

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 20 August 2024

MEMBERS

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Madelaine Griffith, Manager, Research and Design, Foodbank Victoria; and

Christine Crowley, Manager, Melbourne City, OzHarvest.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing on the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Please ensure your mobile phones are switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

Before I continue I would like to acknowledge the country. I would like to begin the hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal people, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and I pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and family. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I would like to welcome all those people watching the public view by live broadcast.

Before I continue I would like to introduce my committee. I am Trung Luu, the Chair of the committee. My Deputy Chair, Mr Ryan Batchelor, is to my left. To my right are Mr Aiv Puglielli, Dr Renee Heath and Mr Joe McCracken.

Before us today are – I would like to welcome them – a representative of Foodbank Victoria, Madelaine Griffith, and Christine Crowley. They are our guests here this morning on the panel.

I would like to read this information to you. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975*, and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberate false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website.

Before we continue, for the Hansard record, would you please state your full name, the organisation you are representing and your position.

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Madelaine Griffith, Manager for Research and Design at Foodbank Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Madelaine.

Christine CROWLEY: Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager for OzHarvest.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Welcome, again. As we inquire into food security in Victoria – I know we have got your submission – I would like to ask you to make an opening statement if you wish, and then we can proceed to questions from there.

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Good morning. I would also like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the lands and waterways where we are today and where Foodbank works, sources and distributes food from. I thank them for their enduring custodianship of the lands that grow this food. I pay my respects to elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations people here and listening today.

Foodbank Victoria is pleased to appear today to provide additional evidence to the committee on the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Our commentary is through the lens of a statewide food security charity responsible for sourcing and distributing food to vulnerable Victorians year-round, including during times of natural disaster. I want to start with a story to remind us that although we are here today discussing important systems-level change, at the end of the day this inquiry is about people. Last week a young mother came to a Foodbank Victoria warehouse with her child in the car. This mother told our receptionist that their child was refusing to go to school because they had no food to take and they were too ashamed to go. This is just one story of many which I know that everybody speaking today and tomorrow will be familiar with.

We deliver the school breakfast clubs program on behalf of the Department of Education, which supports school-aged children and their families in more than a thousand schools across the state. This will extend to all Victorian government schools by 2026. Our annual school survey, which we have just sent out recently, has highlighted the positive impact of this program. One response included the following:

The brekkie club is such a positive culture in our school. It is at regular time when students, staff and community members come together and share food. There is no judgement, no exclusion and no segregation. Everyone is invited, the doors are always open and everyone can have as much to eat as they want.

In 2023 the hunger report that Foodbank Australia prepared really highlighted that food insecurity can be experienced by anyone, especially as cohorts typically not associated with food security emerged in that data. Foodbank Victoria is committed to working with the government and the sector to create a fairer food system, and while this change is undertaken food relief remains an essential component. We currently feed more than 65,000 people a day across the state, many of whom are seeking food relief for the first time. Demand for our service has never been higher, and almost all of our partners have reported increased demand in the past 12 months, some by as much as 200 per cent.

Our vision is healthy food for all. To achieve this we source and rescue a range of fresh food and groceries from over 600 farmers, manufacturers and retailers as well as through public donations and distribute them to almost 500 frontline charities who support community members seeking food relief. In 2022 we implemented a healthy food basket approach to food sourcing and prioritised fresh fruit and vegetables. From this work we know that large-scale healthy food relief is possible.

We believe the six recommendations we have put forward in our submission will help address food security in Victoria. Firstly, by understanding the true burden of food insecurity across the state using a robust measure. This data combined with other data from the sector, including Foodbank's Feed it Forward survey and other large-scale datasets, can help build a nuanced, whole-of-state evidence base to plan actions from. Secondly, by prioritising healthy food relief – in the 2023–24 financial year 85 per cent of the food distributed by Foodbank Victoria was green rated, based on the draft healthy food guidelines for the Victorian food relief sector. Further, a 'food as medicine' approach has promised to proactively support food insecure people living with chronic health conditions. Research shows that healthy food is a priority for people seeking food relief. Thirdly, by continuing our support to school-aged children and their families with the existing school breakfast clubs program and exploring how the school environment, which is traditionally a trusted place, could support access to family-type foods; by investing in infrastructure that is purpose-built and supports local communities to access food, participate in food literacy and gardening programs and supports community connectivity; and finally, by increasing the volume of food moving through the food relief sector through the federal state tax incentive that would otherwise be wasted will help meet the current overwhelming demand.

