



ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

**Submission to the Legislative Council
Legal and Social Issues Committee's
Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria**

26th July 2024



Introduction

The Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. As the peak representative body for Muslims in Victoria, the ICV's mission is to advance the rights and interests of Muslims in Victoria, across Australia and globally. We represent approximately 270,000 Muslims through 76 member societies and over 100 diverse ethnic communities. Like most Australians, increases in inflation and disproportionate rises in the cost of living in recent years have put immense pressure on individuals and families in our community, primarily those in the working and lower-middle classes. We are concerned that the rising cost of living is making it impossible for many Victorians to make ends meet, resulting in food insecurity and forcing people to go without sufficient, nutritious food. It is from this perspective that we write this submission.

All inquiries about this submission should be directed to:

Adel Salman

President

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Part 1: Food Insecurity Among Muslims in Victoria

As the peak representative body for Muslims in Victoria, the ICV is uniquely positioned to engage with Victoria's Muslim community at large, including observing and addressing key challenges faced by the community. We strive to understand the unique needs, interests and concerns of our member societies and their respective communities, and to support their wellbeing, human rights and social welfare. The ICV runs a number of programs that directly support social welfare among the local Muslim community and the broader Victorian community. These include providing interest-free loans to cover basic essentials for low-income individuals, emergency accommodation and necessities for people recently released from correctional facilities, and chaplaincy and social support programs. During the Islamic Holy Month of Ramadan, the ICV also provides free hot meals to the public each night of the month to break the daily fast.

Between 2021 and 2024, the ICV ran a Food Bank Program which provided halal (religiously permissible) food hampers to the public upon request. This program commenced in 2021 during COVID-19 lockdowns, as COVID-19 restrictions, business closures and increased unemployment made it increasingly difficult for many in the community to afford and access essential food supplies. This program was primarily funded by the Victorian Government's *Priority Response to Multicultural Communities Grant*, and supported by Halal Food Bank, a local volunteer-run food bank that provided regular halal nutritious food hampers to those in need. The ICV's Food Bank Program distributed pre-packaged food hampers provided by Halal Food Bank, supporting Halal Food Bank's operations and extending them to the ICV's own community.

Over the course of the Food Bank Program from 2021-2023, the ICV provided food aid to 82 individuals and 439 families comprising 2,074 people. This included supporting several priority communities, including refugees and asylum seekers, new and emerging communities, regional and rural Victorians, international students, youth, seniors, women, and socially isolated communities. Many beneficiaries of the program reported severe food insecurity, having completely or almost run out of food at the time the packages were delivered. The ICV continued to run the Food Bank Program on an ad-hoc basis between 2023 and 2024, supported by additional in-kind donations provided by Halal Food Bank. The program ended in 2024, as our stock of donated food hampers was depleted.

Part 2: Key Observations

As a peak body organisation, through our experience organising and distributing food aid, and engaging with our constituency, the ICV has observed a number of crucial issues regarding food insecurity in Victoria which we urge the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee to take into consideration.

1. Increasing prevalence of food insecurity among Victorians

The current cost-of-living crisis, including high inflation, slow wage growth and the rising cost of essentials, has made food insecurity increasingly prevalent among Victorians over the last few years, particularly since the end of COVID-19 lockdowns. The ICV appreciates that the Victorian government recognised the strain placed on families and individuals by COVID-19 restrictions, and provided increased funding for food relief, and for multicultural and faith organisations to meet the essential needs of their communities. However, while we recognise the unprecedented hardships for communities during the peak of COVID-19 between 2020 and 2022, we believe this was somewhat mitigated by increased income support and other social welfare benefits. Contrarily, since 2022, prices of essentials have skyrocketed and financial strain on the average Australian has increased, without sufficient government initiatives to support individuals and to mitigate hardship. The devastating effects of this are supported by statistics from the Melbourne Institute annual Foodbank Hunger Report, which show that self-reported food insecurity in Australia has increased from approximately 13% of adults in 2020, to 16% in 2021, to 22% in 2022 and a staggering 36% in 2023.¹

