

**Submission  
No 103**

## **INQUIRY INTO FOOD SECURITY IN VICTORIA**

**Organisation:** The Salvation Army Australia

**Date Received:** 25 July 2024



# **Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria**

July 2024

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## Our Commitment to Inclusion

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The Salvation Army Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet and work and pay our respect to Elders, past, present and future.

We value and include people of all cultures, languages, abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and intersex status. We are committed to providing programs that are fully inclusive. We are committed to the safety and wellbeing of people of all ages, particularly children. Our values are:

- Integrity
- Compassion
- Respect
- Diversity
- Collaboration

The Salvation Army is a worldwide movement known for its acceptance and unconditional love for all people. We love unconditionally, because God first loved us. The Bible says, “God so loves the world” (John 3:16, RGT). As both a church and charity, we believe all people are loved by God and are worthy of having their needs met. Everyone is welcome to find love, hope, and acceptance at The Salvation Army.

The Salvation Army Australia Territory wishes to acknowledge that members of the LGBTIQA+ community have experienced hurt and exclusion because of mixed comments and responses made in the past. The Salvation Army is committed to inclusive practice that recognises and values diversity. We are ensuring our services affirm the right to equality, fairness, and decency for all LGBTIQA+ people, rectifying all forms of discriminatory practice throughout the organisation.

We seek to partner with LGBTIQA+ people and allies to work with us to build an inclusive, accessible, and culturally safe environment in every aspect of Salvation Army organisation and services. Everyone has a right to feel safe and respected.

Learn more about our commitment to inclusion: <[salvationarmy.org.au/about-us](http://salvationarmy.org.au/about-us)>

More information about The Salvation Army is at **Appendix A**.







## Executive Summary

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The Salvation Army thanks the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee for the opportunity to provide feedback on the issue of food security throughout the state of Victoria.

As one of the largest providers of social services across the country, and a national provider of emergency relief, The Salvation Army acts as a critical provider of financial support, gifts in kind, and in partnership with others to ensure that community members in need can access food.

Our Doorways program provides case management, emergency relief and immediate support for 128,000 Australians in financial distress every year. One of the most common ways this support manifests is in the provision of direct food relief through our pantries and hampers, or supermarket vouchers. This is also supported by our community meals and community gardens which bring community members together as well as providing them with nourishing food and ingredients.

Our experience, and this submission, focusses on the implications of food insecurity, and the things which are too often foregone by community members in hardship, including the mental and physical health and the long-term socioeconomic impacts of food insecurity.

From this, we have considered options available to the Victorian Government to combat the issue of food insecurity through the lens of the four dimensions identified by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation: food availability, food access, food use and food stability and sustainability.<sup>1</sup>

- **Food availability** is linked heavily to supply and denotes the issues of production of food in arid areas. It also reflects the availability of food retailers in remote locations, and the ability for these retailers to provide sufficient, nutritious and varied food for the community.
- **Food access** includes individuals' ability to reach food retailers in their community, the financial pressures they face, as well as the affordability of nutritious food.
- **Food use** addresses the capacity to transform raw food ingredients into meals and includes storage, preparation time, know-how and equipment with which to cook, and understanding of nutritional needs.
- **Food stability and sustainability** addresses the ability to maintain nutrition over the long-term, including financial resilience to price shocks and income pressures.

Ultimately, there is no single solution that the Victorian Government can implement to address food insecurity. The complexity of factors which leave families, children and young people hungry requires a considered, cooperative, and sustained effort from Commonwealth, State and even local governments to address.

The Salvation Army has made 11 recommendations for the Committee to consider. A summary of these recommendations follows on the next page.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Food and Agriculture Association (2014). *Global Strategic Framework for Food Security & Nutrition*. [https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs1314/GSF/GSF\\_Version\\_3\\_EN.pdf](https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs1314/GSF/GSF_Version_3_EN.pdf)

# Summary of Recommendations

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## Recommendation 1

2.13 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government to meaningfully increase the base rate of JobSeeker and Youth Allowance to ensure that recipients are able to live with dignity.

## Recommendation 2

2.18 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government to enhance regulation of Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) loans, and similar sources of consumer credit, to prevent people from being forced into unmanageable debt.

## Recommendation 3

3.7 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work to establish more local distribution centres in regional areas to improve the access of regional and remote communities to storage and distribution of fresh produce.

## Recommendation 4

3.8 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government to enhance supermarket price competition, particularly in remote communities.

## Recommendation 5

3.10 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with local government authorities to develop planning policies which support the accessibility and availability of healthy food retailers, maximising price competition, and consumer choice.

## Recommendation 6

3.17 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work to enhance the readiness of communities, particularly those in remote or disaster prone locations, for the impacts of disasters on the food supply chain.

## Recommendation 7

4.10 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with providers to address the immediate need for affordable housing, emergency accommodation and social housing services.

## Recommendation 8

4.25 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government increase funding for organisations providing food relief and other support services to relieve cost of living pressures.

