

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 21 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 (*via videoconference*)

Julia Schindlmayr, Acting Manager, Advocacy and Policy,

Ellyn Bicknell, Dietitian and Co-Convener, Food and Environment Interest Group, and

Briony Blake, Dietitian, Dietitians Australia.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Joining us for our last session today are members of Dietitians Australia. Good afternoon, ladies. Just before I continue, I will just read this information to you regarding the evidence you are about to impart to us this afternoon.

Regarding the evidence you are providing, 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 things, 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. Transcripts will be ultimately made public and posted on the committee's website.

For recording purposes, could you please state your full name, your position and the organisation you are presenting on behalf of today. Julia, do you want to start?

Julia SCHINDLMAYR: Sure. I am Julia Schindlmayr. I am an accredited practising dietitian and Acting Manager of Advocacy and Policy at Dietitians Australia.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ellyn.

Ellyn BICKNELL: Yes, thank you. My name is Ellyn Bicknell. I am an accredited practising Dietitian and member of Dietitians Australia and the Co-Convener of the Dietitians Australia Food and Environment Interest Group.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Briony BLAKE: And I am Briony Blake. I am also an accredited practising Dietitian representing Dietitians Australia.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you very much for joining us. I will just quickly introduce you to the committee here today. I am Trung Luu, the Chair. My Deputy Chair is Mr Ryan Batchelor, with Mr Aiv Puglielli. Also joining us is Mr Lee Tarlamis on Zoom, and Dr Renee Heath shortly will be on Zoom as well – there she is.

Thank you so much for your submissions and for joining us this afternoon. I understand we have got your submission already. I invite you to make an opening statement for the committee before we ask you some questions.

Julia SCHINDLMAYR: Thank you. We would like to take that opportunity. I would like to just start quickly with an acknowledgement of country, if I may. We would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, the Wurundjeri people and the Wiradjuri people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we are coming from today. We pay our respect to elders past, present and emerging and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. I also extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are here with us today.

Australia is a wealthy nation. The level of food insecurity with its growing prevalence across the nation and indeed in Victoria is inexcusable. The causes of food insecurity are complex and multifaceted, and they require a comprehensive whole-of-government response. Food is fuel for our wellbeing. We must consider both food and nutrition security together. It is Dietitians Australia's firm belief that the development and implementation

of a robust national nutrition policy would enable this approach and would provide a critical nationally consistent framework to address the social and economic determinants that drive food insecurity.

Dietitians Australia is the peak professional association for dietitians in Australia and is a leading voice in nutrition and dietetics. We are both a membership body and the professional regulator. As part of the foundation of self-regulation, we apply a rigorous standard to accreditation of university programs and the credentialing of accredited practising dietitians to ensure safe, quality and evidence-based practice. Accredited practising dietitians are experiencing firsthand the impact that food insecurity is having on the nutrition status of Victorians. Our members practice in a range of settings, including community and public health, education settings, justice and more. They not only fulfil the requirement of a typical medical model, but they are also versatile in their experience and skills. They communicate, educate, assist and co-create solutions effectively with other professionals and with communities. They play a pivotal role in helping to address food insecurity across the nation. They continue to emphasise to us the need for a comprehensive and cohesive national solution.

The federal government's Department of Health and Aged Care was awarded \$700,000 to develop a comprehensive national nutrition policy framework in 2022, and we are calling on the Victorian government to support and actively engage with the federal Department of Health to drive a national standard from which all states and territories can benefit. Unlike other OECD countries, Australia does not collect regular and consistent population level data on food security. An estimated 4 to 13 per cent of the general population are food insecure, and rates as high as 32 per cent are seen in some communities, depending on their location. There is a critical need to implement a routine, robust food security monitoring surveillance system in Australia. A quote from a member speaks to the heart of this issue: 'You can't mend what you don't measure.'

