

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

Sharon Laurence, Manager, Food Systems, and

Lisa Ohlmus, Manager, Policy and Government Relations, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Joining us for this session are Sharon Laurence from VicHealth and also Lisa Ohlmus.

I would like to read this to you regarding the evidence you are providing today. 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 deliberately 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. For the recording, could you please state your full name and position and the organisation you are representing.

Sharon LAURENCE: My name is Sharon Laurence, and I am the Manager of Food Systems at VicHealth.

Lisa OHLMUS: My name is Lisa Ohlmus, and I am the Manager of Policy and Government Relations at VicHealth.

The CHAIR: Welcome again. I know we have got your submission, but I would like to invite you to make an opening statement before the committee ask you questions.

Sharon LAURENCE: Thank you. Thanks for that opportunity. Thank you to the committee on behalf of VicHealth for the opportunity to provide a submission today to this parliamentary Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Can I start by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the unceded lands where we are meeting today, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation. I wish to extend our deepest respect to elders past, present and emerging.

VicHealth acknowledges the past, ongoing and future contributions that Indigenous agricultural and food practices make to building a regenerative food system. I think VACCHO is presenting next, and I take this opportunity to provide support from VicHealth to recommendations that they will outline because food insecurity does disproportionately impact our Victorian Aboriginal communities. These recommendations were identified through community-based, Aboriginal-led research that was actually funded by VicHealth, titled FoodPATH, so it is very much connected.

VicHealth is a world-first health promotion agency focused on promoting good health and preventing chronic disease. Under our new 10-year strategy released last year, we are moving from a focus on targeting individual behaviours to reshaping systems for a healthier Victoria, putting equity at the very heart of this approach. This topic of course is really critical here, so we welcome this inquiry. The food security of Victorians does represent an urgent challenge that has worsened with the effects of COVID and the rising cost of living. In a high-income, food-producing state like Victoria, poverty, housing insecurity and high living costs are contributing, as you know, to increasing rates of food insecurity. They are all having significant impacts on physical and mental health and the unequal burden of chronic disease across our Victorian communities.

We know that equitable access to nutritious food is a prerequisite for good health, but food is also significant for Victoria's economic prosperity, the sustainability and resilience of our natural environment and celebrating and connecting our very culturally diverse communities. Therefore at the core of VicHealth's submission is the recognition that we need to value, invest in and govern our Victorian food system in a way that reflects the centrality of food in the everyday lives of all Victorians. So VicHealth calls for strength in governance and a shift from the silos where the responsibility of food is fragmented across a range of departments, including health, agriculture, trade, industry, transport, climate, education, families and regions. We think a whole-of-government approach is needed to develop a Victorian food system strategy and investment plan which takes a human right to food informed approach. This will shift the balance of Victorian policies and investments and

strengthen the impact in securing safe, nutritious, affordable and more sustainable food in public and business settings for all Victorians. This approach is also designed to rebalance the reliance on food relief to address the root causes of food insecurity in the longer term.

With the release of VicHealth's 10-year strategy in 2023, our organisation has committed to addressing food systems as one of its three key system priorities to achieve a healthier and fairer Victoria. To support this vision VicHealth is delivering a range of initiatives, including our grant rounds, research partnerships and two flagship investments, including the Victorian local government partnership, which is engaging 36 councils – around half of them – and expert partners to advance that local food system change. Also, we are supporting seven food hubs to explore alternate models that support diverse communities to buy affordable locally sourced and culturally appropriate food across regional and outer growth metro areas.

But we know at VicHealth that much more is needed, that is why our submission to the inquiry proposes five high-level evidence-based recommendations to address food security in Victoria and also to improve the health and wellbeing of all Victorians, which is our core business: the right to food law, food systems governance, food systems data and monitoring, community food systems planning and investing in local food systems. The recommendations in this submission are designed to address the complex and multifaceted impacts of food insecurity and look for those lasting solutions. VicHealth is committed to partnering with government to drive meaningful change to reduce food insecurity and contribute to building a Victorian system that is healthy, sustainable and fair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Sharon. Lisa, would you like to make any comments?