## Recommendation 9

5.15 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government provide funding to support organisations providing budget cooking courses, ensuring these are embedded, accessible, culturally appropriate and sustained.



### **Recommendation 10**

5.16 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with organisations, particularly those specialising in children and young people, and with culturally and linguistically diverse communities to broker partnerships to provide community outreach and budget cooking courses.

### **Recommendation 11**

6.7 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work alongside communities to establish locally led community gardens to improve local food production and stability.





## 2 Going Without

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- 2.1 As food is a necessity, the greatest commonality for all people experiencing food insecurity is what people must forego as a result. For people experiencing minor financial hardship, shifting from name-brand to store-brand is a manageable economy. For people in more significant hardship, swapping fresh vegetables for frozen is common. The people The Salvation Army serves are forgoing one necessity for another.
- 2.2 It is an often used phrase that community members have started to choose between ‘heating and eating’. Foodbank’s Hunger Report 2023 found that 54 per cent of insecure households had been forced to reduce their heating and cooling bill to cope with an increase in food prices.<sup>2</sup>

“

*“People often skip paying bills to have enough to feed their kids that week.”*

**- A Salvation Army Doorways Caseworker**

”

- 2.3 The Salvation Army’s 2024 Red Shield Appeal Report surveyed community members who accessed our services throughout the country. We found that 69 per cent of respondents from Victoria with children skipped meals so their children could have enough to eat. Similarly, 46 per cent of pet owners found they had to skip meals to ensure their pet could eat.<sup>3</sup>
- 2.4 Forgoing necessities reduces community members’ wellbeing. This has negative impacts on their health, both physically and mentally, and naturally pushes people into hardship.

### Health

- 2.5 Consuming nutritious food is an essential component of maintaining good health and wellbeing and this costs money. People who require specific diets or medications for health conditions face additional costs. Food insecurity often forces people to choose cheaper, poor-quality foods lacking in nutrition or to skip meals entirely. Chronic food insecurity in adults is associated with increased risk of chronic conditions including diabetes, hypertension, anxiety, and depression.<sup>4</sup> Food insecurity can have negative, irreversible effects on children’s growth and development, and is associated with poor general health and behavioural problems.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ipsos, Foodbank. (September 2023). Foodbank Hunger Report Research 2023: National Key Findings Report.

[https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023\\_Foodbank\\_Hunger\\_Report\\_IPSOS-Report.pdf](https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023_Foodbank_Hunger_Report_IPSOS-Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Verrelli, S., Russell, C., & Taylor, E. (2024). *Findings from the 2024 Red Shield Appeal Research Project. Victoria Report*. The Salvation Army, Australia.

<sup>4</sup> McKay, F., Haines, B. & Dunn, M. (2019). Measuring and Understanding Food Insecurity in Australia: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 16:3. [Measuring and Understanding Food Insecurity in Australia: A Systematic Review - PMC \(nih.gov\)](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16030303).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid; WFP and FAO. 2024. Hunger Hotspots. FAO–WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity: June to October 2024 Outlook. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0979en>.



- 2.6 Where community members seeking emergency relief have been living for long periods with limited food availability, there is a significant psychological burden. Community members often discuss their experience of food insecurity as a mixture of feeling trapped, and ashamed. Many discuss how not having enough food to feed their children made them feel inadequate.

“

*“When people receive a hamper, the look of relief on their faces is just so clear. They know they’ll have a few days of relief from hunger, from the feeling of dread.”*

”

**- A Salvation Army Doorways Caseworker**

- 2.7 A barrier The Salvation Army services work to minimise is any feelings of shame community members may feel when coming for food relief. A preconceived notion of social judgment that food insecurity is a community member’s own fault, or that the person providing relief will judge the community member is a hurdle for many seeking assistance. Ensuring that community members feel respected and supported when accessing The Salvation Army’s services is one of our core beliefs.
- 2.8 The stress of food shortages creates significant mental ill-health in community members. The need to be constantly thinking about how they will afford dinner, or to keep their family fed takes a long-term toll on their mental wellbeing.

### **Sunraysia Community**

The Salvation Army’s Sunraysia Corps offers community meals several times per week.

To maximise the number of people they can assist, the Corps serves lunch in Mildura on Thursdays, and dinner in the nearby town of Red Cliffs on Wednesdays. This is done in partnership with another church group in Red Cliffs. This sharing of facilities and volunteers, working hand-in-hand, has significantly increased the benefit to these communities.

The local corps have found that the need in their area has grown significantly, with both community meals now serving many more people in need.

“We try and keep the events casual and spark up a conversation with anyone. It is not shameful. We all need a hand sometimes” says the local corps officer.

“Some in our community are from the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) community, particularly from regions with ongoing conflict. We are very aware of their mental ill-health and past experience of trauma. We always try and ensure that our practices are culturally appropriate and trauma-informed.”



