

Food Security in Victoria – Victorian Government submission

Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into food security in Victoria

July 2024

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Committee's Inquiry into food security in Victoria
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In this document, 'First Peoples' and 'Aboriginal' refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'Indigenous' or 'Koori/Koorie' is retained when part of the title of a report, program or quotation.

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Introduction

This submission was prepared by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and endorsed by the Minister for Carers and Volunteers, as the lead Minister responsible for community food relief in Victoria.

The submission seeks to inform the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into food security, by providing a consolidated overview of the Victorian Government's current approach to support food relief and security across the state and contributing to the evidence base on the state of food security in Victoria.

The submission provides an outline of the current demand for food relief in Victoria based on available data and an overview of the existing food relief ecosystem. The submission also outlines the Victorian Government's current investments in food relief and security, including efforts underway to build sustainability in the food relief sector and to encourage stronger partnerships across the sector, including between metropolitan and regional providers.

Key Victorian Government initiatives highlighted in this submission include the 2024-25 Victorian State Budget investment of \$6 million to extend support for six Regional Foodshares and the Regional Food Security Alliance, and to deliver a new Community Food Relief grants program.

Including these new investments, more than \$56 million since 2020 has been invested in food relief and security programs and activities delivered by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (or its predecessor, the Department of Health and Human Services), with a further \$10 million invested in the construction of two Foodbank Community Food Centres in regional areas, and \$3.3 million provided in recurrent annual funding to support Foodbank Victoria's operations.

An additional \$1.1 million has been invested through the Housing portfolio in the 2024-25 Victorian State Budget to provide food relief for tenants in social housing.

The submission also includes an overview of other relevant investments across government, including the Department of Education's School Breakfast Clubs program. Information on recent emergency food relief initiatives is also included as background, noting the focus of this submission is on non-emergency food security approaches and the current state of demand for non-emergency food relief in Victoria.

This submission does not address the issue of food supply and availability more broadly, noting the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee is conducting a separate inquiry in 2024 into securing the Victorian food supply.

Background

Food insecurity in Victoria

Food security definitions

The United Nations' Committee on World Food Security defines food security as a state when 'all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'¹.

Food security is important because a person who can access nutritious food, irrespective of their personal characteristics or life circumstances, and in sufficient quantities to meet their needs, has better health, wellbeing, social and economic outcomes. These include improved life expectancy, higher socio-economic status, increased workforce participation rates, a greater sense of safety and certainty, and reduced burden on the healthcare system.

Food insecurity is defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization as whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain². Food insecurity may be due to a range of social, economic, and environmental factors, including lack of food availability or a lack of resources to obtain food. In Victoria, food insecurity predominantly arises from a lack of financial resources, rather than a lack of availability.

Food insecurity sits on a continuum ranging from 'food secure' to 'severe food insecurity' – for example, occasional food shortages (infrequent and short-lived) to chronic persistent conditions where individuals need long-term food relief services due to vulnerability and poverty.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has adopted Statistics Canada's classification of food security status:³

- **Marginal food insecurity:** Worry about running out of food and/or limited food selection due to a lack of money for food.
- **Moderate food insecurity:** Compromise in quality and/or quantity of food due to a lack of money for food.
- **Severe food insecurity:** Miss meals, reduce food intake, and at the most extreme go day(s) without food.

Food insecurity and health outcomes

Access to adequate, safe, and culturally appropriate nutritious food is a key determinant of health. People experiencing food insecurity compromise the quality and/or quantity of their food intake, including the substitution of nutritious food with lower cost, higher energy, nutrient poor food. Poor diet (i.e. 'dietary risks'⁴) is the third leading risk factor contributing to the burden of disease in

¹ World Food Summit 1996, Rome, Declaration on World Food Security

² HLPE 2020, Food security and nutrition: building a global narrative towards 2030. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome.

³ Statistics Canada. *Food Security*. Available at <https://www160.statcan.gc.ca/prosperity-prosperite/food-security-securite-alimentaire-eng.htm>

⁴ Dietary risks factors include components where adequate amounts in the diet are required to prevent disease, as well as diets where excessive consumption contributes to disease development. The 12 individual dietary risk factors were: a diet low in: fruit, vegetables, milk, nuts and seeds, whole grains and high fibre cereals, legumes,

Australia, and also contributes to overweight (including obesity), and hypertension (the second, and fourth leading risk factors respectively)⁵.

Food insecurity has severe health consequences, increasing the risk of obesity, chronic diseases (such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes), depression and high stress levels, which can lead to further preventable illnesses⁶. International research shows that individuals facing chronic food insecurity have a higher risk of all-cause mortality, including deaths from cardiovascular disease⁷. In addition, the effects of food insecurity during childhood can lead to long-term health issues. For example, a Canadian study found that young people who frequently experience hunger are more likely to develop chronic conditions later in life⁸.