Based on anecdotal evidence from individuals who accessed the ICV's Food Bank Program and have sought food aid from our member societies, the ICV has also observed that households living on low income tend to deprioritise spending on food, let alone sourcing adequate, nutritious and healthy food. Household expenses such as rent or mortgage payments, utilities and transport are generally seen as a higher priority, since defaulting in these payments can result in homelessness, lack of access to water and heating, or unemployment. Students, particularly international students and those whose residency status depends on a job or education, will also prioritise spending on education related expenses and be more willing to forgo food for significant periods of time in order to meet other expenses. As these other household expenses have increased exponentially over the last few years, more and more families and

¹ https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/4348247/ri2022n04.pdf, <https://reports.foodbank.org.au/foodbank-hunger-report-2023/?state=au>

individuals are having to forgo adequate food, being forced to treat it as a luxury or unnecessary expense. Access to food is a basic human right. This includes protecting all people from hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition.² It is the responsibility of the Federal and State governments to ensure that this right is upheld for all Australians.

2. Need for culturally and religiously appropriate food aid

Additionally, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Victoria face a number of distinct challenges regarding food insecurity and require targeted and tailored programs to provide appropriate support. For example, for Muslims in Victoria, access to halal-certified food aid is limited. Halal food, which adheres to Islamic dietary laws, is essential for practicing Muslims. Without access to halal food, many Muslims may go without food rather than consume items that do not meet religious requirements. This creates an added layer of food insecurity, as the availability of culturally and religiously appropriate food is critical to hundreds of thousands of Victorians.

Moreover, language barriers and cultural differences can make it difficult for CALD communities to navigate the existing food aid systems. Information about available resources, eligibility criteria, and application processes is often not accessible in languages other than English, which can exclude non-English speaking individuals from receiving the support they need. This can prevent individuals and families from reaching out for help even when they are in desperate need.

The ICV has also observed that among Muslim Victorians and other CALD communities, large family households and multiple dependents exacerbate the difficulty of accessing adequate and nutritious food, particularly when combined with low household income and other socio-economic disadvantages. It is common among Muslims and many other CALD families to live in large families and households, including inter-generational households where both children/youth and elderly relatives are dependent on the main income earners. For example, the average size of families who benefited from the ICV's Food Bank Program in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 was 4.72 people (2,074 individuals among 439 families), which is significantly larger than the average Australian family household size of 2.5 people.³

² *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, art. 25, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, art. 11.

³ <https://aifs.gov.au/research/facts-and-figures/population-households-and-families>

3. Disproportionate impacts on minority communities

Food insecurity is particularly prevalent, and has particularly detrimental impacts, among migrant communities in Victoria. This includes humanitarian migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, individuals on bridging visas and international students. Migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds in Australia experience higher rates of poverty than those from English-speaking countries and those born in Australia.⁴ Furthermore, amid the rising cost of living, Australians who are not citizens or permanent residents are generally unable to access income support or government benefits and rely wholly on non-governmental charities when experiencing food insecurity or inability to meet their other basic needs. A large proportion of these migrant communities across Australia are Muslims, and the ICV has observed that many individuals and households who access our food aid services are from migrant backgrounds, particularly refugees and asylum seekers and international students. Moreover, for many who have faced trauma as refugees or migrants, the added stress of food insecurity can exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions and hinder recovery and integration efforts.

4. Lack of government funding to tackle growing food insecurity

The ICV has also observed a concerning decline in government funding to address food insecurity, despite the escalating need. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a much-needed surge in community funding as the Victorian and Federal government provided substantial support for food relief initiatives such as the Priority Response to Multicultural Communities (PRMC) grants. However, as the immediate crisis of the pandemic has subsided, so has financial support from the government, leaving many organisations, including the ICV, unable to sustain their food relief programs. This reduction in funding comes at a time when the cost-of-living crisis has intensified, leading to greater financial strain on families and individuals.