“

*“I can afford my medication, or I can afford food this week. But even if I get my medication, it says it has to be taken with food.”*

”

**- A Salvation Army Community Member**

## Hardship

- 2.9 A paradox that people experiencing financial hardship will recognise is that the less money you have the more expensive everything is. This is sometimes colloquially called a ‘poor tax’ or ‘boots theory’. Many goods and services cost less when bought in bulk or upfront, but to access those savings community members need funds that someone in financial hardship simply do not have.
- 2.10 Examples that our community members raise regularly include things like purchasing toilet paper or instant ramen. These are things a person knows they will use and where the per unit cost is significantly lower if you buy in bulk, but it is impossible for a person to stretch the budget to allow the purchases upfront. This goes to Food Use and will be discussed in Chapter 5.
- 2.11 The Salvation Army has long held that the base rate of JobSeeker is insufficient to allow people experiencing unemployment to live with dignity. The payment does not cover basic needs, with more and more individuals coming to organisations such as The Salvation Army, for emergency relief. Our experience working with people who are experiencing poverty as a result of the low rate of JobSeeker has shown how the payment prevents people from affording necessities, like food, housing and medication.
- 2.12 We acknowledge that income support payments are outside the scope of this inquiry and the powers of the Victorian Government. However, the single biggest measure to relieve food insecurity would be to ensure income support is sufficient to allow people to live with dignity. The majority of the people we support receive some form of income support payment. Further, as the JobSeeker Payment is pegged to national inflation, the uneven nature of Consumer Price Index (CPI) growth, as well as the indexation lag, leads to many Victorians seeing their supports eroded by inflation. We implore the Victorian Government to encourage the Commonwealth Government to increase the rate of the JobSeeker Payment and other related payments to ensure that Victorians experiencing hardship can feed themselves and their families every meal every day.

### **Recommendation 1**

- 2.13 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government to meaningfully increase the base rate of JobSeeker and Youth Allowance to ensure that recipients are able to live with dignity.**







- 2.14 The Salvation Army's 2024 Red Shield Appeal report has found that the average community member who received income support payments, has -\$2 per week. In Victoria, this was even worse with the average respondent -\$55 per week after necessary expenses.<sup>6</sup>
- 2.15 Faced with no option to make even further sacrifices, many of the community members enter debt – be it falling behind in utility payments, credit cards, or sourcing other, poorly regulated forms of credit like a 'pay day' or Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) loan. These then put not only financial strain, but mental burden on people who are already struggling to make ends meet, as debts grow, and payments become unmanageable.
- 2.16 The Salvation Army's Moneycare financial counselling service sees how comparatively low amounts of debt can spiral into significant and unmanageable debt. We have seen community members in need enticed to enter consumer leases and rent-to-buy schemes for necessary purchases. Clients end up paying three to four times the normal retail price over the life of the lease. The current under regulation of credit instruments, particularly BNPL loans, is a growing cause of indebtedness. BNPL instruments are inappropriate for many people with limited incomes, and a continued lack of oversight of the sector risks people taking out a large number of expensive BNPL loans rather than safer, regulated forms of finance, such as No Interest Loans (NILs).
- 2.17 We note that the Commonwealth Government is working toward increased regulation of the Buy Now Pay Later sector. The proposed changes in the Treasury Laws Amendment (Responsible Buy Now Pay Later and Other Measures) Bill 2024 are a significant step forward, yet there is an ongoing arms race in financial regulation. While there is such a shortfall in income support payments to the cost of necessities, desperate people will always be enticed into unsafe debt to feed themselves and their family.

**Recommendation 2**

**2.18 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government to enhance regulation of Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) loans, and similar sources of consumer credit, to prevent people from being forced into unmanageable debt.**



*"Kids who go to school without breakfast don't want to be there. They struggle to pay attention and get labeled as 'disruptive kids'."*



**- A Salvation Army Doorways Caseworker**

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



### 3 Food Availability

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- 3.1 Logistical issues play a large role in nutrition. Getting fresh produce to rural and remote communities is often a significant barrier throughout Australia. The size of Victoria does not lend itself to the same types of logistical issues of food transport as other jurisdictions, where literally thousands of kilometres may separate communities from food production. Yet there are still significant barriers to availability of food which place strain on individuals.

#### Location

- 3.2 Where a person is located has significant implications on the availability of secure food. Small remote communities are often serviced by a single food retailer, with the nearest competitor located a significant distance away. Communities in this position have little choice but to access these retailers, which raises the risk of uncompetitive pricing, as well as restricting the choice of foods which can be purchased.
- 3.3 The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has found limited evidence of “misleading, deceptive or unconscionable conduct”.<sup>7</sup> The ACCC Supermarket Inquiry of 2024-25 continues to acknowledge the anecdotal evidence of community members, particularly in remote areas, of supermarket ‘price gouging’ or uncompetitive pricing.<sup>8</sup>
- 3.4 In 2020, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs conducted an inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities. That inquiry examined in detail the need for additional oversight, and consumer information services of grocery providers in remote communities, to ensure price stability and competitive pricing.<sup>9</sup> The final report into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities stressed that much of the increased costs experienced in remote communities is not a result of malicious and anticompetitive behaviour, but an unavoidable result of the additional logistical costs of sourcing food in remote locations.
- 3.5 Transport of fresh produce to highly remote locations is often infrequent, and cold storage is not practical to maintain, and presents additional costs for retailers. This means many communities simply cannot get access to many fresh foods, or afford the price implications of transport and storage. Retailers, and consumers are often forced to supply and purchase products with longer shelf lives, many of which sacrifice nutritional quality for longevity.
- 3.6 The Salvation Army encourages the state government to work with the Commonwealth Government to implement the recommendations of the *Food Pricing and Food Security In*

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<sup>7</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (2020) *Report On Food Pricing And Food Security In Remote Indigenous Communities* [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous\\_Affairs/Foodpricing](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous_Affairs/Foodpricing).