Victorian Population Health Survey data in **Figure 1** below shows that the prevalence of food insecurity (at the severe end of the continuum) significantly increased by 40 per cent from 5.8 per cent in 2020 to 8.1 per cent in 2022. Similarly, obesity prevalence increased from 21 per cent in 2020 to 25 per cent in 2022, which is substantially higher than any increase observed prior to 2020. Similarly, the prevalence of type 2 diabetes significantly increased by 31 per cent from 5.8 per cent in 2020 to 7.5 per cent in 2022.

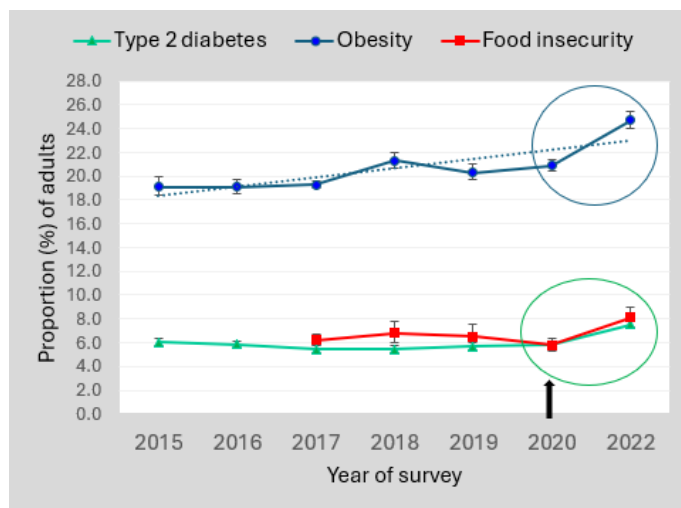


Figure 1 Food insecurity, obesity and Type 2 diabetes trends in Victorian adults: 2015-2022⁹

Figure 2 below shows the prevalence of food insecurity, obesity, and type 2 diabetes in 2022, increased with decreasing socioeconomic status, i.e. the more disadvantaged, the higher the risk of morbidity, mortality, and disability.

polyunsaturated fat, and fish and seafood; and a diet high in: sodium, sugar-sweetened beverages, and red and processed meats. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). *Diet*. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/food-nutrition/diet>

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). *Australian Burden of Disease Study 2018: Interactive data on risk factor burden*. Available at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/abds-2018-interactive-data-risk-factors>

⁶ Laraia B. Food insecurity and chronic disease. *Adv Nutr*. 2013

⁷ Sun Y, Liu B, Rong S, Du Y, Xu G, Snetelaar LG, Wallace RB, Bao W. Food Insecurity Is Associated With Cardiovascular and All-Cause Mortality Among Adults in the United States. *JAMA*. 2020

⁸ Kirkpatrick SI, McIntyre L, Potestio ML. Child Hunger and Long-term Adverse Consequences for Health. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 2010

⁹ The Victorian Population Health Survey, 2022. Available at <https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-population-health-survey>.

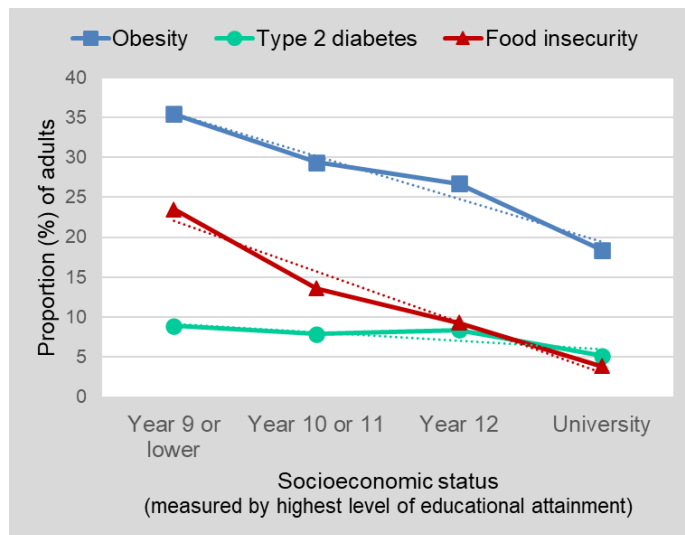


Figure 2 Proportion of Victorian adults (per cent) experiencing food insecurity, type 2 diabetes and obesity by socioeconomic status (2022)¹⁰

Food insecurity also significantly impacts and often leads to lower rates of social and economic participation. Evidence shows that children in food insecure households are more likely to miss days of school, miss out on school activities, and more likely to have emotional and behavioural issues¹¹.

Growing demand in Victoria

Victorians are experiencing rising costs in food, fuel, utilities, insurance, and housing expenses. Although inflation has decreased from over seven or eight percent in late 2022 and early 2023 to current rates of less than four percent, cost of living remains a significant issue. High rates of inflation and reduced access to affordable food has impacted the ability of many Victorians to achieve a level of food security¹².

