

**Submission
No 110**

INQUIRY INTO FOOD SECURITY IN VICTORIA

Organisation: The Community Hubs of Hume and Greater Shepparton

Date Received: 26 July 2024



**Submission to the Victorian Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues
Committee's Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria**

**Hume and Greater Shepparton Community Hubs
(Community Hubs Australia)**

July 2024

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Community Hubs Australia (CHA) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving social cohesion by achieving positive settlement outcomes for Australia's newest residents. Our goal is to assist culturally diverse people, regardless of their arrival status (refugee, migrant, temporary visa), to integrate into Australian communities.

CHA works in partnership with government, businesses, philanthropy, not-for-profits, and community organisations to fund and facilitate locally generated programs that reduce isolation and increase connection.

CHA delivers a network of community hubs across Australia, to engage with and support women with pre-school children from diverse communities.

A community hub is a place-based people-centered program that connects people (mainly women) with schools, with each other and with organisation that offer services such as health, education and settlement support.

Hubs are embedded in primary schools, and harness existing school infrastructure and local community or government services.

CHA partners with specialist support agencies to operate community hubs in local government areas in Victoria (41 sites), New South Wales (25 sites), Queensland (21 sites) and South Australia (10 sites).

The Victorian Community Hubs who contributed to this submission are situated within Hume City Council (15 sites) and Greater Shepparton City Council (3 sites). Hubs are also situated in Brimbank, Wyndham, Geelong, Dandenong and Casey Council areas in Victoria.

1.2 RESPONSE TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

1.2.1 the impact of food insecurity in Victoria, on —

(a) physical and mental health;

According to the 'Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023-2027' less than 10% of women and 3% of men consume the recommended daily serves of fruit and vegetables.

Since Covid, Hubs have seen an increased demand for food relief from families, with more struggling to feed their children and children attending school without breakfast and/or lunch.

Schools noticed that lack of nutritious food impacts on students' concentration and ability to learn, same as per adult learners in the Community Hubs. Food insecurity has created stress and increased mental health issues which has deteriorated the general wellbeing of families.

The Shepparton region saw food shortages in the floods as the transport system failed, with the water blocking truck access to the supermarkets and relief centres and washing away roads. We produce 25% of Australia's agricultural products in the Goulburn Valley but cannot access enough food locally to feed our residents in an emergency.

Mooroopna Education and Activity Centre established a food pantry after another local service for food relief was flooded and couldn't reopen.

Mooroopna Park and Gowrie Street Primary Schools have implemented meals programs, with breakfast, morning tea and lunch provided to all students. The chefs are paid an education support staff wage, with Shepparton Foodshare and Foodbank supplying the food.

This has significantly improved the behaviours, physical and mental health and development of students. Multiple pallets of food were given to families either side of each school holiday break this year for the first time.

The supermarket in Mooroopna North has closed and the Mooroopna supermarkets are too far for residents to walk. Over the whole region there is minimal bus service, with no bus service on Saturday afternoon or Sunday.

(b) poverty and hardship;

As noted in the 'Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023-2027', 17% of people with a household income less than \$40,000 are experiencing extreme food insecurity.

Many Community Hub families must choose between food, rent, utilities, medication and other basic needs as current incomes are not sufficient for cost-of-living pressures. Families are living paycheck to paycheck, with no savings aside for emergencies. Inflation has impacted the cost of living including rents, food, medications, insurances and many basic needs items.

Since the establishment of food relief at the Hume Community Hubs, the numbers of boxes and packs provided to families have more than doubled in 2 years. Families have reported struggles due to increased cost of living even when they are working.

Families who are struggling with food insecurity have cut costs and stopped taking their ongoing needed medications. This impacts their physical and mental wellbeing and deteriorates their conditions of living.

Post Covid, the hubs have seen an increased level of poverty and hardship, with some areas of Hume seeing large extended families of 10-15 people having to live together to cover daily expenses. This impacts on individual mental health, and functionality, with children not being able to concentrate for homework and not getting proper rest and sleep.

Lack of access to basic needs places pressure and stress on families impacting the family unit's cohesion, and young people's sense of belonging and safety.

Hubs have also witnessed that extended families have sent back overseas children who were previously sent to family members in Australia for a better life, as the families in Australia cannot afford to support them anymore.

Shepparton Foodshare, community run and funded food relief service who supplies to the Hubs, struggles to keep up with demand which continues to increase. 13x agencies access the service every week and last month the equivalent of 100,000 meals was provided to community – in June 2023 it was 70,000. The demand is higher than the supply!

Foodbank is helpful but provides minimal fresh food and rarely receives culturally appropriate food. One hub does not source any supplies through Foodbank as the food is not culturally appropriate. In the past, staff and volunteers drove from Shepparton to the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre and Sikh Volunteers Australia in Melbourne to access appropriate food for struggling families who arrived in Australia with minimal income/savings and no work rights.

(2) options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

The need for more affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food is a priority. Hume Hubs have implemented food markets in collaboration with Foodbank and they were very successful as they provided agency for people to choose what they liked, and broke the stigma of attending food relief agencies with long queues and strict requirements. The markets offered fresh fruit and veggies, all culturally appropriate for the receiving communities, that would normally be unaffordable. The markets also offered opportunities to receive further information about other services available and to try “on the spot” new dishes freshly made with in season products. To support this model to succeed, a federal tax on unhealthy foods could be used to subsidise the cost of fresh, healthy foods.

Hubs have worked in close collaboration with Foodbank to educate their staff on what food was required in each area, making it more culturally appropriate and relevant to the receiving community. The Victorian Government should support Foodbank to supply more culturally appropriate food, and provide resources to community organisations such as Shepparton Foodshare, Neighbourhood Houses, and Community Gardens/Farms to improve access to fresh, healthy, local food.

Community farmers markets not currently possible as growers have volume contracts with the supermarkets, and Councils have significant requirements, restrictions and fees for public events. The Victorian Government should fund and encourage Councils to support local food system initiatives and invest in community food organisations.

Hubs have experimented capacity building programs that have supported parents in need of food relief. Programs like Cooking on a budget, workshops to learn how to grow your own food, budgeting programs, interest free programs and saver + program, and pathways to employment programs have helped to alleviate the need for external assistance but the Victorian Government should advocate to the federal government for higher income support.

The Victorian Government should continue to support all government schools to benefit from the Victorian breakfast program and invest in a universal school lunch program with new infrastructure to deliver this program in schools. The meals program model at Mooroopna Park Primary School could easily be replicated at every government school in Victoria.

Many refugees and migrants in Shepparton are from farming towns in their home countries. They are eager to assist in community food growing but have limited space at their homes.

A community farm with paid staff would be great opportunity for this region and for these residents. There is land available and local businesses are keen to improve food security.

25% of Australia’s agricultural product is farmed in the Goulburn Valley, but this is not accessible to residents, as it leaves the region for other markets and volumes are committed in contracts with the supermarkets.

Direct from farm systems like Farmers Pick provide a delivered alternative but the consumer has minimal choice over the box contents and the savings are minimal.

Improved regulations on supermarkets would ensure fairer prices are paid to growers, allowing more farmers to supply to local farmers markets and local grocer shops.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to this inquiry.

Meg Pethybridge

on behalf of the Community Hubs in Hume City Council and Greater Shepparton City Council area

