

Inquiry into food security in Victoria

Parliament of Victoria
Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee
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Submission by Monash University Department of Nutrition, Dietetics & Food in collaboration with the Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Practice

We write in regard to the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the impacts, drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria. We are academics at Monash University in the Department of Nutrition, Dietetics and Food (Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences) and Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP), a multi-disciplinary research centre (Faculty of Education), who have contributed to the evidence-base on food security in Victoria and Australia, its determinants, its impact on people's lives, and the measurement of its prevalence and severity. Our submission draws upon our collective evidence.

We commend the Committee for holding this inquiry and trust from this inquiry that resources will be directed to effective governance and accountability structures, policy-making, and monitoring and evaluation to build a food secure and resilient future for all Victorians.

While we acknowledge that food security exists at multiple scales, our submission will focus on **food insecurity at the household and community level**, which is the predominant field of expertise of our team.

Our submissions includes four recommendations:

1. A whole of government and bipartisan commitment to the investment, design, implementation and evaluation of a Victorian Food Security Strategy. This must include a sustained investment plan that centres the human right to food and is designed with the food security sector and people with lived experience as experts.
2. Sustained investment in a dedicated food security workforce.
3. Food security, in particular at a household and community level, be reinstated as a priority area in the next iteration of the Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan.
4. Timely monitoring and surveillance of the prevalence and severity of food insecurity.



Supported by our responses to the Inquiry Terms of Reference including impacts and drivers of food insecurity and evidence of effective solutions that address the determinants of food insecurity.

We welcome any opportunities to contribute further to this inquiry or any future food security roundtables or stakeholder engagement processes that are connected to this important inquiry. We are available for contact via the details below.

Sincerely,

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MONASH UNIVERSITY SUBMISSION

Parliament of Victoria Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into food security in Victoria

It is Monash University's priority to address the challenges of the age for the betterment of communities, both locally and globally. Monash University is committed to fostering a society that recognises, respects and includes Indigenous peoples, cultures and knowledge by working with and celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In collaboration with government, industry, alumni, donors and community, the [Monash University Impact 2030](#) plan charts the path to prioritise the following three global challenges:

1. Respond to climate change - Climate change impacts the fabric of our planet, the quality of air, water and biodiversity that sustains us.
2. Contribute to geopolitical security - Geopolitical security is being challenged by disruption to established institutional orders across nations and within nations.
3. Foster thriving communities – Living well and together requires understanding and solution of medical, health and technological issues, and systemic social issues. Thriving communities hold the promise of the 'good life' we seek. The challenge to live well and live well together covers the medical and health issues of communicable and non-communicable disease, and also systemic social issues of inequality and disadvantage requiring understanding and solution.

It is with this purpose of Monash University and its reputation for excellence in education and research, coupled with a global record of innovation, that we make this submission. It is our concern that those who have been marginalised and provided with less power in decision-making are those who will most likely be negatively affected by the global, national and state challenges ahead, such as food insecurity, and have least access to the solutions that mitigate their effect. It must be noted that this inequality is felt in the overall quality of life for humans on our planet, and in the quality of life experienced by our communities (Monash University, 2021).

Definition of food security and scope of submission

For this submission, we adopt the definition of food security adopted by the FAO High Level Panel of Experts of the Committee on Food Security:

Food security (is) a situation that exists when ALL PEOPLE, AT ALL TIMES, have PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ACCESS to SUFFICIENT, SAFE AND NUTRITIOUS food that meets their DIETARY NEEDS and FOOD PREFERENCES for an active and healthy life."

This definition comprises six dimensions: Agency, Access (Economic, Social and Physical), Availability, Utilisation, Stability and Sustainability that should all be fulfilled in guaranteeing food security for all Victorians now and into the future.

Victorians face significant pressures on household food budgets in the context of lasting economic impacts of COVID-19, the current cost of living crisis with soaring food prices, interest rates, housing and utility expenses. This is further compounded by the impacts of extreme weather events and supply chain disruptions, which can constrain food access and further drive up food prices (Murphy et al., 2023). These are problems of an economic

system that prioritises profit over people, evidenced by the Coles and Woolworths posting record profits of \$1.1 billion and \$1.6 billion respectively, with the recent Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices report citing “extensive examples of...opportunistic pricing” by supermarkets (Parliament of Australia, 2024).