Lisa OHLMUS: No. I support everything that Sharon has just provided there.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I am going to look at your five recommendations. I will not go ahead on some of them, as the committee might want to speak to them. But I will touch on one of them, if I may: recommendation 5, to empower and resource local councils and regional partners. I think that is a good recommendation. I just want to question your perspective in relation to allocating resources to local councils. With food insecurity, it is basically every Victorian; it does not matter what level or socio-economic background you have got or status you have. Families experience food insecurity regardless of what their financial situation is up to a certain level. With local councils, whereas government incentives are in relation to providing people in low socio-economic backgrounds assistance, most times they have criteria: 'You must have social security, healthcare cards, before accessing this type of service.' In relation to this recommendation, is that to all Victorians or just those who do have a low income only or just meet the criteria? Because I know there are families with only one parent working that do not meet the criteria in relation to low income, yet they are facing insecurity and are facing hardship as well. So I was wondering what your take is in relation to empowering local governments in this way.

Sharon LAURENCE: Yes, I think understand your question. Our approach is boosting that local food system action, which is not just about food relief. In fact it is more about those other opportunities to provide accessible, nutritious, local, seasonal food, and we see local governments teaming up and partnering with regional organisations as being very well-placed and central to invigorating those local food systems. Those are opportunities to make food more accessible and more affordable. I think at the local government level too there is a greater opportunity to really engage with our very culturally diverse communities and also our First Nations communities through Aboriginal community controlled health organisations. There are opportunities to really lift up and value local food systems and bring some of those diverse voices to the table, because – and I think this was discussed before – people connect through food. Food security is not just about what I have on my plate, it is about connecting with community, connecting with culture and connecting with country.

Local governments do have important levers. It is not always in their remit, but in Victoria we are well placed. We have the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan*. It has 'Increasing healthy eating' as a priority in that plan. The Victorian plan sets a guide for all of our municipal public health and wellbeing plans. There is leverage in there, and there is a long history of local governments actually taking action to leverage this change – or with their regional partners – to really kickstart it. We have got plenty of examples. We have got the seven food hubs that VicHealth is supporting, and there are other local community initiatives that have that food with dignity approach, which are supported at that local level – not food relief necessarily but those sorts of smaller scale opportunities to access and purchase local, fresh, delicious food.

Lisa OHLMUS: Our perspective is not about just focusing on food relief; it is more about the broader system and how we can diversify access to fresh, affordable culturally appropriate food.

The CHAIR: Yes. I am going to that. Related to that, yes, these are all initiatives, but I am just wondering if they are accessible for all Victorians regardless of what their income is. That is what I am saying, because at the moment there are various initiatives, but when it comes to the local level they go, 'You must meet these criteria; you must have a healthcare card.' So I am just wondering if VicHealth, in partnership with local councils and organisations like regional partnerships, give access to all Victorians regardless.

Sharon LAURENCE: Yes. But merely by the positioning of where these local food hubs are, how they are set up or who is leading them, they naturally engage priority groups that are not going there for a free meal or a charitable box. They are empowering models. They might be growing their own food close to a local public housing estate. There is an enterprise that has pop-up fresh food markets called the 'Community Grocer', which you might have heard about. It is an amazing social enterprise that has four sites across metropolitan Melbourne. They provide fruit and vegetables for sale that are 56 per cent cheaper than in the local area, and they engage culturally diverse communities. So there are these beautiful models that exist, often through social enterprises, but I think the thing is that they rely on grant funding and volunteer workforces. I think at the heart of it here we are looking for an investment to sort of kickstart some of these really effective models, with multiple advantages for sustainable food, for localising food and for engaging culturally diverse communities – aside from the supermarkets. You know, it is a diversification.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Sharon. Thank you, Lisa. Michael.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Ms Laurence and Ms Ohlmus, for joining us. One of my questions is actually exactly on that point too; it is about your recommendation 5, I believe, on local food systems. What are the missing steps that we really need to address to get there? I represent a very outer suburban region, and we actually have quite a lot of agriculture on the outskirts of where people are living, but there is that disconnect between 'Are we growing what people need?', 'Are we making the best use of the land?' and obviously that land disappearing for development as well. What is the best way in which we can work with communities, especially in newer areas where people have moved from other parts of Melbourne or other parts of the world, to build those community structures into those local food systems? How do we do that?

