

Inquiry into food security in Victoria.

**Submission by Uniting Victoria and
Tasmania.**

Introduction.

Acknowledgements.

This submission was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We work in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's First Peoples and as the traditional owners and custodians of the lands and waters on which we all live and work. We recognise the continuing sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over their lands and waters and their inalienable right to self-determination. We offer our respect to all Elders past and present.

We would like to thank the Uniting consumers who took time to speak with us in the formulation of this submission, and on several research projects cited through this submission. We thank our consumers for sharing their experiences with honesty and integrity, many of whom acknowledged a desire to have their voices heard on the very significant issues of cost-of-living pressures, financial hardship, and housing disadvantage. Names marked with an * have been changed to respect the privacy and protect the identity of the individual.

Our experience.

Uniting Vic.Tas (Uniting) is the principal community services organisation of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. We are more than 3,600 employees and 1,500 volunteers delivering over 650 programs and services across the full spectrum of community services, intervening early to help people avoid crisis, as well as supporting those who live life at the margins. Uniting also undertakes research into community needs and advocates for change that aim to lessen disadvantage, poverty, and exclusion in the community. We celebrate diversity and value the lived experience of people of every faith, ethnicity, age, disability, culture, language, gender identity, sex, and sexual orientation.

We work alongside individuals and families who often present with complex health and social needs. Some have few immediate or extended family supports, limited material resources, are unable to access safe, secure, and affordable housing, are socially isolated and have intergenerational histories of childhood abuse and neglect, family violence, substance use and mental health concerns. For many of our consumers, these complex needs are both exacerbated by, and a driving factor of, their inability to access affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food.

Though any person accessing Uniting services may experience food insecurity, the impact of food insecurity on physical and mental health, and poverty and hardship, are most obvious and apparent for the individuals and families accessing our financial counselling, emergency relief, and meals programs.

Our submission will also discuss how the drivers and impacts of food insecurity concurrently create significant barriers to the provision of emergency relief and meals programs.

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Recommendations.

NUMBER	RECOMMENDATION
One	Uniting recommends the Victorian Government further subsidises or decreases living costs (e.g. rental assistance, energy, transport, health, childcare) so that Victorians don't need to sacrifice food to survive.
Two	Uniting recommends the Victorian Government advocates to the Commonwealth Government to set income support rates above the poverty line so that everybody can afford to eat.
Three	Uniting recommends the Victorian Government introduces policies that reflect the higher costs of living in regional and rural areas to improve the accessibility of affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods.
Four	Uniting recommends the Victorian Government advocates to the Commonwealth Government for greater transparency, certainty, and flexibility in funding arrangements for Emergency Relief programs.
Five	Uniting recommends the Victorian Government supplements funding for Emergency Relief programs to reliably respond to the needs of Victorians, including increasing storage capacity, investing in improved facilities, providing relevant training, and establishing a dedicated case worker.
Six	Uniting recommends the Victorian Government works with local governments, community services and diverse communities to raise awareness of the supports available to people experiencing food insecurity, and to provide adequate funding and support for services to manage the anticipated increase in demand.
Seven	Uniting recommends the Victorian Government invests in strengthening and building partnerships between existing community-based services to provide holistic, wraparound supports for individuals and families who are experiencing food insecurity.
Eight	Uniting recommends the Victorian government invests in providers' ability to develop, implement, and maintain place-based programs and offerings.
Nine	Uniting recommends the Victorian Government invests in meaningful initiatives to concurrently address the drivers of financial hardship.
Ten	To have an impact, solutions need to be linked to other community and government activities, such as housing strategies. Uniting recommends the Victorian Government significantly increases investments in affordable social housing.
Eleven	Uniting recommends there is increased Victorian Government investment in interventions such as Private Rental Assistance Program, which protect people from further financial hardship and from entering homelessness.

The drivers of food insecurity.

Low income.

"People don't have enough money to live. This is the problem." – Uniting Homelessness Senior Manager.