Although cost of living pressures impact everyone, lower-income households are particularly affected. These households allocate a larger portion of their income to essentials such as food, housing, utilities, and transport, making it more challenging to manage household budgets as prices increase.

Rising cost of living pressures have led to Australia and Victoria’s food relief sectors experiencing unprecedented demand. A number of Victorian and national surveys are summarised below. Note that as each survey measure different indicator/s along the food insecurity continuum, the surveys are not directly comparable against each other.

At a national level, according to the 2023 Foodbank Hunger Report, 23 per cent of Australians can be categorised as being severely food insecure, which is defined as actively going hungry and reducing their food intake, skipping meals or going entire days without eating. Of these households, 77 per cent experienced this for the first-time last year¹³.

In 2023, 3.7 million Australian households, or 36 per cent, faced moderate to severe food insecurity. This is defined as either reducing the quality, variety, or choice of food to eating less food than

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Seivwright AN, Callis Z, Flatau P. Food Insecurity and Socioeconomic Disadvantage in Australia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2020; 17(2):559. Available at <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17020559>

¹² Taking the Pulse of the Nation, 2024. Available at <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/data/taking-the-pulse-of-the-nation-2022/2024/ttpr-11-june-2024>

¹³ Foodbank Hunger Report 2023 - Foodbank Reports

required. This is more than a 10 per cent increase on the number of households that were food insecure in 2022, equating to 383,000 more households¹⁴. In Australia, 48 per cent of the general population now feels anxious or struggles to consistently access adequate food. This is up from 45 per cent in 2022¹⁵.

The Victorian Population Health Survey found that in 2023, 8 per cent of Victorian adults ran out of food and could not afford to buy more (reflecting the severe end of the food insecurity continuum)¹⁶. This represented a 38 per cent increase from that reported in 2020¹⁷. At the marginal end of the food insecurity continuum, more than a quarter of the adult population of Victoria (25.1 per cent) worried about running out of money to buy food in the last 12 months¹⁸.

According to the 2023 Taking the Pulse of the Nation survey (which captured data at the moderate-to-severe end of the food insecurity continuum), rates of reported food insecurity among adults exceed 20 per cent in Victoria, with 45 per cent of those living in Victoria reporting financial challenges, including for food, housing, utilities and/or medical expenses¹⁹.

Some areas of the state are experiencing greater food stress than others. Food stress is a similar concept to housing stress and happens when a household must allocate over 25 per cent of their disposable income to food expenses²⁰. The Victorian Food Stress Index (2022 – *unpublished*) was developed to estimate the likelihood that Victorian households in different geographic areas were experiencing food stress and to rank geographic areas accordingly. It showed that 40 per cent of Victorian local government areas are indicating a high likelihood of food stress (see **Figure 3** below).

However, food-stressed households also exist in regions with a low likelihood of food stress.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Victorian Agency for Health Information 2023, 'Victorian Population Health Survey 2023'

¹⁷ Victorian Agency for Health Information 2024, 'Victorian Population Health Survey 2020: COVID-19 report: Victorian Population Health Survey 2020 COVID19 dashboard' (viewed 21 June 2024).

¹⁸ Victorian Agency for Health Information 2023, 'Victorian Population Health Survey 2023'.

¹⁹ Taking the Pulse of the Nation, 2023. Available at <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/data/taking-the-pulse-of-the-nation-2022/2023/tpn-november-2023>; Note that this survey asked if, during the last 3 months, because of a shortage of money, respondents skipped meals, ate less generally or ate less fresh or nutritious food; these indicators appear to lie towards the moderate to severe end of the food insecurity continuum.

²⁰ Ward P.R., Coveney J., Verity F., Carter P., Schilling M. Cost and affordability of healthy food in rural South Australia. *Rural Remote Health*. 2012.