Sharon LAURENCE: I think, as in my introductory remarks, we have to start looking at food in a different way and we have to be valuing food in a multifaceted way. That is why I think a lot of this does start with government centrally in that whole-of-government food system strategy – so we are not just thinking about a strategy for food relief, but we are connecting the supply and access to food with agriculture and with regional prosperity and making those links strategically at a high level. We are proposing there is a minister for food. We are proposing that this sits within DPC. When we are thinking of tourism, when we are thinking of transport and health and when we are thinking of how the public money – the public purse and procurement – is spent on food, why can't we preference healthier, more sustainable food and kickstart and invigorate these opportunities for more sustainable, more equitable, more healthy food?

Michael GALEA: Interesting. Thank you. In terms of the trends that you are seeing from VicHealth's perspective, I am curious to know of any particular trends that you are seeing in terms of physical health and what you have seen over the past few years or decade with regard to food access and security, especially as the population has continued to grow very significantly as more and more people are drawn to Victoria.

Sharon LAURENCE: I think food insecurity has been a hidden issue for decades, to be frank, but we do know there has been an uplift. We need better data on this, which is another recommendation of ours. But certainly the data shows that in 2020 it was 5.8 per cent – this is acute food insecurity – and in 2022 it was 8.1 per cent. That is a relative increase of around 40 per cent, so that is significant. But the fact that I worry about as much is that in 2020 one in four Victorian adults were definitely worried or sometimes worried about running out of money to buy food. They may not have run out of food, but that is ongoing daily stress. One in four – it is incredible, that statistic in Victoria, really.

Michael GALEA: Absolutely, and that has a very significant mental toll on people as well.

Sharon LAURENCE: That has mental impacts, but it also has health impacts, and the health impacts that it has are that when you are food insecure, when you are worried about where your next meal is coming from, you buy that cheaper, often lower-quality, highly processed, ultra-processed, typically unhealthier food. So this is a key issue. We need to make sure that we have got access to, yes, that more nutritious food, because that poor diet quality is driving –

Michael GALEA: It can be just as harmful if not –

Sharon LAURENCE: Yes. It is driving obesity and overweight, and we know those things are very much linked. Food insecurity is linked to obesity and weight – it is called the obesity paradox – and that is a driver also for a range of chronic diseases which we see disproportionately within food-insecure communities. So that is diabetes, which is at peak rate now, type 2 diabetes, heart disease and certain kinds of cancers which are diet related. So poor diet and obesity and overweight are our second highest risk factors for our burden of disease. This is all very important. Food is very central to our –

Michael GALEA: Our overall health, yes.

Lisa OHLMUS: Wellbeing.

Sharon LAURENCE: So many other areas, our health system burden and so forth.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Michael. Aiv.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. I would like to begin with your very first recommendation, the right to food law. It is to amend the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act* to legislate the right to food, ensuring it is embedded in all relevant state and local government policies and activities. We have heard about this in other contributions that have been made today. Why is this so important?

Sharon LAURENCE: I think it is an important opportunity for Victoria. Victoria is known as a progressive state. It is one of the three states and territories that have human rights legislation. We have our Victorian charter of human rights – that is excellent – but it does not extend to food and other social and economic rights. I think, as I described before, food security is a basic human right. It really is a fundamental prerequisite for our good health. I think also by considering food as a human right we start to think of food in a multifaceted way at that higher level that I started talking about before, so that food is not just commercial, it is not just an export opportunity, it is not just a business opportunity. Food is actually critical. Nourishing food is critical for our population's health. We have to balance that conversation and value food. Food is also critical to protect and support our environment. That is why I think if we have that human rights approach, it provides that enabling policy environment, and that flows through all different policies around different domains – our local government policies, our budgeting process. It is the check as we consider food in so many different domains.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It weaves through everything then.

Sharon LAURENCE: That is right.