Insufficient income continues to be the largest barrier to people meeting their most basic needs. A growing number of Australians are experiencing food insecurity due to the rising cost of living, with many households struggling to meet everyday costs such as food and housing (Foodbank, 2023).

In 2022, consumers that were accessing Uniting's emergency relief (ER) and Meals Program services in Victoria and Tasmania were surveyed to understand the impacts of the rising cost-of-living. Key findings from the report are:

- » 92% of respondents reported that food and groceries were the biggest pressure points,
- » 80% of respondents were cutting back on food and groceries to reduce spending,
- » 59% of respondents were buying less meat and 53% were buying less fruit and vegetables (Wilson, Churchus and Johnson 2022).

Across Uniting's services, we are seeing more Victorian households being pushed into financial hardship and subsequent food insecurity. More people are presenting at Uniting's ER services that have never accessed a welfare agency before, including working individuals and families. In January-April 2023, there was a 190 per cent increase in the number of people presenting at Wodonga's ER services whose main source of income was paid employment, in comparison to the same period in 2022.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions surveyed working Australians and found that casual workers were more likely to be struggling to meet living costs than permanent workers (ACTU, 2023). Uniting's frontline practitioners have noticed that underemployment is impacting on people's ability to earn an adequate income, particularly in fields such as the beauty industry. More Australians are cutting back on beauty services, such as manicures and skin therapies, in response to cost-of-living pressures (Portman, 2023).

Increasing living costs across multiple domains are leaving Victorians with little income leftover for food. Mortgage increases, rental increases, transport costs, medical expenses, and childcare are some of the reasons that Victorians are presenting at Uniting's ER services. A frontline ER practitioner reported:

"I'm seeing an increasing number of clients who present who are having to pay out-of-pocket for medical expenses. You know, like services for scans and so forth that they don't get rebates for and having also to travel to Melbourne because we're regional for a lot of these appointments and so forth and that's a huge barrier for them because that's something that we can't support. We can't pay the out-of-pocket costs, and sometimes they're huge."

Cutting back on food is the main strategy used by consumers accessing Uniting's ER and meals program services to make ends meet (Wilson, Churchus and Johnson, 2022). Uniting strongly believes that nobody should have to choose between any of their basic needs to survive.

Recommendation One: Uniting recommends the Victorian Government subsidises or decreases living costs across a range of expenses (e.g. rental assistance, energy, transport, health, childcare) so that Victorians don't need to sacrifice food to survive.

The vast majority of people presenting at Uniting's ER and Meals Program services have government payments, pensions or allowances as their main source of income. The rate of income support payments in Australia remains inadequate and substantially below the poverty line in any measure of poverty. Using the latest data, the poverty line based on 50 per cent of median household income is \$489 per week for a single person, increasing to \$636 per week for a single person with one child and \$738 per week for a single person with two children (ACOSS, 2023). As of 20 March 2024, the JobSeeker payment is \$381.35 per week for a single person, increasing to \$408.45 per week for a single person with children.

During COVID-19, the Commonwealth Government introduced a \$550 per fortnight Coronavirus Supplement for people on JobSeeker payments. There is a substantial amount of evidence that this had a significant impact on people's wellbeing and reductions in inequality (Phillips, Gray & Biddle, 2020; Davidson, 2022). In 2021, Uniting surveyed people accessing our ER sites and homelessness entry points across Victoria, to understand the impact of the withdrawal of COVID-19 payments and Victorian Government tenancy supports. Key findings are:

- » The provision of these extra supports had overwhelmingly positive impacts for consumers, with 80% reporting that life had become easier overall
- » 92% of respondents reported that ending these payments and benefits had negatively impacted on multiple areas of their life
- » Two-thirds of respondents reported that ending these payments and benefits had negatively impacted on their ability to eat well (Wilson, Sama & Johnson, 2021).

"Income is even lower. We got used to eating properly and now we have to readjust." – Uniting consumer surveyed for our 'No fighting chance' report (Wilson, Sama & Johnson, 2021).