Thank you. I welcome any questions from the committee when ready.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that. Do you want to make any comments at all, Christine?

Christine CROWLEY: I have got a statement as well. Thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of OzHarvest. I want to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Aside from our own submission, OzHarvest also coordinated a submission signed by almost 50 of our partner agencies, submission 130. Many of these smaller charities are run off their feet and do not have the capacity to make a submission, but they are on the front line every day and we felt it was important that their voices were heard.

For background, OzHarvest was founded in 2004 by Ronnie Kahn and is well known for our bright-yellow vans that collect surplus food from around the country from over 2600 food donors, including manufacturers, producers, supermarkets, restaurants, cafes and hotels. We deliver it direct and free of charge to 1500 charities that feed people in need. The financial savings for charities from not having to buy food enable them to invest in other programs they deliver and the community support services they offer. We have been operating in Victoria since 2014 and currently have a fleet of nine vans that are out Monday to Friday all the way from Werribee to Rye. In the last financial year we rescued over 2.5 million kilos of quality, nutritious food from 355 donors, which enabled us to deliver 5 million meals to 141 charities who help feed people in need.

In addition to food rescue, we run two education programs in Victoria. We run FEAST, which is a curriculum-aligned program for primary and high schools, and NEST, which teaches healthy cooking and nutrition on a budget to vulnerable communities. Both focus on creating long-term behavioural change, and NEST is proven to improve food security. We are overwhelmingly funded from the community through fundraising, philanthropy and corporate support. Whilst we have received state funding in previous years, mainly during COVID, we currently receive no state government funding.

Food security is a problem that is not going away. We know from our annual community needs survey that 87 per cent of the Victorian charities we support report an increase in demand for food in the past six months. Whilst we are doing our best to deliver as much as we can, 74 per cent of our charities need more food. In fact the majority tell us they could take more than double to meet the demand. We are seeing new people every day turning to our charities for help, and nearly a third are seeking food relief for the first time in their lives. These are people who have jobs and somewhere to live – hardworking Australians who are struggling to make ends meet. They are often faced with impossible choices. One quote from a client accessing food said, ‘We have to choose whether to pay rent or eat; we can’t afford both.’ The truth is we have never seen the level of demand so high and we do not have enough food to feed everyone. There are currently 146 charities on our waitlist at OzHarvest Melbourne to receive food.

Alongside the whole food relief sector, we are here to serve the most vulnerable in our community and absolutely need long-term and sustainable government funding to help us address the ongoing need. Food is often the first thing people turn to for help and can act as a gateway to other services. If they cannot access food, they often do not seek other help. There is surplus food across the whole supply chain in Victoria and this could provide much-needed food relief, but OzHarvest and others in our sector do not have the resources to rescue and redistribute it all. At the same time, more people than ever are going hungry.

We urge the government to consider all the contributing factors that impact food security and options to address them and to fully understand the needs of the community and the ongoing challenges faced by organisations tasked with helping them. From OzHarvest’s perspective, and on behalf of many of the smaller charities on the front line of food relief, things have never been this tough. We appreciate action now more than ever. Thank you for inviting us to speak.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Christine. My apologies: I realise you are from OzHarvest but I mentioned you are from Foodbank. I correct that. Thank you for your statement. We will continue with questions now. I just remind the committee we have about 5 minutes each. If we have time after that, we will come back to you for a second question or a third question. I will start off. Madelaine, you mentioned green-rated food. Could you just expand on that?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: In 2021–22, I believe, members of the Victorian food relief sector came together to produce a series of draft guidelines for food relief in Victoria. This is still in draft form, so it has been sitting there, as I understand it, for quite a while, but essentially that means that green-rated food is healthy food – definitely fresh fruit and vegetables, all sorts of fresh food, as well as minimally processed foods that offer nutritional value to everybody eating them. It is a very similar process to what is used by healthy eating advisory services across the schools and the sporting clubs et cetera, so it is essentially a traffic-light system that can be easily adopted. Especially if it were implemented in the food relief sector, it could be a fantastic guideline for all charities sourcing and distributing food as well as cooking.

