief network member

We've seen high school students attending Foodbank Victoria community-facing markets to collect food for the family, as well as teachers delivering food to families at home to reduce the stigma attached to food relief. Fresh produce is also being frequently requested by families.

Recommendation 4

That the Victorian Government continues to support the School Breakfast Clubs Program and explores increasing food access to family foods/pantry items through schools.

Community food hubs

There is an urgent need to establish more local, community-based food systems that provide the opportunity for communities to take ownership. Such systems should engage local community members, have space for regenerative agriculture, food literacy and skills development and education to all members of the community. More specifically, activities like social supermarkets, food literacy and cooking classes, regenerative agriculture and gardening opportunities, skills development and training can provide a diverse range of opportunities for community members to engage with their local food system. In addition to these, opportunities for social connection, volunteering and referrals to existing service providers strengthen the community.

Purpose-built buildings with available land offer a community asset from which these activities can be based. Examples of existing hubs include the two Community Food Centres run by Foodbank Victoria, funded by DFFH as well as the seven hubs established through VicHealth Future Healthy Food Hubs.

The benefits of purpose-built infrastructure should not be underestimated. A number of existing Foodbank Victoria charity partners attempting to retrofit existing buildings have experienced many hurdles to utilising the space as was originally planned. Experience tells us that some front-line services who currently utilise domestic chillers and freezers to store fresh produce and other essential food relief will no longer be able to afford the running costs, and will cease providing food relief, meaning Foodbanks across the country will need to look at alternate distribution methods to ensure food relief reaches those who need it.

For communities impacted by large scale disasters such as bushfires, floods, droughts, and pandemics it is crucial that local food systems and communities play a pivotal role in disaster preparedness, and in the response and recovery phases of these large-scale disasters. Having a dedicated centre to coordinate and deliver a local food response to local communities and to assist through the continuum of these events is essential to the longstanding cohesiveness and resilience of communities. A key challenge will be ensuring there is sufficient supply to meet demand, without adversely affecting day to day food relief activities.

Recommendation 5

That the Victorian Government invests in more purpose-built food system infrastructure that can house initiatives such as social supermarkets, community gardens and food literacy programs and support community connectivity.

The National Food Donation Tax Incentive

Foodbank Victoria supports the National Food Donation Tax Incentive, a proposal developed by KPMG with the support of End Food Waste Australia and Foodbank Australia (24). Currently, there is no tax recognition for contributing to the transportation, storage and other logistics required in donating to charities. This makes redirecting surplus to food relief a cost that businesses often cannot carry.

This incentive will potentially save the equivalent of around an additional 100 million meals a year and could assist in halving overall food waste by 2030. KPMG estimates a National Food Donation Tax Incentive to have a direct cost to Federal Government of approximately \$50 to \$100 million per annum which is minimal in comparison to the large offsetting social, economic and environmental benefits of approximately \$2 billion per annum and against the current cost of food waste to the Australian economy of \$36.6 billion annually.

The current cost-of-living crisis has made the proposal more pressing than ever. It would mean edible food is not dumped but instead diverted to food relief organisations such as Foodbank to help those going hungry. The Victorian Government has a role to play in supporting such important Federal legislation, to ensure Victorians experiencing food insecurity have access to this food.

Recommendation 6

That the Victorian Government supports the National Food Donation Tax Incentive to reduce food waste and facilitate food donations into the emergency relief food system.

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