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Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) Submission to the Inquiry into food security in Victoria

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Acknowledgement of Country

VicHealth respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the unceded lands where our office resides, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation.

We extend our deep respect to Wurundjeri Elders, both past and present.

Additionally, we recognise all Victorian First Peoples communities as the Traditional Custodians of the diverse lands where the communities we serve live, work and play.

We pay our respects to Elders, both past and present, of the territories comprising Victoria.

Furthermore, we acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonisation on the health and well-being of First Peoples.

VicHealth acknowledges the past, ongoing and future contributions that Indigenous agricultural and food practices make to building a resilient and regenerative food system. We support investment in culturally appropriate food systems and infrastructure led by and for our Victorian communities including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We value the collective wisdom and knowledge held by First Peoples communities and commit to listening and learning to support their right to self-determine solutions that fortify and foster healthy communities.

Always was, always will be.

Contents

Introduction

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) is pleased to provide a submission to The Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into food security in Victoria.

In this submission, we provide evidence relating to the impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria, as per the [Inquiry into food security in Victoria Terms of Reference](#).

Food affects our health, wellbeing, cultures, the economy and our environments.

Our submission proposes five evidence-based recommendations to address food security in Victoria and improve the health and wellbeing of all Victorians. As a health promotion agency, we focus on taking a whole-of-system approach with equity at its core. The recommendations in this submission are designed to address the complex and multifaceted factors influencing food insecurity and to develop lasting solutions.

VicHealth is committed to partnering with government to drive meaningful change to Victoria's food systems and reduce food insecurity.

VicHealth welcomes the opportunity to provide further evidence to the Inquiry.

About VicHealth

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, known as VicHealth, is a world-first health promotion agency focused on promoting good health and preventing chronic disease.

Our pioneering work includes creating and funding world-class interventions; conducting vital research to advance Victoria's population health; producing and supporting public campaigns to promote a healthier Victoria; and providing transformational expertise and insights to government.

We work with all levels of government, across political parties and communities, and a range of sectors across health, sports, research, education, the arts and media.

VicHealth was established under the Tobacco Act 1987 (Vic) with a mandate to promote good health for all Victorians. We have a long history of innovative action in Victoria and as a global leader in health promotion, as a Collaborating Centre with the World Health Organization and technical partner to UNICEF.

Equity is at the heart of all our work.

More about our vision for a healthier, fairer Victoria where everyone benefits from good health and has the opportunity to thrive can be found in the VicHealth Strategy [Reshaping systems together for a healthier, fairer Victoria. The next 10 years: 2023-2033](#).

VicHealth's Food Systems Work

VicHealth's role in the food system is to advocate, influence, and invest in models that ensure all Victorians can enjoy delicious, nutritious, and environmentally sustainable food.

VicHealth's food systems work supports the 'Increasing healthy eating' priority in the [Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2023-2027](#) and in particular the plan's focus on achieving:

- healthy and more equitable, sustainable food systems across Victoria, with a focus on priority populations
- access, availability and consumption of a wide variety of nutritious foods such as fruit and vegetables, as recommended by the [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#).

VicHealth's work in the food system seeks to shape three priority outcomes:

- contribute to a healthier, fairer and more circular food system
- strengthen local food systems to provide improved access to healthy, fresh food
- build, resource and foster equitable, collaborative, and diverse leadership in Victoria's food system.

VicHealth's Food Security Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Right to Food Law

Amend the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* to legislate the right to food in Victoria and embed it into all relevant State and Local Government policies, budgeting processes and activities.

Recommendation 2: Food Systems Governance

Strengthen food systems governance capacity by appointing a Minister for Food and establishing a whole-of-government Food Systems Committee to oversee the participatory development and implementation of a Victorian Food System Strategy and Investment Plan.

Recommendation 3: Food Systems Data & Monitoring

Advance evidence-informed food systems strategy and policy design by strengthening food systems monitoring including the establishment of a comprehensive performance measurement and monitoring framework in Victoria's State of the Environment Report and routine monitoring of household food insecurity via the Victorian Population Health Survey.

Recommendation 4: Community Food Systems Planning

Prioritise and promote healthy local food systems by including health and wellbeing as an objective in the Planning and Environment Act (1987) and include a provision in the Act that requires Municipal Strategic Statements / Planning Schemes to be consistent with respective Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.

Recommendation 5: Local Food Systems and Infrastructure

Empower and resource local councils and / or regional partners to lead the participatory development of community food system strategies by creating a Local Food Investment Fund to grow capacity, improve coordination and drive efficiencies in local food supply and access.

Section 1: Responses to the Terms of Reference

Drivers of food insecurity

Poverty and inequality are underlying drivers of food insecurity[1].