The CHAIR: I know the school program – I have seen it in action – it is a fantastic breakfast. Has there been any consideration of extending the school program? Is it just breakfast, or is it lunch as well?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Yes. There are 28 items on the menu. There are breakfast items, lunch and snack items as well, and there is also a take-home packed hamper which consists of those other items. Although the focus is on breakfast for this program, there are offerings for students that need it throughout the day for snacks, lunch and then it is also available for families to take home.

The CHAIR: And that is both high school and primary school?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Yes.

The CHAIR: This is for you, Christine. You mentioned rescued food. Could you just expand on that, whether that is from farm producers or from supermarkets? How do you rescue food?

Christine CROWLEY: Where do we rescue food from?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Christine CROWLEY: It is across the supply chain, so we go to warehouses, supermarkets, cafes, the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre. We rescue from all across the supply chain, any corporate or business.

The CHAIR: And do you go down to the farm producers as well, or not?

Christine CROWLEY: We do not currently have the resources. We have been contacted by a few, but it is not something that is regular. If we do get contacted by them, it just depends on how much they have.

The CHAIR: If you had those sorts of resources, would you be able to do that?

Christine CROWLEY: Again, it depends on how much they have. Our biggest truck is six pallets, and we once got contacted by a farm to collect 100 pallets of lettuce, so we could not rescue that, but we did pass it on to other food relief organisations that had the capacity. But there is lots of food on farms that can be rescued, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you for that. I think the organisations provide a valuable resource to the community, and I commend you for what you are doing at the moment. I might hold it there and I will pass the question to the next committee member.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Madelaine, Christine, thanks so much for coming in. What do you think the fundamental drivers of food insecurity are? Just to get to the heart of what this inquiry is supposed to be doing.

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Yes, absolutely. Food insecurity is essentially an economic issue, and it is all of the ways that the society is set up that cause, for example, the cost-of-living crisis that makes making ends meet too challenging for people. We can look at the social determinants of health. That can talk to us about things like education levels, types of employment, employment or unemployment and all sorts of other things that make it more difficult for people to earn enough to pay for the cost of food, and at the moment the cost of food is astronomical, as we all know, and that just makes it that much harder. As Christine said, they are seeing people who are working and have not had to access food relief before. And many people are not accessing it, so there is a real change in these past few years that the cost of living is too great for people to bear.

Christine CROWLEY: Pretty much exactly that – it is a complex issue, but there are various contributing factors: costs of living, housing, health, family violence. There are a lot of contributing factors.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Looking at this from a state government point of view, the committee has got to make some recommendations about pretty big and fundamental issues that address this, so understanding the drivers is important and understanding what the responses could be. What do you think some of the key measures that we should be looking at taking are to address both the fundamentals and the symptoms?

Christine CROWLEY: One of the recommendations that actually both Foodbank and OzHarvest put forward is a standardised tool of measurement so we actually understand and speak the same language across all different organisations in regard to measuring food security in the future. Something like that – having the same language – makes it easier to address the issue.

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Absolutely. Some of the other recommendations that I touched on before, that when money is spent on food relief, it should be directed towards healthy, nutritious food that really supports people to move out of food insecurity and have good health. As well as the national food donation tax that is currently with the federal Senate at the moment, that would be a way for a lot more food to move into the sector that can then be distributed. We have a lack of food at the moment, and that would help address getting more food to people in need who are in crisis now and need it now.