Uniting's ER services witnessed the benefits of increasing income support rates for people who were experiencing chronic food insecurity. During COVID-19, people that were previously presenting to our ER sites on a regular basis were no longer attending or attending less frequently:

"We did see a significant decrease in our regular clients that would attend because of the fact that they were getting additional money and it was actually enough. So it kind of does show that if they are paying enough, people actually don't need to use our services. We were getting lots of new people because they were out of work and whatnot and they hadn't experienced food insecurity before, but a lot of our regulars actually stopped coming or weren't coming as frequently." – Uniting Group Manager.

Our consumers overwhelmingly echo the call for increased levels of income support, describing the difficulties of trying to survive on insufficient rates.

"The Government keeps people poor - they think they are helping people get out and get to work but I can't work. I shouldn't have to feel like I'm begging when I come to services for food... The Government needs to know how it makes a person feel - it dehumanises you. It's like you are blamed, like you can't manage your money. Some services want you to go to a budget course if you turn up too many times... It's dehumanising. It dehumanises you when you can't afford food and have to go to organisations for food and food vouchers." – Uniting consumer surveyed for our 'Can't afford to live' report (Wilson, Churchus & Johnson, 2022).

Recommendation Two: Uniting recommends the Victorian Government advocates to the Commonwealth Government to set income support rates above the poverty line so that everybody can afford to eat.

Geographical location.

In Victoria, the prevalence of food insecurity is higher in rural than metropolitan areas (VAHI, 2017). Food is often more expensive in regional and rural areas, with fewer options of stores to purchase from and a limited range of food available at higher prices (Bowden, 2020). This increases the overall cost-of-living and inaccessibility of affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods for people living in these areas.

Recommendation Three: Uniting recommends the Victorian Government introduces policies that reflect the higher costs of living in regional and rural areas to improve the accessibility of affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods.

Limited capacity in the emergency relief sector to respond to demand, complexity, and needs.

Uniting acknowledges that ER services are not a solution and chronic food insecurity needs to be addressed at the root causes and prevented from happening in the first places. However, in the absence

of these measures, it is important for people experiencing food insecurity to be able to access meaningful supports and ER services fill this gap. When we surveyed consumers about the impacts of the cost-of-living, 86 per cent of respondents said that access to ER or meals services would make a positive difference in their life.

Uniting's ER services are primarily resourced by funding from the Commonwealth Government. This funding is increasingly insufficient to meet the demand and needs of communities, and often must be supplemented through fundraising efforts and donations. There is little certainty for our ER programs around when and how much funding will be received throughout the year, which impacts our long-term planning for budgets and staffing. Consequently, a significant amount of time can be spent on hiring, fundraising, grants, and community events to ensure that the program is sustainable.

Uniting's frontline practitioners also discussed instances where they recognised a need for food assistance in areas that were not funded by the Commonwealth Government to support. Inflexibility in the current funding approach means we cannot utilise Commonwealth funding to respond to this need.

Recommendation Four: Uniting recommends the Victorian Government advocates to the Commonwealth Government for greater transparency, certainty, and flexibility in funding arrangements for Emergency Relief programs.

Uniting practitioners identified multiple barriers to accessing ER services and responding to community needs. These include distance, limited transport options, or difficulties leaving the house due to escaping violence, age, or having a disability. Some of our ER programs found that operating a food van was an effective way of reaching communities that otherwise may not have accessed support:

"We just went across the other side of the highway and you know, 5kms up the road, but tapped into a whole new community that need food support badly. But they don't regularly access normally because one, they didn't know about it, but two, it's the distance across to it and you know, transport and things like that." - Senior Manager, Community Engagement and Support.

Stigma is another barrier that prevent people accessing the support that they need, as soon as they need it. Uniting's frontline practitioners highlighted that some people will only present to our ER programs when they are in significant crisis, due to feelings of shame or embarrassment.

"You can walk into (Uniting's ER service) Ballarat and there's a couch. And there's a coffee machine. And people walk in, have a coffee, sit down, wait, grab some snacks while they wait. It's brilliant." - Senior Manager, Community Engagement and Support.