Food insecurity exists when people lack regular access to enough healthy and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. This may be due to the unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food.

Low-income demographics are the strongest and most consistent predictor of food insecurity[2] and relevant to other measures of disadvantage those who are indigenous, unemployed, sole parent's, women and those experiencing homelessness are most likely to be food insecure[3].

A recent federal parliamentary inquiry into food security in Australia, *The Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond,* found that low incomes and high prices were among the most common causes of food insecurity in Australia.[4] Further, the Australian Institute of Family Studies report *Understanding food insecurity in Australia* found that low income earners in remote areas, those receiving government financial assistance, single parents and those who need to spend a greater proportion of their disposable income to buy healthy food were even more likely to be affected by food insecurity.[5]

The Victorian food system, in combination with health, education, social, economic and regulatory systems, influence food insecurity at a household and community level.

Poverty, disadvantage, inadequate and unaffordable housing and transport, racial discrimination and the ongoing impacts of colonisation and other injustices are the underlying drivers for these food and nutrition inequities[6].

The impact of food insecurity

Food affects our health, wellbeing, cultures, the economy and our environments. Food security is fundamental to improving health and wellbeing.

The impact of food insecurity in Victoria on **physical health**

Food insecurity adversely affects physical health.

Food insecurity has a significant impact on diet-related disease by limiting the consumption of healthy food and increasing the consumption of unhealthy or discretionary food.

Evidence shows even mild food insecurity leads us to compromise on food choice. The foods most likely to be compromised in food insecure households are fresh fruit and vegetables[7]. A diet low in fruit and vegetables and high in refined carbohydrates, sugars, and unhealthy fats increases the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, obesity, stroke, heart disease and many cancers [8],[9].

Those most affected by food insecurity are the most vulnerable to obesity due to the increasing consumption of discretionary, energy dense and ultra-processed foods[10].

Poor diet, overweight and obesity are leading contributors to chronic disease and premature death in Victoria, accounting for 5.4 per cent and 8.4 per cent of preventable burden of disease[11]. This places a significant burden on the healthcare system. Based on 2018 figures from the National Obesity Strategy 2022 - 2032, the cost of obesity to the Australian community is $11.8 billion and if nothing is done, may cost an estimated $87.7 billion by 2032. [12].

For infants and children, healthy eating provides the nutrition required for optimal physical and cognitive development, and good oral health. Household food insecurity can impede children from reaching their full physical, cognitive and psychosocial potential13. Children from food-insecure households experience poorer general health compared to their food secure counterparts, including higher risks of some birth defects and increased hospitalisation14. In children a lack of food has been linked to emotional changes such as declines in happiness, irritability, tantrums, hyperactivity, misbehaviour at home and school, increased lethargy, and impacts on sleep15. Food insecurity can affect children's school readiness and is associated with reduced school attendance and academic achievement16. Evidence suggests that household food insecurity is linked with adversity throughout the life course leading to intergenerational effects as it is transferred from generation to generation17.

The impact of food insecurity in Victoria on **mental health**

Food insecurity adversely affects mental health and wellbeing.

Food insecurity has a profound impact on mental health. The stress and anxiety associated with not knowing where the next meal will come from can lead to a range of mental health issues. Food insecurity is associated with chronic stress[18], anxiety disorders[19] and depression[20].

Having a diet low in fruit and vegetables and high in refined carbohydrates, sugars and unhealthy fats have increased risk and higher rates of anxiety and depressive disorders[21].

The impact of food insecurity in Victoria on **poverty and hardship**

Food insecurity is a continuing issue that has been worsened by the effects of COVID-19 pandemic and the rising cost of living[1].

In 2020, one in four Victorian adults (25.6 per cent) were 'definitely' worried or 'sometimes' worried about running out of money to buy food[22]. Food insecurity is disproportionately experienced by some key population groups. A 2017 report by the Victorian Agency for Health Information *Challenges to Healthy Eating – Food Insecurity in Victoria: findings from the 2014 Victorian Population Health Survey* found that food insecurity was more prevalent among the young and adults who were unable to work; identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; from a lone parent household; unemployed and with a household income less than $40,000[23].

Food prices have been a persistent challenge for many, including people experiencing poverty, those on low-incomes, un- or underemployed people, and people living in regional and remote areas. A basic healthy diet can cost some families roughly one-third of their income[24].

All foods have increased in price in recent years, but a large number of healthy foods have increased in price at almost double the rate of discretionary foods[25]. Evidence shows that households are forced to change their purchasing and dietary habits in the face of the cost-of-living crisis as access to healthy and affordable diets are out of their reach[26].