We acknowledge that the Victorian government has initiated a level of monitoring and surveillance of food security. We recommend that these efforts be bolstered through the adoption of the United States Department of Agriculture 18-item household food security survey module. This is a validated, standardised scale which can assess the presence and severity of food insecurity at the household level in adults and children. We also call on the Victorian government to continue to spearhead effective public health campaigns that help to ensure food security across the Victorian community. We strongly encourage the government to lean on the expertise and guidance of accredited practising dietitians in the development and co-design of public health initiatives.

Critical also in the consideration of food security for Victorians is the role that accredited practising dietitians play in the management of health conditions that require alternate routes of feeding. Food insecurity increases when people do not have access to health services for diagnosis, management and treatment of feeding difficulties. People living with conditions that require alternate routes of feeding or conditions where functional aids are required to assist or improve their ability to prepare or eat foods must have access to an accredited practising dietitian. We implore the Victorian government to ensure that the home enteral nutrition program receives committed and ongoing funding to provide for enteral feeding equipment and aids and supports guaranteed access to accredited practising dietitians as part of routine care.

We warmly thank you, the members of the Legal and Social Issues Committee, for the opportunity to present to you today. We strongly encourage the Victorian government to engage accredited practising dietitians in all of its efforts as part of the solution to address food insecurity in the Victorian community. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Julia. Elyn or Briony, would you like to make any statements or comments?

Elyn BICKNELL: No, thank you. We support Julia's statement today.

The CHAIR: Aiv, do you want to start?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us today and sharing your experiences. I understand one of the recommendations that you make in your submission is to legislate the right to food in Victoria and embed that into all relevant state and local government policies, budgeting processes and activities. Why is this so important?

Julia SCHINDLMAYR: Elyn, would you like to take this one?

Ellyn BICKNELL: Yes, absolutely. I would also like to say our sentiments as Dietitians Australia mimic some of the other organisations that have spoken to you in this hearing and over two days around that right to food, food law and food dignity, including VicHealth and VACCHO. We are all aligned in that requirement for that right to food.

That right to food embedded into all levels of government: as the Victorian food systems and food security working party outlined in their consensus statement in 2021, that can really provide some guidelines and strategies for all of those levels of government to work together for those same goals and to be able to refer to. It also provides the local and the state governments that grounding to be able to provide those recommendations to the federal government for further change. That right-to-food law also really speaks to that equity and meeting the needs of all individuals, and not just the food and nutrition needs but also the cultural, the social, the relationship needs we have with food and how that influences mental health, wellbeing and community connection. Thank you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Totally. I have just got a few more points from your submission. You also, in the submission, pull some data to highlight a discrepancy between a weekly shop between the years 2015 and 2024, a price moving from \$100 to \$140, and then highlight that only \$14 of that rise is due to inflation. Meanwhile, Coles' 2023 full-year results, released as a net profit after tax, were \$1.098 billion. Is this concerning?

Briony BLAKE: Absolutely. I think that with the rising cost of dietitian-approved foods, if you will, or foods that we recommend to our clients, if the foods that we see as healthy and health serving are rising in price beyond what is reasonable with inflation, it creates a massive cause for concern and can leave us getting ever more creative and resourceful in the way that we provide nutrition advice to those seeking our care.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I understand also in the submission you recommend the implementation of a mandatory reporting system for pricing of staple food products in particularly remote community stores and that this information should be publicly available to consumers to improve transparency and competition in the market. Would you approve of that work sitting under the Essential Services Commission?

Great. I think that is a nod for the record. Terrific. Otherwise, with the remainder of my time, I understand you call on the Victorian government to work with the federal government on planning and zoning of grocery stores and food retail stores to improve access and affordability. Why is this?