Lisa OHLMUS: It is a principle that can help guide activity across other government areas, and that is the reason why we talk about the importance of governance and setting up the structures to build a food systems plan that can really think deeply about how we coordinate to ensure that food is prioritised as a core part of our health and wellbeing.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. And just moving towards recommendation 5, which you were headed towards then, the food systems, investing in those systems, you mentioned diversifying options for communities earlier – things like the Community Grocer but broader non-private sector run options that people can go to to access or purchase food. Why is it important that we are increasing diversity in those options and increasing therefore competition for the major supermarkets?

Sharon LAURENCE: I think it is important for so many reasons, and I think we have talked to some of them, but for connecting culturally diverse communities through food, through promoting opportunities for

more sustainable food from an environmental perspective – less food miles, eating seasonally, all that. There are so many different advantages of sustainable, equitable and healthier food at that local level.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you think in practice it might mean that people are not then forced to buy a price-gouged product from Coles or Woolies when they have got another option that is from an alternative business that maybe does not have the profit baked on top that is increasing the price?

Lisa OHLMUS: When we talk about diversifying access to food and localised food systems and access, that is part of the logic – that you do have more than the dominant actors in the system, being the major supermarkets, where people can access food that is healthy, fresh and nutritious.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

Lisa OHLMUS: No worries.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Joe, do you want to go on this one?

Joe McCracken: Yes. I have got a few questions. I am interested in your recommendation 5 too. Do you really think local councils are the bodies that should lead this work? Because I have worked in local government, I can tell you they are not.

Sharon LAURENCE: I think different –

Joe McCracken: Particularly large rural councils.

Sharon LAURENCE: Look, there are exemplar councils, and they do have a lever through their municipal public health and wellbeing plan. I do not think we are necessarily suggesting that councils do all the heavy lifting, but I think partnering with other regional organisations –

Joe McCracken: The reason why I ask is because I know local councils are incredibly stretched as it is. I used to be mayor of a large rural council. I know the pressure that they are under. I am not sure that they would have the capacity to lead this work when there are other factors of food production, like local roads and the cost and the wear and tear on trucks and the cost to transport, which leads to food security. I can tell you: local governments do not take care of local roads very well. So, I guess, how do you go at this?

Sharon LAURENCE: I think the investment in local community food systems is also in our recommendation here. This does not just happen without further investment. There does need to be an uplift there to support and diversify and relocalise these community food systems.

Joe McCracken: I would argue that the cost of freight, the increased cost of freight based on wear and tear on product, machinery and those sorts of things, would be – I will put this as a contention – an equal factor to the cost of food as well as the things that you are trying to work through with local government. Local government has only got a certain amount of cash. What levers do they pull? It is a hard one in competing priorities really.

Sharon LAURENCE: Yes. It depends where you are. I think it is about a partnership approach too. Local government can also connect with public settings, like a range of public settings and universal settings. Food is part of those environments too. That is why local government can be an important starting point. We have got childcare services. Schools can be connected through local government. There are workplace food and procurement opportunities. It is important to have them in the mix, connecting community in various ways and seeing food as an opportunity that flows through much of that partnership, and healthy food and opportunities for business activity. It is broader than food relief. We are talking about community food systems and connecting it up.

Joe McCracken: I mean, food relief and this food security issue is almost like a by-product of the cost-of-living crisis that is happening at the moment. People are making economic decisions. They cannot afford to pay their rent, so they are focusing on paying rent rather than buying nutritious food, and we have heard evidence to that effect. I guess one of the questions I was going to ask was about farmers themselves. A lot of the factors in the cost of production, so energy, transport and so forth, mean that a lot of those costs are passed on down the chain, so to speak. Have you had any thoughts on how we could support farmers? Energy, for

example, is a massive one, gas – another form of energy – transport. I know they may seem really indirect, but they have a flow-on effect down the chain which impacts the cost at the point of distribution.