While we acknowledge that food security exists at multiple scales, **our submission will focus on food insecurity at the household and community level**, which is the predominant field of expertise of our team. Figure 1 synthesises our submission into the following: food security guiding principles, determinants of food insecurity, our four recommendations and their outcomes for food security.

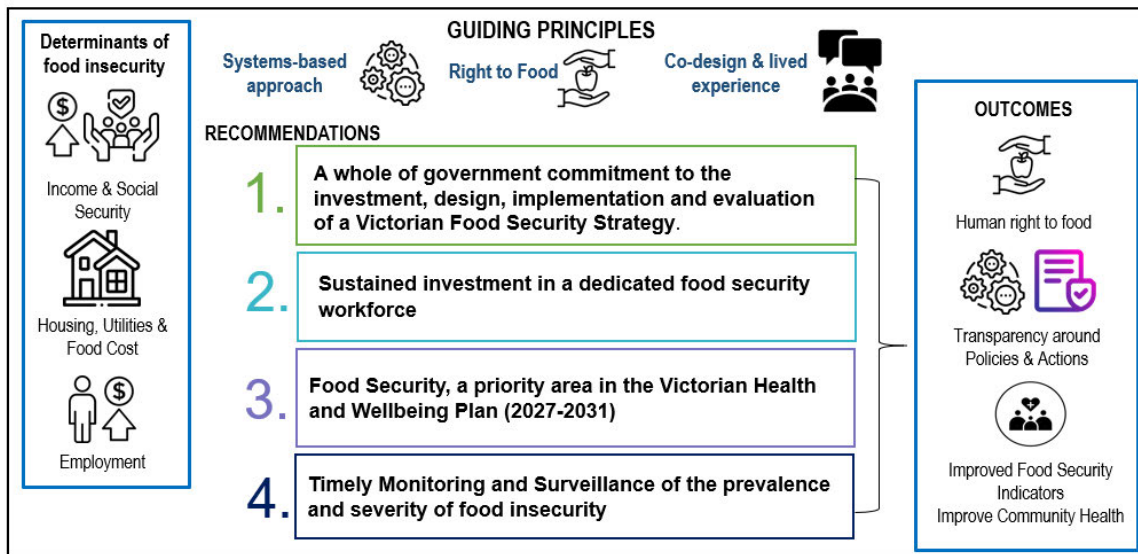


Figure 1: Food security guiding principles, determinants, recommendations and outcomes.

Food insecurity as structural violence

Research consistently highlights poverty and socio-economic inequities are the underlying causes of household food insecurity (Kleve et al., 2018; Pollard & Booth, 2019). As such, food insecurity has been named a form of *structural violence*, describing how “embedded and normalised social structures (for example, political, economic, cultural) can cause harm to individuals, groups and societies, limiting people from their full potential” (Galtung, 1969; Lindberg et al., 2023). Manifestations of structural violence include: inadequate social welfare payments that greatly increase risk of food insecurity, policies and programs that normalise the redistribution of surplus or unsaleable food to individuals and households experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, and evidence of controlling, demeaning and depriving practices experienced by customers accessing food relief services in Victoria (Lindberg et al., 2023).

Policy context: inquiries must translate into action

Actions to address food security in Victoria and Australia more broadly are undermined by a weak and fragmented policy context, lacking a comprehensive food plan or strategy at a State or Federal level to guide practice and programs in this area. Worsening rates of household and community food insecurity since COVID-19 have led to increased public and policy attention to this topic. This has led to several relevant inquiries including the 2022 Federal Inquiry into Food Security (awaiting government response), the 2021 NSW Inquiry

into Food Production and Supply (government response well overdue), the 2024 Inquiry into Securing Victoria's food supply and of course this current Inquiry.

As described below, key resources developed with State Government of Victoria funding have not been made publicly available to improve food security policy and practice in Victoria, which has stymied the progress of the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Food Relief Taskforce in implementing their [Action Plan](#). Such examples of initiatives that have been completed but not released nor made publicly available include the Food Stress Index, and the Charter and guidelines for the provision of healthy, culturally appropriate, and dignified food relief.