I think it is worth pointing out that food security exists along a spectrum. The recommendation for the 18-point United States model for measuring food security would help us determine this. At the moment we ask one simple question that highlights severe food insecurity, but in fact we have severe food insecurity, moderate, mild, as well as people who are food secure. It is on a spectrum and people can move along it, and people need different things at different points depending on where they are at. So if somebody is in severe food insecurity and has no money, then they need a particular kind of service; for example, emergency food relief. If somebody is in moderate food insecurity, they might be compromising the type of food that they are eating and potentially having less nutritious food, so something more like food literacy programs that can help them learn about how to budget and get nutritious foods at a lower price could be something that is suitable for them. I think it is important to look at it across the spectrum of food security and recognise that there are different things required for different people.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I am interested in this idea about this federal tax incentive for food waste. Could you explain a bit more about what that is and how it would work?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: I do not have a lot of details on that, but I know that Foodbank Victoria completely supports the Foodbank Australia position. It is to incentivise food producers and a lot of fresh fruit and vegetable producers to donate food into the secondary food relief sector that at the moment is a cost to them. So it is making it more enticing and beneficial to the whole system, and that is perfectly edible food but at the moment there is no pathway for that to come into the sector. Places like Foodbank Victoria have got a statewide reach with a lot of logistics around it, and other organisations can then get that to where it needs to go to.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I might leave it there and come back in the second round.

The CHAIR: Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. Thank you, guys, so much for coming in and for your submission and presentation. Just from the outset – amazing work that you guys do. I know that Trung asked before about food rescue. What is that exactly? Is it food that would be wasted, or food that meets certain criteria?

Christine CROWLEY: It is a range. So it might be you go to the supermarket and then there might be one item – in a kilo bag of oranges one is a little bit bad so they cannot sell it, so it is the rest of that. It might be overstocking, getting in new stock or issues in the supply chain so they have over ordered, or catering at events – not all the food is served, it is in the back waiting and then they have had a hundred out of 500 people cancel. That is the food that we are collecting.

Renee HEATH: That would be used if it was, for instance, catering for emergency relief, is it? Is it things that are – sorry about being a bit naive about this – like sandwiches and things that are made up or more ingredients?

Christine CROWLEY: It can be. At OzHarvest we collect everything. There are a few that we do not because it is high risk, but everything from pre-made food like catering we can collect within 24 hours to fresh produce, to frozen meat, dairy – we collect across all types of food, all categories of food.

Renee HEATH: Is there still a lot of food going to waste from supermarkets and different places?

Christine CROWLEY: There is food waste across the whole supply chain, you know. There is food waste at farms, in factories, in warehouses, at the supermarkets, but also at homes, so it is across every aspect of the supply.

Renee HEATH: Madelaine, you said 65,000 people per day you are reaching. Do you have any idea of those you are not reaching, in numbers? How do you access these people?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: It is extremely hard to know, because they sort of do not turn up in the data in the same way. But what we know from last year's hunger report from Foodbank Australia was that about half of people who are food insecure are not reaching out and seeking food relief, and the biggest reason for that is stigma and the stress and the shame of accessing food relief – that we hear from community members – and also people not knowing where to access food relief from. They are sort of the top two barriers that we have found, and they came through in our recent Feed it Forward survey, where we went out to our 500-odd charity

partners and heard back from them that they were the top two reasons why people were not accessing the food that they need – a lot of people.

Renee HEATH: Yes, huge. And you mentioned that there is one simple question you ask regarding food security – is that what you said? What is that?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: The current methodology used in Victoria for food security – understanding what that is – is one question, and it is ‘In the past 12 months have you ever gone without food and not been able to afford to buy more?’ That really points to people who are completely out of money and cannot access more food. The first recommendation that we have on this 18-item module from the states is a lot more nuanced. Yes, it asks about if you have run out of money and those sorts of things but also if you have been stressed about running out of food, if you have changed your diet for running out of food and if you have gone hungry for running out of food. If that model was to be implemented, it would give us an understanding of, along that spectrum that I mentioned before, what it looks like for people.