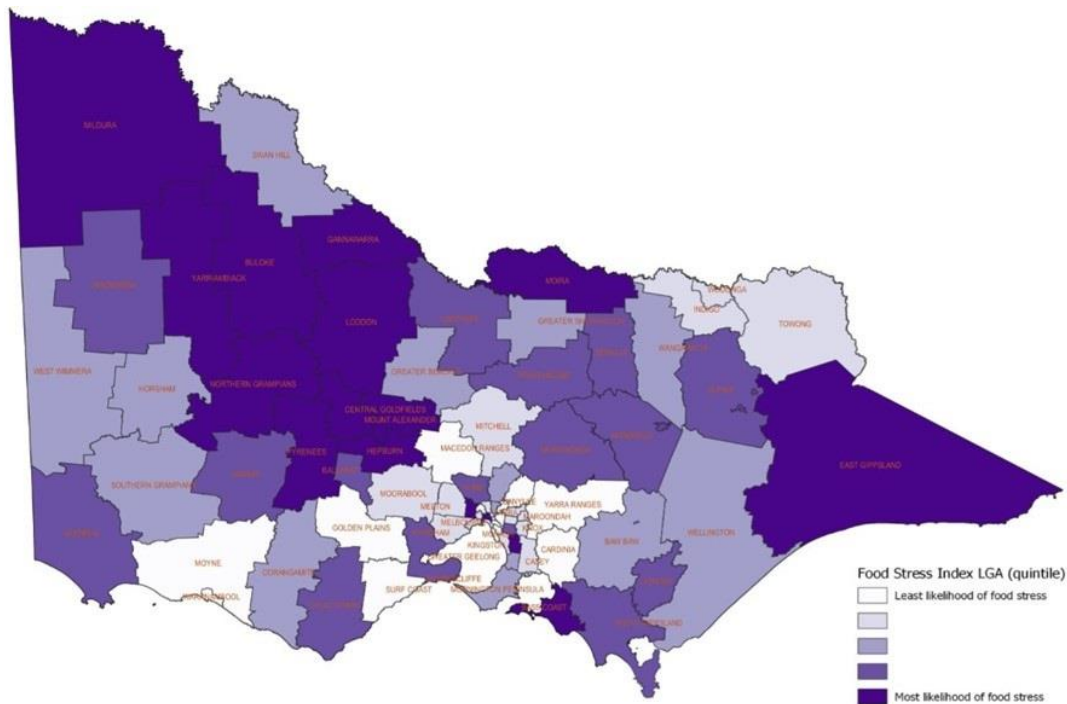


Figure 3 Victorian Food Stress Index - Local Government Areas (unpublished, 2022)

According to the 2023 Victorian Population Health Survey, adults who resided in the Local Government Areas of Benalla, Brimbank, Frankston, Greater Dandenong, Hume, Latrobe, Melton, Pyrenees, and Wodonga, were statistically *significantly more likely to have run out of food* in the last 12 months and not able to afford to buy more (i.e. severe food insecurity), compared with all adults in Victoria.

Adults who resided in the local government areas of Brimbank, Hume, Pyrenees, Casey, Frankston, Greater Dandenong and Whittlesea were statistically *significantly more likely to have worried about running out of money to buy food* in the last 12 months, compared with all Victorian adults²¹ (i.e. marginal food insecurity).

Food insecurity rarely occurs in isolation. It typically results from a combination of intersecting needs such as low incomes, financial hardship and other significant life events. The increased demand for food relief is symptomatic of deeper issues exacerbated by factors like rising inflation and escalating housing and energy costs. Addressing food insecurity requires a comprehensive range of services to respond to the underlying factors causing food insecurity.

Reflective of this need, community organisations and food security providers are facing an increased demand for help and support, with many reporting an increase in the numbers of people who are fully employed seeking food relief support for the first time.

Priority groups and communities

Food insecurity particularly affects those Victorians who already face disadvantage and vulnerability in the community. Certain groups face systemic barriers to accessing food relief due to experiences of structural discrimination, disadvantage and marginalisation, including First Peoples, recently arrived migrants, and refugees or people seeking asylum.

²¹ Victorian Agency for Health Information 2023, 'Victorian Population Health Survey 2023'.

People accessing food relief are more likely to be experiencing low incomes, unemployment and/or underemployment, family violence, chronic illness, mental health issues and disability. A number of other factors also put some people at greater risk, including significant life events such as the breakdown of relationships, significant trauma, or entry and exit from the justice system.

Many people experience multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination and experiences which compound disadvantage, further increasing food insecurity.

According to the Victorian Population Health Survey those groups at the severe end of the food insecurity continuum (run out of food and unable to afford to buy more) include:

- First Peoples – in 2020, Aboriginal Victorians were almost three times more likely (15.1 per cent) than non-Aboriginal Victorians (5.7 per cent) to have run out of food and unable to afford to buy more.
- Families with children under 17 years old – in 2022, 36 per cent of adults with children aged 17 years or younger, reported running out of food and unable to afford to buy more (compared with 28 per cent of adults without children under 17 years of age).
- Young people aged 18–24 – in 2022, the proportion of people aged 18-24 years (12 per cent) who reported running out of food and unable to afford to buy more was 50 per cent higher than all Victorian adults (8 per cent).
- Victorians living in rural areas – in 2022, significantly more Victorians living in rural areas (12 per cent) reported running out of food and unable to afford to buy more, compared to those living in the metropolitan area (7 per cent).

Groups at higher risk of marginal food insecurity (worrying about running out of money to buy food) include:

- Younger adults aged 18-44 years – in 2020, 33 per cent of this age group worried about running out of money to buy food.
- First Peoples – in 2020, 40 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians worried about running out of money to buy food.
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – in 2020, 41 per cent of those who were born overseas and spoke a language other than English worried about running out of food.
- People experiencing socio-economic disadvantage – in 2020, of the people who reported worrying about running out of money to buy food, 45 per cent were unemployed, 29 per cent did not hold a university qualification, and 35 per cent of adults with a total annual household income between \$40,000 to \$60,000 were significantly more likely to have worried about running out of money to buy food compared with all adults; this increased to 50.5 per cent of adults who reported an annual household income of less than \$20,000.
- People experiencing significant health challenges – in 2020, 43 per cent of people who reported worrying about running out of money to buy food were experiencing high levels of psychological distress and 34 per cent were living with two or more chronic diseases²².