The PRMC grants, while beneficial during the pandemic, are no longer sufficient to combat the growing issue of food insecurity. It is crucial that the Victorian government recognises the ongoing and escalating nature of the food insecurity crisis and increases funding to support food aid initiatives. Sustainable and increased financial support is necessary to ensure that organisations can continue to provide vital services to those in need, particularly as the economic challenges facing the average Victorian continue to grow.

⁴ https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Poverty-in-Australia-2023_Who-is-affected.pdf, p57.

Part 3: Recommendations

The ICV emphasises that in addressing the growing problem of food insecurity in Victoria, prevention, rather than cure, is the key. Targeted policies are needed to curb the cost-of-living crisis and ensure that all Victorians can afford basic necessities, including housing, clothing, healthcare, transport, education, and above all, adequate and nutritious food. This includes legislation to outlaw and prevent supermarket price gouging, as recommended by the Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices in May 2024, capping rental increases and ensuring that minimum wages and income support payments adequately reflect inflation and the rising cost of living.

In addition to policies aiming to prevent poverty and food insecurity, policies to mitigate the effects of poverty and support those experiencing food insecurity remain indispensable. In this regard, the ICV makes the following recommendation to the Victorian government.

1. Increase funding for food aid

The ICV urges the Victorian government to allocate increased and sustained funding for food aid, to sustain and expand existing food aid programs and develop new ones. This funding should be directed towards non-governmental organisations that have a proven track record of effectively addressing food insecurity, as well as local community groups, and religious and/or cultural centres to increase their capacity to support community members experiencing food insecurity. Ensuring that food aid programs are adequately resourced will help alleviate immediate food insecurity and contribute to the overall well-being of vulnerable populations in Victoria. Moreover, as volunteer retention can often be a serious challenge for food aid organisations, a portion of financial support should also be allowed to fund the wages of essential staff, allowing food aid organisations to continue their basic operations even when volunteers are unavailable, and preventing the closure of existing food banks.

As discussed in Part 2, the Victorian government rightly recognised the financial strains and economic hardships imposed on working and lower-middle class Victorians during the peak of COVID-19, implementing strong support for food aid and the provision of essential resources. However, these support initiatives have since ceased or decreased, while the rising costs of living have driven more and more people into poverty and food insecurity. Funding and support for food aid is needed in Victoria now more than ever.

2. Provide targeted support for community-led aid, including for CALD communities

The ICV recommends that the Victorian government increases financial support for community-based aid initiatives, such as those run by local community groups, cultural centres and religious organisations targeting their respective communities. These organisations are uniquely positioned to understand and address the specific needs of their communities, including being well-known and accessible support hubs, catering to non-English speakers and being able to ensure that food aid meets cultural and/or religious dietary requirements for communities in need. Government support should include financial assistance, capacity-building resources and partnership building to enable these organisations to expand their operations and reach or establish new community-led food aid programs throughout the state. By empowering community organisations, the government can ensure that food aid and other essential services are delivered in an effective and culturally sensitive manner, enhancing their effectiveness and accessibility for those in need.

Conclusion

The Islamic Council of Victoria urges the Legal and Social Issues Committee to consider the increasing prevalence and severity of food insecurity in Victoria and urges the Victorian government to meet its duty of ensuring the human right of access to food is upheld. We also urge the Committee to consider the unique hardships faced by Victoria's Muslim and other CALD communities, and the pressing need for culturally and religiously appropriate food aid for these communities. By implementing targeted solutions that address both the affordability and accessibility of nutritious and culturally appropriate food, the Victorian government can significantly improve the physical and mental health outcomes and alleviate poverty and hardship among vulnerable populations. The ICV remains committed to working collaboratively with the government and other stakeholders to achieve these goals.