We commend these crucial food relief initiatives but wish to convey the importance of the current Inquiry culminating in tangible action, resourcing and accountability from the government towards this critical issue.

Food relief as the primary policy response to food insecurity in Victoria

The Victorian Government has invested more than \$39 million to expand community food relief across Victoria from February 2020 to October 2022 (Victoria State Government, 2022), with a further \$4.6 million announced as part of the 2024-25 budget to enhance food security and hardship support services (Victoria State Government, 2024). However, despite this additional investment towards emergency food relief, in the absence of a long term plan and resourcing to address the causes and determinants of household food insecurity, the problem continues to grow. The 2023 Foodbank Hunger Report found that 35% of Victorian households experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, forcing families to compromise on the quality, variety or preference of their food, or even skipping meals altogether (Foodbank Australia, 2023). The most recent data available from the Victorian Population Health Survey (2022) estimates 8.1% of Victorians experienced **severe food insecurity**. Low-income households are disproportionately impacted; for households earning <\$40,000/year, prevalence of severe food insecurity was found to be 23%. However, these Victorian figures do not account for marginal and moderate food insecurity, nor the severity of food insecurity, so the true physical and mental health burden of food insecurity is not reflected in these figures (Bowden, 2020). As discussed further below, this underscores the importance of robust and timely data collection and reporting.

Outside of the food relief sector, there has been limited sustained investment in tackling the systemic issues driving household food insecurity. Instead, the responsibility has been shifted from the government onto community, charitable and faith-based food relief services, who are often chronically under-resourced and reliant on volunteers (Lindberg et al, 2015). While these organisations are acknowledged to play an important role in supporting community members in an emergency situation, 'emergency' food relief has become the primary source of food for so many Victorians experiencing hardship with agencies now commonly dropping the term 'emergency' from their titles.

The scale and urgency of food insecurity in Victoria necessitates the State Government to look beyond short-term food-based solutions. Guaranteeing the human right to food for all Victorians necessitates cross-sectoral policy actions to address socio-economic determinants of food insecurity across government portfolios including across government portfolios including health, housing, social services, education, transport and environment.

Recommendations:

As part of this Inquiry, we ask that the Committee's inquiry report documents the methodology taken to analyse submissions as well as the weighting and prioritisation of stakeholder perspectives, and be transparent about how the Committee's recommendations were decided upon. The Victorian Government should also commit to such transparency around decision making when formulating their response to the Committee's report.

Recommendation 1: Victorian Food Security Strategy and Investment Plan

That the **Victorian Government commits a whole of government approach** to the investment, design, implementation and evaluation of a **Victorian Food Security Strategy and Investment Plan, grounded in the human right to food**. Of utmost importance is that policy planning and implementation occurs in partnership with the sector and is co-designed with people with lived experience of food insecurity as experts. It is imperative that this Strategy receives bipartisan support and receives sustained investment for the long term (beyond the four-year election cycle).

Since the pandemic, the Victorian Government's recent investment has focused on temporary cost of living relief such as \$400 one-off payments to offset school costs (\$280m). Additional funding has been allocated towards food-based solutions such as Free Breakfast for all Government School Students (\$21.1m in 2024-25) to expand the School Breakfast Club Program to every government school and \$3.5m for food relief grants to community support organisations, including Neighbourhood Houses ~\$2.5M (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2022). The funding specifically supports the cost of running food relief in participating Neighbourhood Houses and does not target a core determinant of food security; Food Literacy interventions which are best placed in these community hubs whose aim is to bring people together to connect, learn and contribute through activities. A statewide grant program has also been instigated to sustain operations of six Regional Food Relief Hubs.

Whilst we welcome Victorian Government investment to date, the Victorian Food Security Strategy should address all six dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilisation, stability, agency and sustainability and adopt a 'food systems' approach. The strategy should establish clear accountability metrics for addressing food security and realising human dignity and the right to food. Therefore, the Strategy **must go beyond food relief and food-based solutions** as the solution to food insecurity. Tackling the socio-economic drivers of household food insecurity necessitates **cross-departmental policy action** and **sustained resourcing of programs** across government portfolios including health, housing, social services, education, transport and environment.