<sup>8</sup> Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC). (February 2024) *ACCC Supermarket Inquiry: Issues Paper*. [https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/supermarkets-inquiry-issues-paper\\_0.pdf?ref=0&download=y](https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/supermarkets-inquiry-issues-paper_0.pdf?ref=0&download=y).

<sup>9</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (2020) *Report On Food Pricing And Food Security In Remote Indigenous Communities* [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous\\_Affairs/Foodpricing](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous_Affairs/Foodpricing).

*Remote Indigenous Communities* inquiry report, as well as the ongoing ACCC Supermarket inquiry, to ensure that remote communities have access to comprehensive and competitive food supplies.

### **Recommendation 3**

- 3.7 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work to establish more local distribution centres in regional areas to improve the access of regional and remote communities to storage and distribution of fresh produce.**

### **Recommendation 4**

- 3.8 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government to enhance supermarket price competition, particularly in remote communities.**

## Food Deserts and Food Swamps

- 3.9 Areas where it is difficult to access food, particularly fresh produce, are referred to as Food Deserts. Research from the University of Deakin has found that many areas, particularly the outer suburbs of Melbourne, are 'food swamps' where most of the food options and food sold is un nourishing.<sup>10</sup> It is important to recognise that people experiencing financial hardship face not only a shortage of income, but also often a shortage of time. To the people working or living in food swamps or deserts, needing something quickly due to time poverty, the only available options may be either non-nutritious food, or food which is less competitively priced. The failure of local government planning forces many to pay a premium, or eat unhealthy food.

### **Recommendation 5**

- 3.10 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with local government authorities to develop planning policies which support the accessibility and availability of healthy food retailers, maximising price competition, and consumer choice.**

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<sup>10</sup> Needham C, Orellana L, Allender S, Sacks G, Blake MR, Strugnell C. (2020) Food Retail Environments in Greater Melbourne 2008–2016: Longitudinal Analysis of Intra-City Variation in Density and Healthiness of Food Outlets. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2020; 17(4):1321. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17041321>.





## Natural Disasters

- 3.11 As climate change continues to impact on Australia's seasons, and increased the occurrence of natural disasters, it too has an impact on food security. Weather events causing damage to crops, severing supply chains and decreasing food availability, will prove to have a significant influence on communities throughout Victoria.
- 3.12 As a major emergency response provider, embedded in communities throughout the state, The Salvation Army has seen how food supplies are a critical consideration in natural disasters.
- 3.13 During the 2022 flood event, several road closures due to flood waters, including the Goulburn Valley Freeway between Seymour and Shepparton meant that food and other essential material aid items such as bedding, tents, clothing and specialised baby formula needed to be airlifted into isolated towns.
- 3.14 The Salvation Army played a significant role in organising these airdrops when there were no other options available to get essential aid to affected townships and communities. This included organising the supplies for each airdrop including transport to the airlift location and airdrop pick-up in the receiving location. This was the first time The Salvation Army Emergency Services team has used airdrops to deliver essential material aid to disaster impacted communities in Australia. We fear it will not be the last time that aerial assistance will be necessary to deliver food supplies into isolated communities during disasters.
- 3.15 Even where communities themselves are not directly impacted by natural disasters, the impacts on the supply chain can be significant. A confluence of pressures from COVID-19, drought, bushfires and other natural disasters have led to shortages of staple fresh produce. Disasters such as floods and Bird-flu cases in east coast states have put pressure on supply chains, forcing highly publicised price spikes in some foods.
- 3.16 Further planning and consideration of the resources needed to maintain supply chains, including food supplies to communities cut off by fires or floods, must be enhanced.

### **Recommendation 6**

- 3.17 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work to enhance the readiness of communities, particularly those in remote or disaster prone locations, for the impacts of disasters on the food supply chain.**

## 4 Food Access

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- 4.1 Access to food is one of the broadest and most critical elements of food security. Although it encompasses issues of physical access, including transport to a place to purchase food, the issue most clearly seen by The Salvation Army is affordability. There are a number of levers available to the Victorian Government to address the factors that contribute to food inaccessibility.