²² Victorian Agency for Health Information 2020 and 2022, 'Victorian Population Health Survey: dashboard'. Available at <https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-population-health-survey>.

Figure 4 below provides a snapshot of the communities known to be at increased risk and some factors and issues encountered by these groups that contribute to greater levels of food insecurity.

Cohort	Factors
Multicultural communities, including refugees and people seeking asylum.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poor food literacy and nutrition education • departure from traditional diet when migrating to Australia • language barriers and difficulties with sourcing culturally appropriate and healthy food • challenges faced during resettlement (unemployment, poverty, visa conditions) • lack of knowledge or understanding of the types of foods available in Australian supermarkets
First Peoples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low income to purchase nutritious food • household infrastructure and overcrowding • access to transport, storage and cooking facilities • rural households have limited food outlet availability, which often leads to food being more expensive.
Communities in rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • additional transport and logistics costs for suppliers that are passed on to retailers and customers. • fewer large supermarkets forcing dependence on smaller shops that stock a limited range of foods, often at higher prices. • a higher density of, or greater access to, take-away food outlets compared to healthier food outlets.
People experiencing homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of funds to purchase nutritious food and limited facilities for meal preparation • low access to affordable, healthy food stores • lack of cooking and storage facilities in temporary accommodation (e.g. community housing, private rentals or friend/family’s homes).
Single parent households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited funds available to purchase nutritious and adequate quantities of food due to single income and high living expenses • limited disposable income • time pressures due to employment limiting capacity to prepare healthy meals.
Older people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited funds available to purchase nutritious and adequate quantities of food due to reliance on government financial assistance • unable to live independently, resulting in limited capacity to prepare and cook meals • limited access to affordable food stores for healthy groceries due to mobility issues and ability to carry groceries
Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited funds to purchase healthy and adequate food due to higher prevalence of underemployment, insecure and low paid work • limited nutrition literacy • insufficient opportunity to source and cook nutritious food²³

Figure 4 Factors contributing to greater levels of food insecurity for some groups²⁴

Importance of providing culturally appropriate food

Victoria is home to one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world and is among the fastest growing and most diverse states in Australia. Victorians come from more than 300 ancestries, speak more than 290 languages and dialects, and follow over 200 faiths.

In 2021, 30 per cent of Victoria’s population were born overseas, an increase from just over 28 per cent in 2016, and greater than the national percentage of more than 27 per cent. Over 49 per cent

²³ Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice, 2022, Realities of food insecurity for young people: Insights from the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer. Available at <https://doi.org/10.26180/20128370.v2>

²⁴ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2020, Understanding Food Security in Australia. Available at https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publicationdocuments/2009_cfca_understanding_food_insecurity_in_australia_0.pdf

of Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent born overseas. The proportion of overseas-born Victorians who come from non-main English-speaking countries is 77.7 per cent – the highest of any Australian state or territory²⁵. Victorian Population Health Survey data (2022) highlighted multicultural and multifaith community members as an at-risk group for food insecurity due to insufficient financial resources.

In this context, it is critical that food relief efforts respect cultural and religious dietary practices. By ensuring food relief is culturally appropriate, food waste is reduced, and a dignified experience is provided for people supported through these services.

Access to culturally appropriate food mitigates some multicultural Victorians lack of awareness of Australian food, in particular a lack of knowledge on unhealthy and less nutritious options. A culturally appropriate approach also supports the health and wellbeing of multicultural and multifaith communities, and demonstrates sensitivity and respect, leading to more effective and meaningful support.

²⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021, Housing: Census, ABS

Food relief service ecosystem in Victoria

Community food relief is delivered through an ecosystem of major, regional, and local community organisations, represented at a high-level in **Figure 5** below. They are supported by food suppliers, financial donors, and funding through a mix of local, state, and federal government programs.