Dietary restrictions can also be difficult to respond to under current funding arrangements. Providing food vouchers is one option that Uniting's ER programs can utilise, however, this is not a cost-effective approach. For example, one Uniting practitioner described how a \$50 voucher would only provide someone with approximately 3 items from a supermarket. Sufficient funding for ER services is necessary to respond to dietary restrictions, including purchasing specific products, improving storage capacity, and providing training for staff and volunteers on food handling and storage.

In Victoria, only a small number of organisations can receive and distribute food and material aid to ER services. Any changes to the way these organisations operate significantly impacts what Uniting can offer at our ER sites. To consistently meet the needs of our communities, ER services require investment from Uniting to increase storage capacity to receive larger donations and purchase products that are regularly in-demand.

We are also seeing a greater complexity of needs with people presenting to Uniting's ER and Meal Program services. Food assistance is often the first type of service that a person accesses (DSS, 2022). Uniting's ER programs often act as a 'soft-entry' point to other services, such as mental health, AOD, homelessness and family violence. However, not everyone that presents at our ER services has the capacity to engage with these additional services.

"Lots of people that come with very complex mental health needs that we have food to give them and services to give them, but they won't either take it or go to the next step of accessing further services due to mental health or AOD or other factors." - Team leader, Mental Health Services.

Under the current funding model, Uniting's ER services must rely on volunteers to be operational. Our volunteers do not necessarily have the appropriate skills or training to support the increasingly complex needs of the people presenting at these sites, nor do ER programs have adequate or reliable funding to be able to provide this training to volunteers.

Recommendation Five: Uniting recommends the Victorian Government supplements funding for Emergency Relief programs to reliably respond to the needs of Victorians, including increasing storage capacity, investing in improved facilities, providing relevant training, and establishing a dedicated case worker.

Lack of awareness and uptake of support services that assist with food security.

Despite experiencing high levels of food insecurity, relatively few Australians are receiving food assistance (Botha & Payne, 2020). A lack of awareness around the types of support available and how to navigate the system can be a barrier to people seeking assistance with food security. For example, sometimes language barriers prevent people in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities from accessing services when they are needed.

"I think that there's lots of, you know, CALD communities that you can tap into that need the support. But due to language barriers, because we found a huge amount of the people presenting found out about it by word of mouth and communication through their own grapevine. But English was, you know, definitely a second language or some of them barely spoke any or none at all." - Senior Manager, Community Engagement and Support.

Some local governments, such as Wodonga, have developed helpful resources alongside community services to guide people to the support services they might need. Every community will have different needs, support services and preferred ways of being engaged that should also be considered.

Recommendation Six: Uniting recommends the Victorian Government works with local governments, community services and diverse communities to raise awareness of the supports available to people experiencing food insecurity, and to provide adequate funding and support for services to manage the anticipated increase in demand.

The impacts of food insecurity on physical and mental health.

Varied impacts on physical and mental wellbeing.

Through the delivery of our ER services, Uniting is familiar with the myriad of ways that food insecurity impacts on a person's wellbeing. Stress, depression, anxiety, health conditions, stigma, social isolation, and malnutrition are only some of the well-documented impacts of food insecurity (Bowden, 2020; Pollard & Booth, 2019). Our consumers have shared similar stories of these interrelated impacts:

"I've been struggling and when I don't have food, I start to lose weight and don't have energy. You feel depressed. I sleep a lot. I have health issues." – Uniting consumer surveyed for our 'Can't afford to live' report (Wilson, Churchus & Johnson, 2022).

Food insecurity can directly and indirectly impact on a person's health. For example, our frontline practitioners have described situations where having the right nutritional balance was essential for medications to work as intended. Inaccessibility of nutritious foods can also be stressful for consumers with existing health issues:

"I have a serious heart condition and I worry all the time about the lack of vegetables and fruit I'm eating and the nutrition I'm losing from that." – Uniting consumer surveyed for our 'Can't afford to live' report (Wilson, Churchus & Johnson, 2022).