Renee HEATH: I actually went to the opening of the Foodbank in Morwell. It was just wonderful. They were saying that this issue has just exploded. It is getting so much worse. Do you know how we are measuring in Victoria next to other states? Is it worse, is it better or is this across the board? I understand that you may not have that.

Madelaine GRIFFITH: No. As far as I am aware, it is across Victoria because so many of the drivers are Australia-wide problems.

Renee HEATH: Yes, okay. What is food literacy?

Christine CROWLEY: Food literacy – so we have two programs at OzHarvest: NEST and FEAST. FEAST is the one with schools, so it is curriculum aligned for grade 5 and 6, year 7 and 8. It is getting healthy food in the hands of kids, so they learn recipes and they learn teamwork while they are doing recipes together. It is introducing them to food earlier. And NEST is our nutrition program that is for adults – we have also got a youth one at the moment, but that is run directly in communities and it is the same thing – so the focus of that is English food literacy. It is teaching healthy eating on a budget, how to read food labels and how to make healthy choices – if you have only got so much money to spend, how do you cook healthier? We have a range of different clients. That is supported by quite a few councils across Melbourne, so we run them at neighbourhood houses, we run them at different charities, like Men’s Shed, and it is teaching food skills on a budget.

Renee HEATH: Great. Wonderful. Thanks so much.

The CHAIR: Aiv.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Thank you both for coming in and for all the amazing work that you do out in the community. I might begin first with you, Christine, in relation to OzHarvest. I understand in your submission, one of the recommendations under ‘Take immediate action to reduce the cost of food in Victoria’ is to consider options to introduce pricing caps on essential groceries, as delivered, for example, in France and Croatia. Could you tell us a bit more about that and why it has been recommended?

Christine CROWLEY: It is more along the lines of there are so many factors, and cost of living and food prices have been addressed as one. In our industry of food, it is focusing on all the different factors. But the details around Croatia and France I do not have with me at the moment, sorry.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I completely understand that; we are in the Victorian context. But I suppose in terms of why pricing caps, for example, are recommended on those essential items, why do you think that is important?

Christine CROWLEY: It is just more, again, the cost of living. It is one of the key factors. Housing, financial – all of that comes into it, but we mention that more from the food perspective because that is what we deal with every day. We have been told that food is usually the first thing to go if people have a choice between rent or other costs. Food is not the easiest but the hardest and quickest decision to make.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is really useful that you have listed it out in that way because, as Mr Batchelor mentioned, we are looking for potential recommendations at the end of this process, so it is awesome that you

have been quite explicit with an option. In terms of the essential grocery items, could you perhaps give a bit of an idea to the committee of what some of those items could be?

Christine CROWLEY: Essential grocery items?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes.

Christine CROWLEY: We have also mentioned in it that everyone has the right to food. Along with essential items we want everyone to have access to a safe, equitable and culturally appropriate food system – access to food – so those essentials are part of that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So are you saying that some of those essentials might change for different people?

Christine CROWLEY: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So it is important that whatever is deemed essential is broad enough to cover the diverse communities in Victoria.

Christine CROWLEY: Absolutely.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Would you consider the provision of food an essential service?