### Cost of Living

- 4.2 On an economy-wide level, cost of living pressures have been mounting throughout the country for several years. The Salvation Army's Doorways emergency relief service provided 50 859 interactions of assistance to Victorians in 2023-24 financial year. 41.4 per cent identified increased expenses and cost of living pressures as the major reason for seeking assistance. The largest single reason for seeking assistance<sup>11</sup>
- 4.3 One of the major concerns The Salvation Army has seen is the uneven impacts of price rises throughout the CPI basket of goods. While the headline CPI measures food price increases, these are often masked by other items. Particular recent price pressures on fresh fruit and vegetables are being masked in the broader cost of living discussions due to downward trends in other prices in the metric.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, geographic differences dull the accuracy of headline inflation, regional and metropolitan communities differing significantly, and each state varying from one another.
- 4.4 The nature of the Australian economy has seen significantly higher rates of CPI growth in Melbourne and throughout Victoria than in other jurisdictions.<sup>13</sup> These rises on essential goods, including fresh food, have placed additional pressure on low-income Australians.
- 4.5 Research conducted by The Salvation Army has found that 69 per cent of those who accessed our services in Victoria found affording enough food was one of their greatest challenges. Food insecurity was a far higher concern in Victoria than at the national level. 87 per cent of respondents in Victoria reported food insecurity as a concern, which is almost seven times higher than the national average on this measure (13 per cent).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Data was extracted from TSA's Client Management System, SAMIS (Service and Mission Information System) for the Doorways Emergency Relief program.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (Mar-quarter-2024). *Consumer Price Index, Australia*. ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Verrelli, S., Russell, C., & Taylor, E. (2024). *Findings from the 2024 Red Shield Appeal Research Project. Victoria Report*. The Salvation Army, Australia.



## Housing Affordability

- 4.6 While the cost of living pressures described above are an issue for all Australians, one of the critical elements The Salvation Army has seen in Victoria is housing unaffordability. With a residential vacancy rate of three per cent considered a 'healthy rate', the 1.3 per cent vacancy rate in Melbourne, and lower still in regional areas, shows the unhealthy nature of affordable housing in the state.<sup>15</sup> Competition for accommodation has pushed rents to unsupportable highs for many families, consuming ever more of the already limited incomes of those in poverty.
- 4.7 The Victorian Rental Report from March 2024 found that the Melbourne Rent Index increased by 14.6 per cent over the previous twelve months, with weekly median rents throughout the state reaching \$550 per week.<sup>16</sup>
- 4.8 The lack of social housing stock in the state, particularly in regional areas, puts pressure at all levels of the housing spectrum, from rents, to housing prices. This ultimately pushes those experiencing financial hardship, including families with children, to consider the cost of nutrition against the cost of accommodation.
- 4.9 In no small part this cost pressure is due to a shortfall in the stock of social housing. Some estimates suggest that the state will need 60 000 social housing homes over the next decade to supplement the state's Big Housing Build.<sup>17</sup>

### **Recommendation 7**

- 4.10 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with providers to address the immediate need for affordable housing, emergency accommodation and social housing services.**

## Food Relief

- 4.11 Throughout the state, The Salvation Army provides food relief to thousands of Victorians. When a community member experiencing financial hardship accesses any of our services, food relief is often the most immediate form of assistance we can provide to alleviate their total budgetary pressures.

<sup>15</sup> SQM Research (2024) *Residential Vacancy Rates: Melbourne May 2024*. [https://sgmresearch.com.au/graph\\_vacancy.php?region=vic-Melbourne&type=c&t=1](https://sgmresearch.com.au/graph_vacancy.php?region=vic-Melbourne&type=c&t=1).

<sup>16</sup> Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. (May 2024). *Rental Report statistics – March quarter 2024*. <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/rental-report>.

<sup>17</sup> Housing Peaks Alliance (2020) *Making Social Housing Work: A Framework for Victoria's Public and Community Housing 2020–2030*. <https://justiceconnect.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Make-Social-Housing-Work.pdf>.







4.12 Between various sites and corps there is a variety of forms of food relief. From vouchers to food pantries and hampers, to cafes and community gardens, The Salvation Army works to ensure that as many community members as possible have access to nutritious food.

#### Vouchers

4.13 As a provider of emergency relief, The Salvation Army distributes food relief in the form of vouchers for supermarket retailers. In the 2023-24 Financial Year, The Salvation Army distributed 29,351 vouchers to community members in need, across the state of Victoria alone.<sup>18</sup>

4.14 Vouchers allow our community members to have the most dignified access to essential food, retaining choice in the foods that they and their family enjoy, including choice in accessing dietary and culturally appropriate foods.

#### Pantries and Food Hampers

4.15 The Salvation Army, through partnering with other food charities, local corporate partnerships, and through our own fundraising capital, source a variety of fresh, shelf-stable and frozen food, to stock pantries and fill hampers at sites across the state. Corps utilise on the ground knowledge of their community to maximise choice and are constantly working to ensure that the greatest value of food relief can be provided to their community members.

4.16 Our corps work with retailers, food relief charities, wholesalers, and primary producers, as well as volunteers to ensure we can keep a stock of staples, seasonal fruit and vegetables.