There has been considerable work by researchers and organisations in the community food sector in co-designing evidence-based solutions to food security that should be drawn on in designing the Victorian Food Security Strategy. This includes:

- The [Victorian Food Systems Consensus Statement](#) outlining 10 Leverage Points towards a healthy, regenerative and equitable food system in Victoria
- [Food Policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health \(FoodPATH\) report](#), with 10 government and community-led actions to improve food security and nutrition outcomes amongst Victoria's First Nations communities.

Recommendation 2: Sustained resourcing and investment for food security workforce

That the **Victorian Food Security Strategy** includes sustained investment for a food security workforce. Crucial to supporting policy and action to address food insecurity **is the resourcing of a workforce who have the training, knowledge and skills to support state and local implementation**. In Victoria we have seen the recent restructure and reduced investment in health promotion and public health prevention and dismantling of the Victorian Department of Health public health human resources team, specifically the loss of decades of experience and expertise in public health nutrition. In 2023 the Victorian Department of Health advised of a ten per cent cut to Community Health Health Promotion funding (Towl, 2023). This workforce is crucial to advance food security prevention and action. At local levels we can not rely on volunteers and their good will to support those experiencing food insecurity nor prevent it in the first place.

Transparency and accountability on action is needed. In response to the increased profile of food insecurity during COVID we saw the creation of a multi-stakeholder [Food Relief Task Force](#) (the taskforce) to provide strategic advice and recommendations to government, including the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, on strengthening and enhancing food relief activity in Victoria. Government funded key projects including the creation of a Food Stress Index, to identify areas that may be at risk of food stress, a Charter for food relief service delivery and nutrition guidelines for food relief. Monash Nutrition, Dietetics and Food in collaboration with the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and Curtin University created the Food Stress Index and were involved in expert working groups to support and advise the development of the Charter and guidelines. Nearly two years later we still are awaiting the release of these government investments.

Recommendation 3: Reinstate food security as priority area in Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan

We recommend that **Food Security, in particular at a household and community level, be reinstated as a priority area** in the next iteration of the [Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan](#) (2027-2031) to enable Local Governments to tackle this issue as a matter of strategic priority. Our recent research with local governments exploring the local measurement of food insecurity in Victoria for action (currently being prepared for publication by Hayton et al.(2023), highlighted the importance of government strategic planning documents to prioritise food security.

Recommendation 4: Food Security monitoring and surveillance

Timely monitoring and surveillance of the prevalence and severity of food insecurity is crucial. We welcome the Victorian Government's current and historical commitment to the measurement and reporting of food insecurity in the Victorian Population Health Survey (VPHS), both at a state level and every three years to a local government level. Monash has been advocating to the Victorian Government for the use of a more robust measurement tool and welcomes the incorporation of the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module: Adult Six-Item Short Form (USDA, 2012) in the 2024 VPHS to provide state-level food security prevalence and severity information.

We ask that this is continued and resourced and then conducted every three years at a local government area level using the The United States Department of Agriculture Household

Food Security Survey Module - 18 item (USDA, 2012a) to provide prevalence and severity of experience across a household including households with children.

Our research and work with Victorian local governments and other community organisations has highlighted the importance of **timely availability of state and local level intelligence** on the prevalence but also the severity of food insecurity. Availability and reporting of this data is typically two years post collection, meaning that it is outdated (Hayton et al., 2023). The consequence of not having timely local data to understand the extent and impact for households limits the ability to identify areas of the population that are experiencing or at risk of experiencing food insecurity. Local governments are well placed to act on food security within a local context especially as they are increasingly focusing on local food systems (Carrad et al., 2021), but need timely and accurate data to do so.