Christine CROWLEY: Yes. Food relief, we know, is not a solution, but it is necessary right now. We got funding during COVID because there was higher need during COVID. Individuals and our sector got additional funding, so we were able to meet that need. Whereas now that funding has finished up, but every day people are still faced with emergencies. Just because there is not a pandemic or a flood does not mean that emergencies still are not happening for people, so food is very much a right every single day.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Madelaine, how about you? That same question: do you consider the provision of food to Victorians to be an essential service?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Yes, I think that is important. You were asking about some of the potential actual food items; we could certainly look to the Australian dietary guidelines and the foods that are recommended as part of a healthy diet within that. That is flexible enough to be culturally responsive, Victoria being such a diverse state. So it is important that part of the food security definition is that it is healthy food, it is affordable and it is culturally suitable for people. It is important that if there were a list, so to speak, or a group of items, there would be enough fluidity in that that it would meet the diverse needs of Victorians.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. In respect to the Foodbank submission's recommendation 5, that the Victorian government invests in more purpose-built food system infrastructure that can house initiatives such as social supermarkets, could you tell us a bit about what social supermarkets are?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Sure. They are a system of food relief that is very popular in Europe and America. The UK have a lot. We have a few in Australia. They are essentially replicating a retail-like experience for people so that for people accessing food relief it is a very dignified experience. There is often a cost associated with it, so there is still the dignity of paying for food and being treated like you would be if you were going to another supermarket. Important parts of a social supermarket model are to have choice available for people to meet their diverse needs and that there is affordable access. Wraparound services are often a really important part of that set-up in a physical sense, so if people are coming to access food at a social supermarket there are also other services around that can support that person and those families in other ways that they need.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Awesome. So the Victorian government should invest in more of those?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Terrific. Well, thank you both for coming in. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr McCracken.

Joe McCracken: Thank you both for coming in. I appreciate your contributions. I too just want to get to the heart of the cause of food insecurity. We talked about it before with some of the contributions that have

already been made. As you say, Madelaine, it is an economic issue and people are making economic decisions. Is it the case that people are deciding to not buy food because rent is too high or electricity and those sorts of things are too high –

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Yes.

Joe McCracken: I know it is probably yes to all of them, but is it the case that people may not be – I will just say it – making wise decisions and they might be buying takeaway instead of cooking a healthy meal? I am trying to really drill down to what the drivers are. I think you might have even said that food costs are astronomically high. What is your view as to why that is?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Why the cost of food is so high?

Joe McCracken: Yes.

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Well, that is the price that the supermarkets are putting on the shelves. I know that they or some of their representatives will be speaking later today to talk about the detail of that, but I think that is the essential point – that the cost has gone up. Certainly there have been changes to the supply – recovery from COVID and all the disruptions caused there and other things happening around the world have all impacted on that. But certainly in the past couple of years the cost of going to do a weekly shop, for example, or just getting some things you need for dinner or whatever the circumstances are is now out of reach for a lot of people for whom it was not previously.

Joe McCracken: I do not mean to be disrespectful, but it would be great if we did not need you guys.

Christine CROWLEY: One hundred per cent.

Joe McCracken: We would love everyone to have food security – to be able to pick and choose what they want to eat, whatever is culturally appropriate for them – and you guys are sort of a safety net, but a safety net that cannot reach as many people as you said you would like to. What are you hearing from people that come to you about the things that cause them to come to you? Is it ‘I can’t pay my bill’ or is it ‘I have lost my job’? I am trying to understand: what are the drivers that drive people to you?

Christine CROWLEY: We have a community needs survey that we did, and I do not have those numbers in front of me, but there was, again, a range of factors. It could be that there are mortgage payments or it is just the general cost of living. As Maddie spoke to before, kids are not getting food – they cannot take food to school, so they might be embarrassed. When you talked before about whether it is a literacy issue where people are picking the wrong options or it is the cost of living, it could be a range for different people and what they have access to. They might not have access to the education that others might have access to. So it really does change for individuals.

Madelaine GRIFFITH: In our recent Feed it Forward survey we asked that specific question. We asked it of the partners we work with, not of people accessing food relief, but they are working on the front line and really know the communities that they work with. Almost 100 per cent of the responders said that the cost of living is the reason people are coming in, followed by financial stress, unemployment or underemployment, rental stress, people who are experiencing homelessness and sleeping rough, where Centrelink payments are not enough, people who have experienced long term food insecurity, housing crisis and health barriers, and there are a few others as well. So there are a real range of reasons why people might need to seek food relief. But all of those speak to not enough money, essentially – all of those issues.