*“We have a tub of school lunchbox goods which are very popular, parents often mention the cost of giving their children healthy snacks they will eat for morning tea.”*



**– A Salvation Army Doorways Caseworker**

#### Cafes and Community Meals

4.17 At numerous locations throughout the state, The Salvation Army also runs community meals, providing a warm meal for those in need. This not only caters to the need for nutrition, but also the community and connection that is vital to mental wellbeing. Due to the differing needs of each community, corps have adapted community meals to best service their community members.

<sup>18</sup> Data was extracted from TSA’s Client Management System, SAMIS (Service and Mission Information System) for the Doorways Emergency Relief program.



- 4.18 In central Melbourne, Project 614 runs a community group and meal program from Mondays to Thursday designed for international students, alongside the Magpies Nest café discussed below. Our Corps in Sunraysia, discussed above, runs two community meals partnering with other groups to maximise the frequency and reach.
- 4.19 Two Victorian branches of Grill'd, Southern Cross Station and Ballarat, have partnered with The Salvation Army and the St Vincent de Paul Society to run their City Support program. This allows community members experiencing food insecurity to enjoy a meal and company in a safe place, connecting with community and with the Grill'd staff with dignity.

### The Magpie Nest

The Salvation Army's Magpie Nest operates from out Bourke Street Project 614 site. The Magpie Nest provides breakfast, lunch and dinner to community members from all walks of life, providing as many as 700 meals per day, five days a week. Our chef is supported by Salvation Army staff, but the café relies on volunteers, many of whom are from our partners in nearby corporate jobs, who are vital to making the operation work.

The Café benefits from donated food from various corporate partners who can store and deliver on demand, as well as supplies from Oz Harvest, Second Bite and Foodbank, which our Chef folds into his plan to provide nutritious and exciting meals.

"I really enjoy how creative I need to be with our café menu. When large donations arrive we chop and change what we need to, ensuring we not only don't waste food but can also create nutritious appealing meals" said the Magpie Nest Chef, Adam Thomson.

Our goal is accessibility. We try and spark up a conversation with all the people who come to the café. This fosters a welcoming atmosphere, and also allows us to better help community members who need more than just a hot meal then and there, but also a hamper to take home, things for kids lunches, or clothing and toiletries. We have Corps Officers at 614 who are proficient in Mandarin which is helpful for the growing Chinese community who have come to access the café.

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*“A community member came in the other day to our community meal. A volunteer sat with him and he told us that both he and his wife worked, but had just been inundated by bills that fortnight. He felt so ashamed to come and ask for food from The Salvos, but needed something to get him over the hump that week. We gave him a hamper and he broke down and cried. He came that one time.”*

”

**- A Salvation Army Doorways Caseworker**



### *Wraparound Support*

- 4.20 The Salvation Army always approaches the needs of community members in a holistic fashion. That is why our services, including our food relief work, can act as a soft entry point for people experiencing significant disadvantage to benefit from warm referrals to assist all forms of disadvantage.
- 4.21 Many of our services have found that food provision is such an effective way to make community members comfortable engaging with your services. This sharing of a meal, leading to sharing their story, often allows our staff and volunteers to provide greater individualised emergency relief, and to link the community member with other services.
- 4.22 Our services are, wherever possible, co-located with other Salvation Army services to provide wraparound supports for people experiencing financial hardship, homelessness or family and domestic violence. We coordinate with other community sector partners to ensure that community members experiencing financial hardship and food insecurity are supported in a holistic way to access the maximum relief possible. For example, in some locations community meal events are coordinated with a local volunteer hairdresser and Orange Sky Laundry, ensuring that those sleeping rough can access those facilities onsite.
- 4.23 Many locations throughout the state operate ‘community days’ which allow numerous Salvation Army services as well as state and community sector partners, to collocate and provide diverse supports to community members. Some locations have regular representatives from the St Johns Ambulance, housing services, legal aid, and utility providers’ hardship staff.
- 4.24 The Salvation Army has seen an overlap of people accessing our food relief services who are also experiencing family and domestic violence, and more specifically, coercive controlling behaviours. Many people who use violence will also use access to money and financial abuse as a manifestation of control, preventing the victim-survivor from accessing money for food and necessities. As a major provider of family and domestic violence services across Victoria, The Salvation Army’s staff and volunteers are always alert to the possibility of family and domestic violence and are trained to recognise signs and provide effective referrals to our own, and partners, services.

#### **Recommendation 8**

- 4.25 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government increase funding for organisations providing food relief and other support services to relieve cost of living pressures.**





### Lily's Story\*

Lily\* is a 28-year-old woman, who recently left a seven-year relationship in which she experienced psychological, verbal, sexual and financial abuse, including manipulation, controlling and stalking behaviours. During the relationship her ex-partner controlled all finances and forced her to perform sexual acts in return for money for nappies or milk for their children.

During the relationship Lily's ex-partner also obtained various loans in her name without her knowledge or consent. She discovered this late in 2019 as a result of accessing an email account unused for years. Lily continues to find new debts in her name. The debts currently total over \$50 000, in addition to previous debts totaling tens of thousands of dollars in her name.