Concerningly, some consumers have experienced health emergencies while accessing Uniting's ER programs. Our staff have had to call ambulances for people that experienced low blood pressure, fainting, and other health issues while accessing one of our food trucks. **Uniting strongly believes that nobody should be experiencing severe health crises due to a lack of food.** In Victoria, over 2.4 million tonnes of food waste occurs each year (Sustainability Victoria, 2020). Nobody should be going hungry when there is such a significant surplus of food available. To address this, food growers and suppliers could be incentivised to provide any surplus to communities or ER sites.

*"It's probably a bit more of a broader issue around impacting on community health services and ambulance services, which are already really under strain, from people just not having adequate food nutrition. I think also the impact on the other people who are there, on the staff responding to people in really significant health crisis, just because of a simple food issue – **or what should be simple.**"* – Senior Manager, Child Youth & Families.

Food insecurity can also lead to social isolation, particularly if someone reduces their social activities to cut back on spending. People might attend fewer social events or gatherings, avoid inviting people over to their homes, or parents might not allow their children to visit other people's homes due to concerns about not being able to reciprocate. As one consumer explains:

"I don't go for coffee or to the movies with my friends because I can't afford it. Sometimes I say yes [to going to a café] but I tell my friends I am not hungry...I don't eat because I can't afford to buy food. Sometimes I sneak a tea bag in my handbag and ask the waiter for a hot water. Then I sneak the tea bag in the hot water so I can drink tea with my friends." – Uniting consumer surveyed for our 'Can't afford to live' report (Wilson, Churchus & Johnson, 2022).

An online survey conducted by Foodbank Australia found that 56 per cent of food insecure households in Australia owned pets in the last 12 months. For some people, pets are a form of mental and emotional support, which could help to alleviate feelings of stress, anxiety and depression (Foodbank, 2024). At the same time, Uniting's ER services have heard that some people are skipping meals to feed their pets. Some of our ER programs occasionally provide limited pet food and supplies to reduce this when they are able.

Given the breadth of impacts associated with food insecurity, a range of wraparound supports are needed to provide a holistic response. In our experience, building partnerships between and investing in services that are already established in a community is a more effective and efficient strategy than initiatives that try to 'reinvent the wheel.'

Recommendation Seven: Uniting recommends the Victorian Government invests in strengthening and building partnerships between existing community-based services to

provide holistic, wraparound supports for individuals and families who are experiencing food insecurity.

The impacts on families and children.

Many Australians are skipping meals and cutting back on food in response to the rising cost-of-living (ACOSS, 2023). Amongst Uniting's consumers, parents (especially single parents), carers and people with a disability are more likely to report that they are skipping meals, even when cooking for others (Wilson, Churchus & Johnson, 2022).

Parents may be stigmatised if their children become unwell, malnourished, or are not provided with nutritional foods. While there have been positive changes in Victoria to encourage healthy eating, nutritious foods are not always affordable or accessible for people on lower incomes. Uniting's frontline practitioners have heard that some parents will keep their children home from school due to practices that are supposed to encourage healthy eating:

"Part of that daily exercise at school might be, let's get your lunch box and let's have a look at what you've got in this lunchbox. The embarrassment and stigma that goes with that is just, you know, so whilst we're trying to be positive and with good intent, the downside to it is when you've got this hardship and poverty and food insecurity." - Senior Manager, Child Youth & Families

Uniting commends the Victorian Government's ongoing investment into and expansion of the School Breakfast Clubs program, which seeks to improve educational outcomes for students experiencing disadvantage by offering free and healthy foods. Further initiatives are needed to continue breaking down barriers for families that are impacted by disadvantage and food insecurity.

The impacts of food insecurity on poverty and hardship.

Difficulties escaping financial hardship.

In Victoria, low-income households are at higher risk of experiencing food insecurity (VAHI, 2017). Data from the latest census found that more than one in eight Victorians were experiencing significant economic disadvantage. With increases to the cost of food, energy, housing and other essentials, this number is likely to be even higher now (VCOSS, 2023). For Uniting's consumers accessing ER and Meals Program services, the rising cost-of-living has primarily impacted on their financial situation and security (78 per cent of survey respondents) and their ability to eat well (70 per cent of survey respondents) (Wilson, Churchus & Johnson, 2022).