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the first of which is to end poverty. However, Australia has the 15th highest poverty rate out of the 34 wealthiest countries in the OECD – higher than the average for the OECD; higher than the UK, Germany and New Zealand[27].

The elimination of poverty is a means to reduce rates of food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition here in Victoria and around the world.

Section 2: Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Right to Food Law

Amend the *[Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006](#)* to legislate the right to food in Victoria and embed it into all relevant State and Local Government policies, budgeting processes and activities

The right to food has been internationally recognised as a human right since its inclusion in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Australia is a party to a number of international human rights laws that formally recognise the right to food, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The ICESCR recognises the right of everyone to an adequate standard, including adequate food; Australia has legal obligations under ICESCR to respect, protect and fulfill the right to adequate food[28].

Victoria is one of three states and territories in Australia which has human rights legislation. The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (2006) protects some civil, political and cultural rights, however it does not include economic and social rights, such as the right to adequate food.

While Australia is a signatory to international human rights laws that recognise and agree to the fundamental right to food in principle, this right is not recognised in domestic law, including the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities and relevant government policy frameworks, meaning it cannot be legally enforced in practice.

The human right to adequate food is "the right of every individual, alone or in community with others, to have physical and economic access at all times to sufficient, adequate and culturally acceptable food that is produced and consumed sustainably, preserving access to food for future generations[29]".

Food security is a basic human right, and a fundamental pre-requisite for the health, social and economic prosperity of Victoria.

VicHealth supports the creation of an enabling policy environment to transform Victoria's food system by legislating the right to food in Victoria and embedding it into all relevant state and local government policies, budgeting processes and activities to uphold these rights.

Recommendation 2: Food Systems Governance

Strengthen food systems governance capacity by appointing a Minister for Food and establishing a whole-of-government Food Systems Committee to oversee the participatory development and implementation of a Victorian Food System Strategy and Investment Plan.

Governance of the food system in Victoria currently falls across a range of government departments including health, agriculture, environment and climate, education, families, housing, industry and regions. Developing a systems-based solution requires an integrated, whole-of-government approach that looks beyond funding an ever-increasing demand for food assistance[30]. The Victorian Government is well-positioned to show leadership across the whole of the Victorian food system and with a proven track record of delivering whole of government reforms across portfolios. The Victorian Government's response to the COVID pandemic is a prime example of this.

VicHealth supports a systems approach to food governance through the appointment of a Minister for Food and the establishment of a whole-of-government Food Systems Committee housed within the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The Committee would require ministerial and departmental membership spanning the Health, Environment, Agriculture, Regional Development, Planning and Education portfolios, and it would need to build multi-stakeholder partnerships and networks that support participation and representation, including the voices and lived experience of priority populations.

The Committee would be responsible for:

- Planning and overseeing a state-level food system strategy and investment plan
- Monitoring and measuring the performance of the Victorian food system
- Advising and making recommendations to the government on food policy issues
- Fostering stronger coordination and communication among all food system actors
- Improving food systems literacy in Victoria and encouraging the involvement of Victorian communities in food policy setting, particularly at a local level
- Commissioning vital research on food systems[31].

Recommendation 3: Food Systems Data & Monitoring

Advance better food systems strategy and policy design by strengthening food systems monitoring including the establishment of a comprehensive performance measurement and monitoring framework in Victoria's State of the Environment Report and routine monitoring of household food insecurity via the Victorian Population Health Survey.

Victoria has a number of existing mechanisms that can be leveraged to strengthen food systems monitoring.

Victoria's State of the Environment Report

Currently in Victoria there is little integrated monitoring or reporting of food system impacts beyond productivity measures, limiting policymakers' ability to consider what trade-offs are being made and identify and prioritise actions to drive food system transformation for a prosperous future. We need to evaluate our food system's performance in terms of its capacity to affirm the right to food for all Victorians, including its broader environmental, social and health impacts, and formalise regular, comprehensive food systems performance monitoring to facilitate coherent policy responses.

Globally, many examples of food system balance sheets have been developed to shed light on the complex dynamics of food systems[32], including the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity AgriFood Evaluation Framework[33]. These sustainability frameworks can inform the development of a holistic food systems performance monitoring program, which the government could build into existing data collection and reporting mechanisms.