These debts have severely affected Lily's credit rating and she is unable to purchase a car, which she needs for transport for her children and to access her medical appointments.

The Salvation Army has assisted Lily to contact all creditors and to provide the police with information. This process is a slow one, and continues to have a significant impact on Lily's mental health.

*\*Name changed*

## 5 Food Use

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- 5.1 Food use is the ability to harness base ingredients and utilise them to make meals. This covers cost effective food preparation, as well as the capacity to store and cook meals.

### Facilities

- 5.2 As noted above, a lot of advice for cutting the cost of food failed to recognise the facilities necessary to make these ‘tips’ practical to many individuals.
- 5.3 The most pertinent example of this involves buying food. Ingredients and cooking a meal is cheaper than buying ready-made meals however it requires access to a functioning kitchen – something many of our community members do not have. Likewise tips around buying frozen rather than fresh vegetables presume access to a freezer – again something that someone who is experiencing homelessness does not have.
- 5.4 The Salvation Army sees a large number of community members who are couch surfing, living in cars, or otherwise do not have permanent accommodation. Community members in this position are forced to pay a premium for ready-cooked food or takeaway meals, which also sacrifice nutritional balance for convenience. People staying in temporary and crisis accommodation including hotels may also lack necessary kitchen facilities to prepare nutritious and affordable meals. There is a need to ensure all temporary and crisis accommodation has suitable kitchen facilities. More broadly, there is a need to ensure sufficient long-term accommodation options to move people on quickly from transitional accommodation. As discussed in [Recommendation 7](#), there is a significant need for social and affordable housing construction to meaningfully address the issue of food security.
- 5.5 An added complication is that most people who are financially poor are also ‘time poor’. A person reliant on public transport or who has moved to cheaper accommodation far away from work and social networks will expend far more time commuting than someone with access to a car or closer accommodation. Often there is a trade-off between time and expense (such as meal planning and cooking, researching the best deal or travelling to multiple stores to get the best deal). For people who are both financially and time poor there is no correct answer.

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*“Have you earned the right to ask that question? Especially of an elder.”*

– A Salvation Army Doorways Caseworker

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- 5.6 Where The Salvation Army provides food relief, our staff try to work with the community member to understand their situation and provide the best quality of support they can for that individual. This must be done carefully, as people experiencing hardship feel vulnerable, and necessary questions such as ‘how many people do you have in your household?’ and “do you have access to a kitchen?” can sound judgemental. Without appropriate care, asking these questions to understand the community member’s scenario could be interrogation, making the community member feel judged and unwilling to return for support. Our staff always work to develop a rapport with community members, and to make these inquiries in a culturally respectful and trauma-informed manner.
- 5.7 Through our partnerships, a number of our locations have received large donations of food from frozen food suppliers. Never wishing to turn down any food donations we receive, corps have invested in cooling equipment and temperature-controlled transport to ensure that whenever there is a donation from a supplier we are in a position to accept, transport and store the food if needed.
- 5.8 Our services always try and maintain a balance between shelf stable, frozen, and fresh food to ensure that community members have choice and that there is suitable food for their scenario. Some foods items like rice, pasta and tinned soups are always in high demand at our services.

“There’s no point giving frozen chips to someone without a way to cook them or to store them.”  
– A Salvation Army Doorways Caseworker

Knowledge

- 5.9 May of our services provide resources, and even group community cooking classes to help community members experiencing food insecurity to utilise affordable ingredients for nutritious food in their own homes. This sort of education is highly effective and we receive positive feedback from participants.
- 5.10 Our Project 614 service in central Melbourne runs a youth group, specifically for international students, called The Couch. Aside from a community space and meal provision, The Salvation Army is able to provide some ‘cooking on a budget’ classes to the young people who engage with The Couch.
- 5.11 Similarly, throughout the state we try to share educational resources, such as *The Tight Arse Cookbook*.<sup>19</sup> The resident Chef at the 614 Café, Adam Thomson, has developed two resources in partnership with The Salvation Army. *One Table*, and *Meals to Make Ends Meet*

<sup>19</sup> Ballarat Community Health (2023) *The Tight Arse Cookbook*. <https://bchc.org.au/taq/tight-arse-cookbook/>.





have both been popular and effective methods of communicating tips to build community and eat nutritiously on a budget.<sup>20</sup>

- 5.12 Corps share these resources, and where possible, we try and make classes and information resources tailored to the types of foods that are in season, or that our pantries have in stock.
- 5.13 We are unfortunately unable to provide these courses at all our locations throughout the state due to both staffing and facility constraints. This is despite our services' strong desire to embody the adage of 'teaching people to fish'.
- 5.14 The Salvation Army is not the only community sector organisation to provide budget cooking classes, and we would support the development of more resources like the *Tight Arse Cookbook*.<sup>21</sup> Where possible, these 'cooking on a budget' courses should be locally embedded, and accessible to all within the community. Possible partnership with universities, schools and other groups for young people would help them develop life skills and provide a soft entry for nutrition information, as well as other community supports, for families and households.