Julia SCHINDLMAYR: I will take it if you want, Ellyn. We are fully aware that there are such places we like to refer to as food deserts, and these are areas of the community that are not well serviced by fresh food purveyors. You will find a lot of fast-food restaurants in these areas, very little access to produce, supermarkets even and so on. It is critical for people to be able to access fresh food within their suburbs. Why are we asking people to drive for an hour to find fresh good produce when these opportunities should actually exist within their own areas? I will now pass to Ellyn, if you have got any further comments.

Ellyn BICKNELL: Absolutely, thank you. It is not just about the presence of those supermarkets or shopping centres but actually what they are stocking in those centres. Do they have, as Julia mentioned, access to fresh fruit and vegetables? What is that kind of access looking like? Are they able to get that at an affordable and equitable price or is the transport to those remote locations something that is then making some of those fresh and whole foods less accessible or less desirable?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Great points. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Aiv. Ryan.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, everyone, for coming in. We have talked a bit about this. The concept of food deserts has come up quite a bit. How do you think we incentivise the establishment of more fresh cheap food options in more-established suburbs and communities where you would go to get a market-based experience? How do you think we can do that in newer communities, suburbs, growth areas? Have you seen any models anywhere or come across any models where there has been a successful fostering or incubating or catalysing, whatever word you want to use, of that sort of more traditional approach to market-based shopping in your communities?

Briony BLAKE: One example I can think of, and I heard it mentioned by VicHealth, is the Community Grocer, which is like, I guess, a social enterprise – volunteer reliant – which brings below-market-priced fresh fruit and vegetables to our communities. They have Flemington, Carlton and Fitzroy markets. The one in Fitzroy is actually at the bottom of one of the public housing buildings. If we talk about accessibility of fresh, affordable food that is on your doorstep, that is a really fantastic example of a model, I feel. In terms of larger scale, I am not sure if it is something that we need to scale or whether we invest in these pre-existing community-based grassroots initiatives that seem to be, because they work so closely with their communities, really effectively servicing them.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Yes, they are good initiatives. I suppose what I am trying to get at is that there are parts of Melbourne that are pretty well serviced. There are larger parts of our growth corridors, outer-suburban communities, that all they have got probably is a Coles or a Woolies, maybe an Aldi, in their local communities. In those places we may not have the concentration of support services around existing social infrastructure and historically they have been more reliant on planning-based and council-based provision of those services. Have you seen any models where it works in those types of locations?

Briony BLAKE: Not documented examples. Anecdotally I am aware of multiple other state cooperatives that have been started up in areas that are under-serviced, food cooperatives that have been started up with just a small number of producers and sometimes hand makers as well and the development of that cooperative has actually driven more growers locally to be producing and backyard producers to be connecting. Look, that might sound like a small effort, but when you have some of that local excess surplus being shared, over time that can grow to be connecting communities around food in some of those newer locations or those under-serviced locations.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks. The other thing that you mentioned in your submission relates to access and making sure that food relief initiatives give people the dignity of choice. I was wondering if you can explain a bit why it matters for individuals to have that agency in the way that they engage with measures that are designed to help them receive food relief.

Briony BLAKE: Yes, absolutely. This really comes down to, as I have mentioned before, that as human beings we have really strong cultural and mental health relationship ties to our food. What we would say in terms of dignity of choice is we think that dignity of choice is not just around the choice of what foods they have access to in emergency food relief. We are saying that to improve food security we need to ensure that people have a choice of what foods they have for cultural and other reasons other than just nutrition, although we push nutrition as such a major kind of factor. It is not just for that nutrition and fuel; that choice can have other reasons. Therefore in relying on that food relief as our key solution for food security, we need to look broader than that in terms of the system. I know that a lot of food relief centres, as we have heard in these hearings, are trying to diversify what foods they have available to meet the needs culturally and nutrition-wise. I know that a lot of dieticians work hand in hand with their local food relief centres to guide and advise on the nutritional requirements of the people seeking that food relief.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks very much. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ryan. Lee, are you still online?

Lee TARLAMIS: I do not have any questions, Chair. My internet is dropping in and out, so I will sit this one out.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Renee, have you got any questions?