Coming back to the question about whether it is just that there is not enough money, well, I think that is certainly a huge component of it. Or is it people that are making choices that they could otherwise be doing? I think if we try and put ourselves in the position of someone who does not have enough money and is trying to do the best that they can, what that looks like is going to be different for each different person. This is why I think there are range of measures that are important and that there are things associated with the price of food and the amount of money that people have. But then it is also, ‘Okay, well, if you do have some money and this amount, how could you maximise that for yourself and for your family?’ Some people are fantastic cooks that just need access to the food, and then other people have never learned to cook. So there are different sorts of needs for different people. I think that is important to remember.

Joe McCracken: It makes sense. Thanks very much. I appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Joe. I know Ryan is halfway through his questions. Ryan, please.

Ryan Batchelor: You mentioned that income is a big driver in food insecurity. The need for increased payments – obviously the federal government has a responsibility for income support. They can always do more. How much of the support that you get in a funding and program sense do you get from the federal government? Do you know?

Madelaine Griffith: I am not sure, actually.

Ryan Batchelor: Do you mind finding out and providing it to us on notice?

Madelaine Griffith: Sure. Yes.

Ryan Batchelor: I think one of the things that strikes me is that improvement to the income support system would be a very significant improvement that we could make to addressing the issue of food security, because it is driven by cost. A little bit of the challenge I think that we face in this state is that we are often left to pick up the pieces from a federal government that was not doing enough over many years. My other question, Madelaine, is: could you quantify any of the benefits you see arriving from the school breakfast club program? Obviously it has been progressively supported over a number of years. There is sort of a big expansion coming, funded in the recent state budget. Have you seen the benefits of that program so far, and what do you expect to see as it goes out to more schools?

Madelaine Griffith: It has been running since 2016, so we have got a long history of the benefit of the program. We have recently just put out the annual survey. The initial results I am getting back for this year are certainly that it has an impact on children's attendance at school, children's concentration, their ability to learn, the relationships between the school and the home, and the relationships between the school and the students. It is really wide reaching in terms of the benefits of it, and obviously the more schools that it can be in, the more children are supported – and families.

We also have the cooking classes program as a smaller component of that. That is not as available to all schools across the state, but we know from those schools that have participated in that that families are cooking more together at home. There is a real sense of connection for families within the class that obviously feeds back into the home. That is a particularly important aspect for reaching families for schools that might be harder to connect with, so it is a really fantastic program.

This year we asked for the first time if schools were reaching out and providing other food – not school breakfast club food – and other items to families. The data is very early, but there are certainly a lot of schools that are doing that. Some of them are paying for that; some of them are seeking funding for that. Certainly as schools are a trusted space, I think there is an opportunity there to look at how else – although they are extremely busy – as a sort of place-based approach, they are a fantastic location.

Ryan Batchelor: Thanks very much. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: There is just a minute or so left. I have just got a quick question before we finish off. What we are hearing is basically there are two types: there is the driver of cost of living and economic issues, which causes the issue in relation to people demanding your service, but also on the other hand there is food waste, which can assist with accessibility of food. You touched on this in relation to supports from governments, state and federal, and tax incentives from the feds. What kinds of recommendations can you see to assist in relation to accessing more food waste or stopping the food waste?

Christine Crowley: I think, as a state support, the national donation tax. I know it is federal, but as a state we can advocate for it because we can see the benefits on the ground here. And this is not necessarily an end to food waste, but one of the drivers is to invest in educational programs in schools and communities, because I think across the board that is shown to have dramatic impact on what we do.

The CHAIR: We have got 1 minute left. Are there any other questions?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I might just clarify one of my last questions, if that is okay, because it sounds like we both agreed that the provision of food is an essential service to the community. To get slightly more technical, if the Essential Services Commission regulated that as such, would you both support that?

Madelaine GRIFFITH: Yes.

Christine CROWLEY: Yes, but there would also need to be funding for things like infrastructure. If there is all this food available, that is great, but our charities and the food relief sector need funding to match that with infrastructure and resources.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Totally. Thank you. Perfect.

The CHAIR: Our time is up. Again, thank you so much, Madelaine and Christine, for coming in and providing all your evidence. It is crucial, and it is something we will take in to form our conclusions and recommendations down the track. Thank you very much for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.