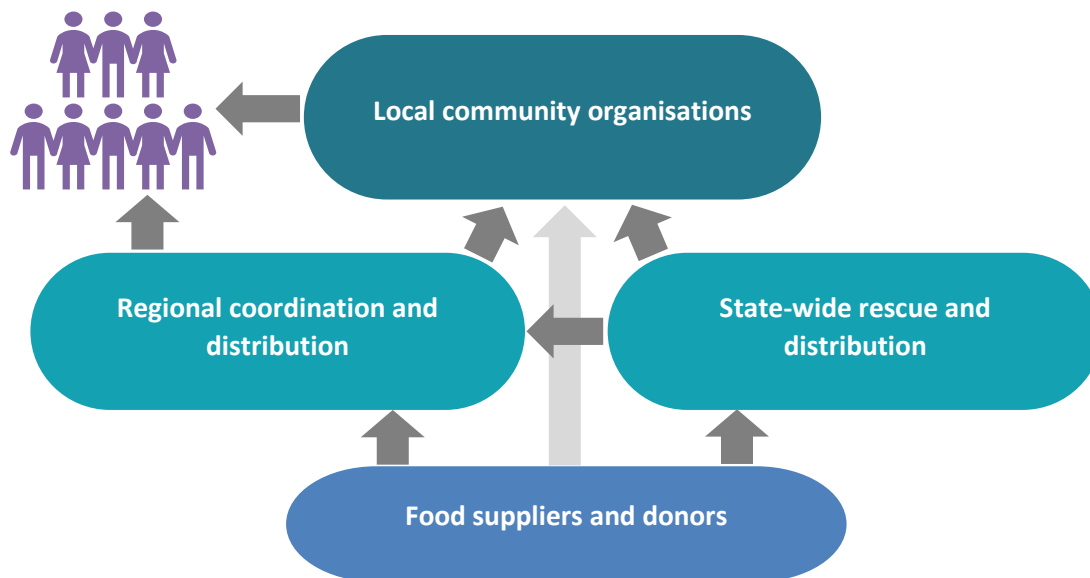


Figure 5 Visual representation of the community food relief system in Victoria

The food relief sector comprises many organisations operating at varying scales. Organisations operating within the sector can be categorised as follows:

- **State-wide food relief organisations** operate across Victoria and play an integral role in the food relief ecosystem by sourcing and redistributing food to food relief hubs and foodshares in regional and rural Victoria, and to smaller community food relief agencies and charitable partners across the state.
 - Organisations undertaking large scale statewide food relief operations in Victoria include Foodbank Victoria, OzHarvest, FareShare and SecondBite²⁶.
- **Regional Foodshares and Community Food Centres** source, warehouse and distribute food to partnering agencies. These organisations work within their wider communities, including with primary producers and charity and not-for-profit partners, to improve coordination and efficiency in the procurement and distribution of food relief.
 - The Victorian Government currently funds six Regional Foodshares operating in Albury-Wodonga, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Shepparton, and Warrnambool, as well as funding the construction of two Foodbank Community Food Centres in Ballarat and Morwell.
- **Community food relief agencies** operate at a local level and supply food directly to Victorians in need.
 - Survey data from a KPMG report prepared in 2022 indicates that approximately 35 per cent of food relief organisations are religious organisations, 23 per cent are community groups and 22 per cent are neighbourhood houses, with 20 per cent being local councils or other. This

²⁶ In May 2024, FareShare and SecondBite announced a merger, which will see SecondBite provide ingredients to the FareShare kitchens to prepare meals for people experiencing food insecurity.

same survey found that food is distributed from local organisations to consumers in a number of ways, with 46 per cent providing on site collection points, 29 per cent offering home delivery and the remainder reaching consumers through other agencies or mechanisms²⁷.

The food relief sector operates on a complex supply chain to enable organisations to procure, store, and distribute food, as well as manage logistics and waste. Successful food relief relies on sufficient food quantities generated by farmers, manufacturers, and wholesalers to move through food rescue channels. It relies on efficient logistics and coordinated operations to move produce and surplus food through statewide providers and regional hubs towards community food relief agencies.

The Commonwealth Government also plays a lead role in delivering financial crisis and material aid to people experiencing financial hardship. The Commonwealth Government funds emergency relief and food relief services across Australia to support people experiencing financial hardship with their immediate needs, such as food, transport, pharmaceuticals and clothing. The Commonwealth Government funds Foodbank, OzHarvest and Second Bite to ensure food items are available for emergency relief providers to deliver to individuals and families in need across Australia.

The food security sector has made considerable advances in recent years, supported by Victorian and Commonwealth Government investment, to lay the foundations for collaborative partnerships and efficient coordination.

Yet, food relief is not always consistently or transparently distributed on the basis of need, and often depends rather on ease of logistics, population size, or number of agencies and their capacity. There is a need for improved collaboration and facilitation across the sector to reduce existing inefficiencies and duplication in transport logistics and distribution practices, to improve the coordination, supply, and distribution of food relief across the state.

Broader supports and referrals

Food relief can provide a critical entry point for referrals and provision of other supports. Most community members attending agencies for support with meeting immediate needs, such as food relief and support with utility bills, are experiencing a range of other challenges.

Community food relief agencies and regional food relief centres and foodshares not only provide immediate food relief assistance, but also advocacy, system navigation information, and referrals to other support services. These can include family violence services, medical, mental health, substance abuse, housing and legal services, financial information and assistance, case management, counselling, and legal and youth services²⁸.