Sharon LAURENCE: I think it is probably getting a little bit out of our domain of expertise. This is why we work in a systems approach: to ensure that we are connecting and collaborating with other sectors that can provide that input. For medium and small farmers in the peri-urban space, what are the opportunities at the local level to sell their produce? Does local government have an opportunity to provide land for the community for a farmers' market? There are lots of leverage points. If we have food systems at the core and as a value and a policy lead, then from that and by connecting different sector actors the opportunities come to fruition if we are connected on that shared vision.

Joe McCRACKEN: I see what you are saying, but I think it has got to be through the lens of a low cost. Look, I know, for example, the shire I used to be mayor of ran saleyards, but private saleyards could run a lot more efficiently and therefore they charged lower fees. That was then passed on to the end consumer. I am just wondering: what level of government intervention do you need in these sorts of systems? Sometimes they can have a negative effect. Sorry, I am just trying to talk through that with you.

Lisa OHLMUS: Absolutely. I think that is part of the reason why we are saying we do need to map this out. We need to have an understanding of how all of these factors interrelate and feed into each other. That is the reason why we talk about the need to develop a food systems plan, which other jurisdictions are looking at at the moment. We would not be the first to be considering that, and it is something that has come out of a federal parliamentary inquiry as well. That can help us better understand all of the factors that are contributing to the prices of food that we see on the shelves and also what the options are outside of that.

Joe McCRACKEN: I have even had conversations with First Nations people about fishing and hunting, the importance of those in a cultural sense and enabling those activities to take place on country so that we can support the catching and eating of food all in a very culturally safe manner, which I think is so important to a lot of First Nations people and quite often is ignored. You get a lot of animal activists saying, 'You can't do that, you can't do that.' A lot of Indigenous people are calling for those sorts of things because it is important to them and their culture.

Sharon LAURENCE: I agree.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Joe. Renee.

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much for your submission and also your presentation today. I think it was you, Sharon, who spoke about food with dignity and not relief. Because we are dealing with a crisis at the moment, a lot of it is downstream. But what do we have to do further on to make sure that people have this, and what does food with dignity look like and mean?

Sharon LAURENCE: It is a good question, and there is a place for food relief. It is not the place that VicHealth have focused on particularly, but we are supporting those opportunities to take initiatives across that spectrum from food relief to food security if you like. When I think of dignified approaches, I am thinking of opportunities that provide people with choice, culturally appropriate foods. But sometimes it is not food relief; it is food that is provided that is subsidised, but it is still at cost. It can be pop-up markets that sell at low cost. I talked about the Community Grocer before. That is a beautiful example of accessing fresh produce on a weekly basis and at much lower cost but it is a social enterprise.

Lisa OHLMUS: That sort of model is available to everybody, as we touched on before. It is not targeting or necessarily potentially stigmatising people, requiring them to provide evidence of their socio-economic status. Ensuring that that food is available without that stigma I think is part of that thinking around food with dignity.

Renee HEATH: Lisa, you spoke about how you can diversify access to food. What are some good examples of that?

Lisa OHLMUS: Absolutely. At VicHealth, and Sharon, as the Food Systems Manager, has a really good insight to this, we have been piloting and building up local food hubs in which young people are being trained to harvest and cultivate locally grown food and make it available within their communities. Do you want to talk a little bit more about that?

Sharon LAURENCE: Yes. They are in their second year. They are a model which I think has merit, and it is a model that has been in place in other places internationally. The US, for example, has a strong network of food hubs to provide that opportunity. It is not food relief that I am talking about. There are food relief hubs as well, but these are food hubs that do still retail local produce but have very much a social connection led by culturally diverse communities. Often in the case of Victoria, in terms of the ones that VicHealth are leading, it is an opportunity. For example, we have got the United African Farm out in Cardinia, and they have land there. They are bringing people together. They are harvesting vegetables that are culturally appropriate for their communities. They are selling them to local community agencies and so forth. They operate at a quite small scale, but for the communities they are serving they are very important and they have impact. They are the sorts of local opportunities that I think we can accelerate and do better at.

Renee HEATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Renee. Thank you, Sharon and Lisa, for coming today and your submission in relation to governance, planning and local system investment. It is something definitely we will take into consideration moving forward for our recommendations to the government down the track. Thank you very much for your time and your submission.

Witnesses withdrew.