The [Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act 2003](#) includes a statutory requirement for the Commissioner to "prepare and submit to the Minister a periodical Report on the State of the Environment of Victoria prepared at intervals not exceeding 5 years". While the Victoria's State of Environment report includes a broad set of 170 indicators, many of which relate to food systems, the reporting is currently not organised in such a way to draw out the interconnectedness between our food system, our natural environment and our communities. The report has begun transitioning to a new framework that enables progress reporting against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - the first state government to do so[34]. In recognising that transforming food systems is integral to achieving the SDGs, the State of Environment report provides an avenue to address this shortfall in food systems performance monitoring. Moreover, the statutory obligations of the report give a direct mechanism for ministerial influence and open a pivotal window of opportunity to identify and drive priority actions to transform our food system and generate improved social, environmental, health and economic outcomes.

Victorian Population Health Survey

The Victorian Population Health Survey is conducted annually by the Victorian Department of Health and is an important source of insight about the health and wellbeing of Victorian adults. VicHealth commends the Victorian Government for the inclusion of food security in the survey and supports the incorporation of additional questions to better measure the extent and severity of food insecurity in Victoria. Best practice food security monitoring surveys such as the USDA 18-item food security survey [35] are available to inform this strengthening of routine

monitoring of household food insecurity via the Victorian Population Health Survey. Furthermore, VicHealth supports regular reporting of food security data from the Victorian Population Health Survey at both a statewide and local government level to enable the translation of insights to advance better food systems strategy and policy design. This can help inform and monitor the impacts of proposed local food system interventions.

Recommendation 4: Community Food Systems Planning

Prioritise and promote healthy local food systems by:

- **including health and wellbeing as an objective in the Planning and Environment Act (1987) and**

- **including a provision in the Act that requires Municipal Strategic Statements / Planning Schemes to be consistent with respective Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.**

Community food systems are well recognised as a powerful tool to address multiple aspects of health and wellbeing, including improving diets, building social connection, promoting environmental stewardship and contributing to local economic development.

Our neighbourhoods influence our health and wellbeing in many ways, including determining our access to healthy and unhealthy foods. Under the current Victorian planning system, the population health impacts of planning applications are not sufficiently considered when local authorities assess planning applications. This means planning decisions can undermine what would be in the best interest of public health, creating harmful long-term health consequences. Changes to the planning system that better recognise and address the impacts of planning on health will contribute to improved community health outcomes by supporting healthy and sustainable local food systems.

There has long been a broad consensus that significant reforms are needed to align planning policy with public health goals. In 2012, the Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health in Victoria received several submissions for the State Planning Policy Framework to comprehensively address health and well-being. A recommendation made by the Inquiry was that "the Victorian Government amends the State Planning Policy Framework within the Victoria Planning Provisions to include a policy on planning for health and well-being[36]". However, almost a decade has passed, and this amendment is yet to be made.

There is a growing international precedent for planning approaches that take measures to improve community food systems. This is in line with Health in All Policies (HiAP) which recognises that population health is not merely a product of the health sector but largely determined by policies that guide actions beyond the health sector. Policy in every sector of government can potentially affect health and inequities in health[37].

Unfortunately, community health is neither a policy nor planning objective in the Planning & Environment Act 1987. This has contributed to the development of neighbourhoods with limited access to healthy food, and high densities of unhealthy food outlets. Research shows that in population growth areas in Victoria, unhealthy food outlets (including fast-food outlets, takeaways and convenience stores) have increased and rapidly outpaced the expansion of healthy food outlets to reach a ratio as high as 9:1. This ratio has nearly doubled from 2008-2016[38].

With the Victorian Government committed to reviewing and updating Victoria's almost four decades old planning legislation as part of its ongoing housing reforms, there is a strong opportunity to update the objectives of the Act to better promote the health and wellbeing of

current and future generations of Victorians, including by increasing Victorian's access to healthy food and supporting them to lead active lifestyles.

There is also an opportunity to update the Act to include a provision that requires Planning Schemes to be consistent with respective Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans (which are informed by the overarching Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan). This would help to align Planning Schemes with the objectives of Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.

VicHealth also supports a review and reform of the Victorian Planning Provisions (VPPs) to align the VPPs with the desired outcomes of the Plan for Victoria and increase consideration of the health impacts of planning decisions.

Recommendation 5: Investing in Local Food Systems

Empower and resource local councils and / or regional partners to lead the participatory development of community food system strategies by creating a Local Food Investment Fund to grow capacity, improve coordination and drive efficiencies in local food supply and access.

Local food systems, commonly (but not exclusively) led by local councils have the potential to be at the forefront of action towards lowering the cost of food and improving access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Local food systems can reconnect communities with eating seasonal, diverse diets and shift agency to communities, especially and importantly, to vulnerable and marginalised groups, including women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrant workers and those on low incomes. This creates opportunities for communities to participate to a greater degree in decisions about what foods to grow and eat, how to do so, how they are processed and distributed – all foundational principles embedded in a rights-based approach[39].