#### **Recommendation 9**

- 5.15 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government provide funding to support organisations providing budget cooking courses, ensuring these are embedded, accessible, culturally appropriate and sustained.**

#### **Recommendation 10**

- 5.16 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work with organisations, particularly those specialising in children and young people, and with culturally and linguistically diverse communities to broker partnerships to provide community outreach and budget cooking courses.**

<sup>20</sup> The Salvation Army Project 614, Thompson, A. (2019) *On Table: A Collection of Our Family Favourites*. Wilkinson Publishing; Thompson, A. (2023) *Meals to Make Ends Meet*. <https://salvationarmysupplies.com.au/meals-to-make-ends-meet-download/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ballarat Community Health (2023) *The Tight Arse Cookbook*. <https://bchc.org.au/taq/tight-arse-cookbook/>.

## 6 Food Stability

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- 6.1 Resilience to shocks, on an individual and at an economy-wide scale, is necessary to fully achieve this final element of food security.

### Community Gardens

- 6.2 One incremental method of enhancing remote communities' access to fresh produce, and bypassing significant logistical costs, is to support the development of community gardens where possible.
- 6.3 The Salvation Army's Bendigo Corps operates a significant community garden, spanning over several acres. This garden is staffed by a full-time staff member, Mohammed, and has significant input from other community groups and The Salvation Army's staff and volunteer base.
- 6.4 The Bendigo Corps community garden and Mohammed teach community members how to grow fresh food products, and through a combination lock, community members can come and access some of this produce at times when the garden is not staffed. The food grown in the community garden is then sold to local restaurants, stocked into the food pantry on site, and served in the corps community meals.
- 6.5 This garden not only provides food for community members, but also imports social connection, and education for people to undertake their own vegetable gardens as part of their own food security.
- 6.6 Community gardens like this are run in communities across the state, and further support from government to establish and allow these initiatives to thrive is an important element to ensuring community members can themselves stabilise access to secure, nutritious, and affordable food. These gardens should, where possible, be locally led, ensuring they are tailored to the locations and the communities they are in.

### **Recommendation 11**

- 6.7 The Salvation Army recommends that the Victorian Government work alongside communities to establish locally led community gardens to improve local food production and stability.**



## Poverty and Financial Hardship

- 6.8 Long-term financial stability is critical to a person achieving food security. The Salvation Army's emergency relief, homelessness, community housing support and other services, all work to provide support to those experiencing hardship. Our Moneycare services can provide financial counselling and advocacy to assist in the establishment of payment plans and other measures. These all work to assist people experiencing temporary or severe episodic periods of food insecurity.
- 6.9 The current period of high cost of living pressures has seen many community members seeking food and other assistance from The Salvation Army and other providers for their first time. This shows that food insecurity can strike many people, including those who are in paid employment, or have never experienced disadvantage before.

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*“Sometimes you see some pretty nice cars in the car park. It just goes to show that it can happen to anyone at any time.”*

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**– A Salvation Army Doorways Caseworker**

- 6.10 Unfortunately, a number of community members who approach our services are experiencing prolonged, even multigenerational, poverty. This includes people in households where the issue is that the cost of food and necessities is beyond the income they receive through work or government support. Food relief of any form is not a solution to the fundamental causes of food instability, and is unable to provide security in the long-term. This limits the scope of what The Salvation Army and the broader community sector can do to help community members experiencing food insecurity.
- 6.11 As discussed above, The Salvation Army again implores the Victorian Government to call on the Commonwealth Government to increase the base rate of JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and other income support payments to ensure that Victorians experiencing hardship are able to afford to live with dignity, and to achieve long term food security. (See [Recommendation 1](#)).



## 7 Conclusion

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- 7.1 The Salvation Army thanks the Legislative Council Justice and Social Issues Committee for the opportunity to provide input.
- 7.2 The Salvation Army would welcome the opportunity to discuss the content of this submission should any further information be of assistance. Further information can be sought from 

**The Salvation Army Australia Territory**

**July 2024**





## Appendix A About The Salvation Army

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The Salvation Army is an international Christian movement with a presence in more than 130 countries. Operating in Australia since 1880, The Salvation Army is one of the largest providers of social services and programs for people experiencing hardship, injustice and social exclusion.

The Salvation Army Australia provides more than 1,000 social programs and activities through networks of social support services, community centres and churches across the country.

Programs include:

- Financial counselling, financial literacy and microfinance
- Emergency relief and related services
- Homelessness services
- Youth services
- Family and domestic violence services
- Alcohol, drugs and other addictions
- Chaplaincy
- Emergency and disaster response
- Aged care
- Employment services

As a mission-driven organisation, The Salvation Army seeks to reduce social disadvantage and create a fair and harmonious society through holistic and person-centred approaches that reflect our mission to share the love of Jesus by:

- Caring for people
- Creating faith pathways
- Building healthy communities
- Working for justice

We commit ourselves in prayer and practice to this land of Australia and its people, seeking reconciliation, unity and equity.

Further information about The Salvation Army can be accessed at: <  
<https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/>>