Data on the determinants of food security at a community/household/individual level should be collected alongside household level measures of food security. Data on the factors that directly influence a community, household or individual's capacity for food security in the food security dimensions of 'availability', 'access – economic, physical and social' and 'utilisation' would provide crucial and targeted intelligence to inform and support policy and program responses (Ashby et al., 2016). Questions pertaining to these dimensions have been developed and tested within an Australian context and have been used within Victoria and Queensland (Archer et al., 2017; Kleve & van Burgel., 2019). The measurement of the prevalence and severity of food insecurity without data on direct and upstream determinants perpetuates a policy response that puts the responsibility to food security on an individual. Therefore, bold, evidence-based, data-driven policy action and investment is needed to address the structural causes of chronic food insecurity.

The impact of food insecurity

Access to food is a human right. People experiencing food insecurity do not have ongoing access to adequate, nutritious, culturally appropriate and safe food for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2024).

Food insecurity is an issue of equity, a determinant of health and a breach of human rights. Food security is a social and economic condition primarily centered in poverty and disadvantage that is detrimental to physical, social and mental wellbeing across the lifecycle. Food insecurity impacts growth and development in children and poor dietary intake, behaviour and educational outcomes, malnutrition, overweight and obesity, chronic diseases and mental health issues in adults.

A focus on Food Insecurity Impacts and Young People

Victoria is one of the states influenced most by lockdowns and other COVID-19 related measures (Deng et al., 2024). Facing the post-COVID "new normal", many young people may face various issues affecting their development and wellbeing, with one significant issue being food insecurity (Jeffrey et al., 2022; Waite et al., 2022). Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) 2024 Australian Youth Barometer (Walsh et al., 2024b) shows that in Victoria alone:

- 16% of people aged 18–24 experienced food insecurity in the last year
- 56% of young Victorians were worried that they would not have enough to eat
- 60% were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food
- 53% had to skip meals
- 58% ate less than they thought they should

- 40% reported their household ran out of food
- 57% were hungry but did not eat
- 39% went without eating for a whole day
- 68% ate only a few kinds of food.

For many young Victorians, it is challenging to buy food. Regardless of age this quote reflects the common and difficult decisions about food:

“I don't choose what I want to eat. It's my wallet that chooses what I want to eat”

Man, 27, Low food security

Access to food and food insecurity challenges connection to culturally familiar foods that are beyond nutrition but are associated with meaning and connection with culture and community. One participant in the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer highlighted the difficulty to source religiously appropriate food:

“I'm a Muslim, so I can only eat halal food, so there are times here and there when obviously I can't eat when I want to because I can't guarantee that it's halal or not. So, for me, it's just safer not to eat it. ... I'll just try to find, 9 times out of 10 I just look for a vegetarian or vegan option because I can't guarantee that the meat is halal.”

Man, 20

The Drivers of Food Insecurity

Food security is a complex issue that is not just food related. It is indicative of both material and economic deprivation. The food insecurity experience is associated with issues such as the cost of living, un- and under-employment, housing availability and affordability, utilities and energy affordability, discrimination and racism, poor health and well-being as well as structural and interpersonal violence (Gallegos et al., 2023).

These drivers of food insecurity in Victoria that impact the six dimensions of food security may be different across geography, population groups and household types. Our research in 2022 into the cost of food using the validated Victorian Healthy Food Basket tool across Victoria from 155 stores across 41 of Victoria's 79 LGAs (52%) and 10 out of 13 regional groupings (85%) found that median price of the VHFB costing \$488.50 per fortnight (\$470.42 - \$523.54) for a family of four, constituting 33.97% (32.71% - 36.40%) of income. This is indicative that households in Victoria are in food stress (van Burgel et al., 2022).

In collaboration with Cardinia Shire Council we have explored the experience of food insecurity and the drivers. Our findings highlight the complexity of the drivers of food insecurity but are clearly associated with the nine financial stress indicators defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Molenaar et al., 2023).

Evidence of Solutions:

Food relief was designed to meet the needs of individuals and families during emergencies and crises and may provide some immediate short-term relief for people experiencing food insecurity. Food relief alone will not solve the ongoing experiences of community and household level chronic food insecurity, nor address the underlying causes of poverty and the requirement of ongoing access to nutritious food in a socially acceptable and dignified way. Therefore, **the framing of food security solutions is important.** Unlike the Standing

Committee on Agriculture's report from the Federal Inquiry into food security, we urge the committee to avoid conflating food donations and emergency food relief with food waste mitigation as a solution to food insecurity (Booth & Pollard, 2020; Parliament of Australia, 2023).