These agencies play an important role in encouraging clients to seek support and address the underlying issues contributing to their food insecurity.²⁹

For example, Geelong Food Relief Centre has reported that community members often seek out food relief support when they are experiencing high-level and complex needs. At the same time as providing a voucher to access their mini-mart, customers receive wrap-around supports and referrals for issues related to family violence, financial literacy and addiction.

²⁷ Mapping and Gap Analysis of the Victorian Food Relief Sector, KPMG, 2022.

²⁸ Community Information and Support Victoria (May 2024) A Decade of Impact: CISVic's Emergency Relief Consortia Report.

²⁹ Sarah Belton, Maggie Jamieson & Tanya Lawlis (2020) Despite Challenges Food Relief Is A Conduit to Developing Relationships, Trust and Enabling Client Food Security and Specialized Support: A Case Study, Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition.

Role of volunteers

Volunteers play a critical role in supporting the food security sector, with large-scale distributors and smaller community agencies heavily relying on volunteer support to deliver their essential operations and broader supports for community members. Many organisations within the food relief sector have reported growing volunteer numbers post-pandemic. For example, the Regional Foodshares have experienced a 16 per cent growth in volunteer numbers, from 840 active volunteers in June 2023 to 973 at June 2024³⁰.

Access to volunteer opportunities not only supports the delivery of key services but has important benefits for volunteers themselves, relating to increased social inclusion and community connection. For example, Geelong Food Relief Centre's volunteer workforce has increased from 65 to 183 in the two years to June 2024. Each month, the equivalent of over \$125,000 in volunteer support is provided to the Geelong community. Volunteers benefit from friendship, connection, a strong sense of purpose, and are able to build skills.

Albury Wodonga Regional Foodshare recently received the Wodonga Volunteer Award and the Two Cities One Community Volunteer Award, in recognition of the level of community engagement and volunteer support provided.

³⁰ Figures provided by the Regional Food Security Alliance, 2024.

Food security investments – Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

Summary

Principles underlying investments

In response to the growing demand for food relief, significant investments have been made in the food security sector in recent years. The key principles underlying investments include:

- Supporting more individuals and families currently facing food insecurity to access healthy and culturally appropriate food, in a dignified way.
- Establishing an integrated food relief system to ensure that food relief activities are coordinated and targeted to areas of greatest need.
- Enhancing effective community food models and enabling community organisations to expand and strengthen current efforts and embed sustainability.
- Supporting people accessing food relief with connections to other community supports and services, including financial wellbeing and food literacy programs.
- Using and commissioning expertise, data and evidence to inform programming, and exploring opportunities to enhance data availability.

Summary of investments

Since 2020, including investments in the 2024-25 State Budget, more than \$56 million has been allocated to initiatives delivered by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (or its predecessor, the Department of Health and Human Services) to strengthen the food relief system and deliver more food to Victorians in need. This investment includes:

- \$24 million in crisis funding, in response to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 flooding event in central Victoria.
- \$16 million to strengthen food relief infrastructure, organisational capacity, and system leadership and collaboration across Victoria's food relief sector, including initial funding for Regional Foodshares, and Regional Food Security Alliance.
- \$8 million in grants provided through multiple rounds of the COVID-19 Priority Response to Multicultural Communities program, with funding for provision of food relief among other supports.
- \$2.2 million to support FareShare to upgrade their facilities to expand the provision of nutritious meals to people across Victoria who need it most, using surplus quality food from supermarkets, wholesalers, farmers, and other businesses.
- \$1.25 million for 28 community organisations to deliver pop up food relief markets across metropolitan Melbourne.
- \$6 million through the 2024-25 State Budget to extend support for the Regional Foodshares and the Regional Food Security Alliance, and to deliver a new Community Food Relief grants program.

In addition, \$10 million has been provided by the Victorian Government to Foodbank Victoria to establish new community food centres in Ballarat and Morwell to distribute food to charity partners, as well as \$3.3 million in annual operational funding.

More detail about current and recent investments is provided below.

Food Relief Taskforce 2021 – 2023

To further inform the work of the Victorian Government during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, the Government established the Victorian Food Relief Taskforce which operated from April 2021 to June 2023. The Taskforce brought together representatives from the food relief sector, community sector and all levels of government³¹. The Taskforce strengthened and enhanced food relief activities across Victoria to ensure that the food relief system could respond effectively and efficiently to meet demand for food relief during the COVID-19 response and recovery period.

The Taskforce provided an important forum to collectively address barriers and develop solutions to improve the efficiency, quality, and accessibility of food relief. The Taskforce completed a number of projects including:

- Commissioning a report to improve the understanding of the food relief system in Victoria and provide data to support the delivery of food relief and future reforms and initiatives.
- Developing a Victorian Food Stress Index, which estimates food stress for all geographic regions of Victoria, to enhance Government's ability to monitor demand and target efforts to areas experiencing greatest need.
- Developing a Charter and Healthy Food Relief Guidelines, to help ensure consistency and standardisation across the food relief sector, which are currently being considered for publication.