Renee HEATH: Thanks, Trung. No, I do not have any questions.

The CHAIR: In your submission you mention food nutrition and literacy. I was just wondering, does that include food preparation, education and sustainability as well? I know with various food if you do not prep it right, the nutrition will go away anyway, so does that education include preparation and sustainability of various food as well as the literacy?

Briony BLAKE: Yes, absolutely. I am careful to not overstate the reliance on increasing food literacy to address food insecurity. If people cannot afford to buy food, all the knowledge in the world is not going to be

helpful for them to prep it. But absolutely I think accredited practising dietitians are best served to give that education and embed that into our school systems, our workplaces and any other places that might bring community together. Also, in our submission we did mention some community initiatives that have combined increasing food literacy with cooking classes and access to food relief. Pairing them together, as we have seen in other initiatives, can be a really nice way to ensure that people are accessing food relief and then that they are able to use the food that they have accessed to prepare nutritious meals and store them in a way that is safe and will mean they are going to last for a longer time and therefore keep them food secure for longer.

The CHAIR: Does it also include using the food that is the best available – basically using all of the food, that is what I am trying to say, that is available?

Briony BLAKE: So reducing waste, I suppose?

The CHAIR: Correct, yes.

Briony BLAKE: Yes, absolutely. I think that is very important. Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Also, in your submission you mention investing in regional infrastructure to support food rescue. Could you just expand on that a little bit in relation to your point of view on that sort of infrastructure investment?

Ellyn BICKNELL: Yes, definitely. Look, we can provide more information on this that has been outlined in some of the Dietitians Australia endorsed publications, including the Dietitians Australia position statement on healthy and sustainable diets. The redirection of food waste, as you just mentioned in your previous question to Briony, is utilising food that can be utilised for human consumption and utilising all of it to the best of its abilities for that human consumption. There are multiple avenues, as has been documented in case studies, that can be looked at in terms of redirecting that waste and utilisation.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Any more questions?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Happy to jump back in. Further on the subject of food waste, do you think that the current practices employed by the major supermarkets are fit for purpose with regard to how they specify what food they will take in? Do you think there needs to be an update there, and if so, what should be changed?

Ellyn BICKNELL: Yes, absolutely. Look, I am not as familiar exactly with those specific requirements of the grocery stores. We have got many campaigns across some of the major supermarkets that are trying to encourage that wonky fruit and veg, but there is certainly a lot more that can be done in expanding what they can take and the education around that. That can be simple messaging or flyers and posters within those centres that guide people about how you would use that slightly less-than-perfect or ripened food. The other thing to consider is that sometimes that less-than-perfect produce can cost a lot for farmers to get that produce to the supermarket and they are not necessarily getting the same income from those foods. So some of the strategies that take produce that is not as fit for the supermarkets or does not meet supermarket guidelines and redirect it to other areas can certainly utilise those foods or process them and make the most of the energy that has been put into producing those to still provide food for human consumption in a more equitable model for the farmers as well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Great points. Just as a further example, I understand there have been instances where a fruit or vegetable item is too big and therefore the supermarkets will not take it in. Should they be allowed to do that? Given we are in a food insecurity crisis, that to me sounds absolutely absurd. What do we reckon?

Briony BLAKE: I would agree with you absolutely there. I am not sure where that even comes from or for what reason you would be rejecting perfectly edible food in a time like this.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That is all my questions, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is it from us. Thank you so much for your time, your submission and all the evidence you have provided us today. We will definitely take it into consideration in the deliberation of our recommendations.

Before I finish this session I just want to say thank you to the broadcast team, the Hansard team, my committee colleagues, all those on Zoom, all those who viewed the broadcast over the last two days and the secretariat for their assistance for the last two days. I would like to thank you again, ladies, for attending and giving evidence. This brings our panel session to a close, so I again thank you all for attending this Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria.

Committee adjourned.