It is timely for the Victorian Government to think beyond food relief. Understanding food insecurity as a marker of a pervasive material deprivation and profound health inequity helps direct to effective and long term approaches to this issue. What is needed is investment in both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive actions on the social and structural determinants impacting at a National, State and local level. We need viable models that enable food access for all, food with dignity, place-based engagement, and access to culturally relevant foods that are not reliant on rescued and/or donated food.

The Community Grocer

Starting in 2014, [The Community Grocer](#) (TCG) is a not-for-profit social enterprise that runs four fresh produce markets to increase social, economic and physical access to fresh food across Melbourne TCG addresses the physical, economic, and social barriers to fresh food by focusing on:

- **Access:** Holding weekly pop-up markets in local, convenient locations.
- **Affordability:** Prices are 35% less expensive than surrounding fresh food outlets.
- **Cultural relevance:** Stocking produce that is requested by customers, with over 140 types of culturally relevant fruit and vegetables available at markets.
- **Social Inclusion:** Markets provide a community space to meet and make friends.

This innovative social enterprise model is successful and the demand for more markets is growing; supplying healthy fresh and local food to low income households and connecting communities. Monash University undertakes the annual food security and social impact evaluation in partnership with the Community Grocer repeatedly showing positive impacts (Lindberg et al., 2019).

The Grocer Gift Program is an innovative food voucher program that enables people who may not have the income to spend on food to still access TCG markets, providing a nutritious, dignified and choice-based alternative to traditional food relief provision and models. In the last 12 months the TCG have worked with over 30 community partners in the past 12 months to fund and distribute physical and digital cards to community members in need and experiencing food insecurity, with a value typical of \$20-\$40, redeemable at TCG markets. Since its launch in 2021 nearly 5,000 Grocer Gift individual vouchers have been distributed and 83% of recipients who were surveyed agreed that shopping with a Grocer Gift Card provided a greater variety of choice and more dignity compared to emergency food relief options.

South Australia Social Supermarket pilot

This **Social Supermarket** pilot is a not-for-profit supermarket and community organisation founded in 1990 in Adelaide. In 2020 it was funded by Wellbeing SA and Department of Human Services SA to be developed as one of Australia's first, '[Social supermarkets](#)' to offer affordable, nutritious food with co-located social services, support and opportunities for social connection. It helps more than 600 people every week. It provides affordable groceries, clothing and household goods and social interaction through the Grocery Shop, Mel's Op Shop, and Arnolds Place Café. This organisation is committed to assisting members of the public living on low incomes and/or experiencing financial difficulties.

Alternative Nutrition Specific and Sensitive models of emergency food relief

Models such as [The Stop](#) in Toronto, Canada provide both nutrition specific food based responses that support food access and connection and also nutrition sensitive wrap around responses such as access to social, welfare, housing and financial advice services. Co-design and lived experience is embedded into the service, whereby users propose and shape new programs and public policy priorities. In focusing outcomes around social connection and developing programming in response to the needs of the community, The Stop model aims to address the effects and root causes of food security and marginalisation.

The **Scottish Government commitment to a ‘cash-first’ approach** to tackling food insecurity aims to reduce the need for people to turn to food banks. The focus is **prevention of food insecurity** and strengthening incomes from: fair work, social security and reduced cost of living. This makes food banks the last port of call in a crisis by improving access to: emergency financial assistance, money advice and holistic support services. This provides a sufficient and secure income to be able to access food that meets needs and preferences. The intention is to maximise dignity and reduce future need for emergency food relief. This is supported by [Dignity in practice](#) principles where dignity is at the centre of approaches to food insecurity. **Nourish Scotland** and the **Poverty Truth Commission** in collaboration with people with lived experience of food insecurity, staff and volunteers in community food initiatives, and wider stakeholders explore what dignity means in food security practice and service provision.

We request that the committee takes action on the recommendations and evidence provided in this submission to address this escalating issue and commits to creating food secure futures for all Victorians.

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