"I come to you guys for everything. I need gas [petrol] today. Any little bit of food helps. I feel grateful that services are there. I know it's heartbreaking for staff too because you don't have a lot of food to give. It's not just people on a pension, it's everyone... Even with [food] vouchers, the [service] down the road used to give a \$50 voucher but now that's reduced to \$20." - Uniting consumer surveyed for our 'Can't afford to live' report (Wilson, Churchus & Johnson, 2022).

Households utilise a variety of coping strategies to reduce their spending on food (Foodbank, 2023), however some strategies are not accessible or sustainable for people on lower incomes. For example, purchasing food in bulk is not always possible for someone in financial hardship. Consequently, they can end up paying more for food in the long-term. Uniting's frontline practitioners have also noticed more people using credit cards to purchase living essentials, such as food.

When asked to identify the number one thing that would make a difference, one in five consumers in Uniting's 'Can't Afford to Live' report identified increased income or money, while 15 per cent identified employment or work experience (Wilson, Churchus & Johnson, 2022). For some people, the difficulty is not necessarily gaining employment, but maintaining employment with limited financial resources:

"Sometimes getting a job may not be the tricky bit. It's actually keeping the job because of things like not having enough money to pay for transport or car or whatever it might be that they actually need to be able to do that or, you know, the wardrobe or childcare, whatever it is that they actually need to be able to maintain that employment, to help them get out of or improve their experiences around alleviating poverty and then food insecurity as well." - Senior Manager, Community Engagement & Support.

Many local governments have established their own initiatives to support the delivery of food relief and tackle the drivers behind food insecurity. A holistic and whole-of-community response is needed from state government, local government, community services and community members to prevent Australians from experiencing food insecurity and to assist with exiting out of that situation (Botha & Payne, 2022; Botha et al. 2024).

Recommendation Eight: Uniting recommends the Victorian Government invests in providers' ability to develop, implement, and maintain place-based programs and offerings.

Recommendation Nine: Uniting recommends the Victorian Government invests in meaningful initiatives to concurrently address the drivers of financial hardship.

Increasing the risk of housing insecurity.

A person's housing situation can contribute to and be impacted by food insecurity. Anecdotally, we have heard that some people move to regional or rural areas to reduce the cost of housing. However, this can increase a person's living expenses in other areas, such as transport costs and groceries. Furthermore, this can reduce the accessibility of services that support with wellbeing or cost-of-living pressures (Crommelin et al., 2022).

People experiencing homelessness in Victoria are more likely to also experience food insecurity (VAHI, 2017). Whether a person is rough sleeping or placed into temporary accommodation, they may have limited access to cooking facilities or none at all. People are subsequently limited to options that tend to be more costly, such as pre-made meals and takeaways.

"When you are homeless you tend to buy more take away. I don't have anything to cook with."
– Uniting consumer surveyed for our 'Can't afford to live' report (Wilson, Churchus & Johnson, 2022).

At the same time, food insecurity can increase a person's risk of experiencing homelessness, due to people juggling different living expenses. Uniting practitioners noted that they have limited options when supporting somebody that is in rental stress and having to choose between food or housing.

"I oversee the Private Rental Assistance Program and every day households are telling us they have to make decisions as to feed their family or pay their rent." – Senior Manager, Homelessness.

Uniting has previously called on the Victorian Government to increase funding to tenants under the Private Rent Assistance Program (PRAP). PRAP provides financial assistance to maintain a tenancy and supports people at risk of homelessness to avoid eviction. It also assists people newly experiencing homelessness to find an accommodation option as quickly as possible. This measure, to which Uniting remains committed, is important to addressing the full range of financial pressures that contribute to and are impacted by food insecurity.

Recommendation Ten: To have an impact, solutions need to be linked to other community and government activities, such as housing strategies. Uniting recommends the Victorian Government significantly increases investments in affordable social housing.

Recommendation Eleven: Uniting recommends there is increased Victorian Government investment in interventions such as Private Rental Assistance Program, which protect people from further financial hardship and from entering homelessness.

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