There are many different ways of organising local and regional food systems to support healthy and more sustainable diets, including regenerative practices and equitable access to nutritious and culturally appropriate foods. Food hubs are a common model used worldwide and are beginning to gain traction in Australia. Other examples that promote dignified approaches support vulnerable groups to move beyond food relief to food security, including pop up markets, low cost or subsidised fresh produce boxes, voucher schemes, social supermarkets and opportunities to support people to grow their own food.

Community food systems supported via local councils have a further opportunity to leverage the procurement of local food through public settings, including early childhood services, health services, schools and aged care facilities. Public settings that adopt policies to support healthy and more sustainable food procurement can enhance the business viability of local operations, as well as support healthy eating and food literacy initiatives at scale.

To realise the many benefits of local food systems and build long-term, generalised resilience into a secure and nourishing food supply will require sustained investment[40]. The Victorian Government can play a key role by investing in essential local infrastructure for markets, storage, processing and other necessary food system components to diversify and enable localisation of supply and distribution networks.

The Community Grocer

The Community Grocer in Pakenham, Fitzroy, Carlton and Flemington is an affordable pop-up fruit and vegetable market, which centres food as a way to promote healthy, connected communities through providing dignified access to quality, affordable products. In 2023, The Community Grocer served 7,266 customers through their weekly markets, of which 80% were either living on a low income or unemployed. As surrounding fresh food markets were 56% more expensive than The Community Grocer, 72% of their customers were enabled to increase their fruit and vegetable intake as a result of shopping at these markets.

VicHealth food system investments

VicHealth is supporting community food system initiatives at the local and regional levels. Flagship investments include:

Victorian Local Government Partnership

The VicHealth Local Government Partnership (VLGP) draws on VicHealth's decades of practice, experience and research working in close collaboration with local governments and other expert partners, to strengthen their development and delivery of health policy and programs. The VLGP provides councils with evidence-informed guidance through 'modules or toolkits', including a core module which aims to strengthen the capacity of councils to create local, healthy food systems. The VLGP also provides councils with funding for health promotion activities, and forums to collaborate. VicHealth also provides capacity building and leadership support to Local Public Health Units, particularly those with a strong interest in taking a holistic food systems approach.

VicHealth's Future Healthy Food Hubs

VicHealth's most recent major investment related to food security is a $4.4 million investment over 3 years in 7 Future Healthy Food Hubs (Food Hubs)[2]. Based in regional Victoria and the outer metropolitan growth corridors, this investment supports community-led organisations to build local relationships, infrastructure and services to create spaces where community members can buy affordable, locally sourced and culturally appropriate food.

Most Food Hubs were projects proposed by existing food relief providers (Bendigo Foodshare, Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Community Council, Centre for Participation and Whittlesea Community Connections) who demonstrated a strong interest in moving beyond providing emergency food relief, to lead more holistic, sustainable and participatory strategies to support equitable food access.

Seeding success

Together with The Difference Incubator and STREAT we are investing in training to support local food enterprises focussed on healthy, fresh and affordable food for the communities they serve. VicHealth's investment provides personalised coaching sessions and workshops as well as networking opportunities with like-minded leaders in the food system sector. Participants will gain the skills and confidence to create sustainable and impactful business models to help their organisations succeed.

VicHealth research investments

Impact grants

In 2023 VicHealth provided funding to a research project led by Victoria University that will build on past investigations by the Moondani Balluk Indigenous academic unit to progress research on the importance of ancestral Aboriginal dietary practices, place-making and self-

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Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems

[2] https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/programs-and-projects/local-government-partnership

determination for Aboriginal people. This project aims to strengthen sustainable, healthy food systems and reduce health inequities experienced by Aboriginal people living on Kulin Nation lands, in collaboration with policy and practice partners.

Early Fellowship program

VicHealth's early-career Fellowship program[3] is supporting Dr Christina Zorbas (Deakin University) to complete a research project which recognises that the voices and values of those experiencing social and economic exclusion are underrepresented in food policy decisions, research and advocacy efforts. Her fellowship will identify and pilot approaches to meaningfully include the lived experiences of diverse, under-represented groups in food policy decisions, including in relation to food insecurity.

Growing Healthy Communities Grants

VicHealth's Growing Healthy Communities Grants (July 2024) will provide grants of up to $150,000 (from a total funding pool of $4 million) to organisations that support young Victorians and their families from priority populations facing structural barriers to good health[4]. Eligible projects include those that aim to strengthen local food systems by creating new or improved places for communities to access, grow and share healthy, local and culturally appropriate food.

"[VicHealth Local Government Partnership (VLGP)](#)

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