The Taskforce's work assisted in establishing a key understanding of the sector, supported decision-making by Government and enhanced the delivery of food relief activities. In addition, the Taskforce established a strong foundation to position the sector to work in a targeted, collaborative, and sustainable way into the future.

Foodbank Victoria and Community Food Centres

The Victorian Government invests more than \$3.3 million each year to support Foodbank Victoria's operations. This funding supports Foodbank to distribute staple, fresh foods, and personal hygiene and household items, through more than 500 charity partners. This recognises the primary role of Foodbank Victoria as the largest food relief organisation operating in Victoria and Australia, supporting Regional Foodshares and community food relief agencies to deliver food and essential items to individuals in need.

Foodbank Victoria's operations are wide-reaching with the organisation actively supporting emergency relief efforts for natural disasters and reducing food waste occurring at the retail, commercial and household level.

In 2023, Foodbank sourced the equivalent of 92 million meals for charity partners and school breakfast programs throughout Australia. In 2022-23, Foodbank Victoria collected and distributed over 13 million kilograms of food (staple, fresh and frozen) and personal hygiene and household items, through around 500 charity partners and 1,000 schools. They are supported by 115 paid

³¹ Members included Foodbank Victoria, SecondBite, FareShare, OzHarvest, Regional Food Relief Network Steering Group, Victorian Farmers Federation, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Victorian Council of Social Services, Municipal Association of Victoria, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Victorian Multicultural Commission, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Department of Health, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions and Commonwealth Department of Social Services.

staff, over 2,000 volunteers who contribute nearly 30,000 hours, and a network of food and financial donors.

The Victorian Government has also invested in food relief infrastructure across the state, including new Foodbank Community Food Centres in Morwell and Ballarat, with a funding contribution of \$10 million. These centres are filling critical gaps in regional food relief storage and distribution. Across the two sites, Foodbank expects to distribute more than 850,000 kilograms of food annually.

Foodbank Victoria recommended the Ballarat and Morwell sites as data showed these areas have some of the most vulnerable communities in the state and were not being adequately serviced. In addition, these locations are in or near regions more frequently affected by natural disasters.

Foodbank commenced operations at the Ballarat site in November 2023 and the Morwell site in May 2024. Both sites are supporting charity partners with access to food. Foodbank also plans to expand operations with a social supermarket, for clients of local agencies to self-select produce, and a social café and training kitchen.

Since opening in November 2023, the Ballarat Community Food Centre has distributed approximately 2,600kg per week to charity partners. The Ballarat Community Food Centre not only provides food to families in need in the Ballarat Grampians region, but also provides important food education programs, vocational training and support for the local community. A pilot cooking program will be delivered through the centre, teaching university students how to prepare a healthy meal, and later expand into other cooking programs tailored to meet the needs of the Ballarat community. Onsite kitchen facilities will serve as a training space for people to learn basic food preparation skills.

In partnership with Federation University's Ballarat Campus, Foodbank Victoria has also set up a 'community supermarket' to provide students with access to a range of healthy foods. More than 600 students have already accessed the service.

Other infrastructure investments

The Victorian Government provided \$2.9 million to support a purpose-built warehouse for Shepparton Foodshare. This funding allocation will enable the design and construction of a new warehouse consisting of approximately 900 square meters of warehousing space and loading facilities, with 220 square metres of office space, meeting rooms and amenities. The warehouse is expected to be completed by February 2025.

In addition, Bendigo Foodshare has been funded \$1 million to support the construction of a new community food hub. The multi-purpose food hub will enhance food storage and distribution facilities, establish a social supermarket, community garden, food education hub, and space for the Bendigo Community Farmers Market. The food hub will provide a centralised location for the community to come together to address food security, share ideas and access locally grown produce. Upgrades are anticipated to be completed in 2024.

Regional Foodshares and Regional Food Security Alliance

Victorian Government funding for the Regional Foodshares commenced in 2020 to respond to increase demand for food relief in regional areas and increase the capacity of the network of food distribution hubs in regional areas during the pandemic. Foodbank's 2018 Hunger Report noted that people living in regional Australia are 33 per cent more likely to experience food insecurity than their metropolitan counterparts³².

A targeted expression of interest process was undertaken with organisations identified to have capacity to expand storage and distribution capacity to respond to increased demand for food relief and support efficient and safe food storage practice. Funded organisations include Albury Wodonga Regional Foodshare, Bendigo Foodshare, Geelong Food Relief Centre, Mildura Foodshare and Warrnambool and District Foodshare. Shepparton Foodshare has been included in operational funding since 2022-23.

The Regional Foodshares receive, store, and distribute food to partnering agencies and work within their wider communities, including primary producers and charity and not-for profit partners, to improve coordination and efficiency in the procurement and distribution of food relief.

Impact of Regional Foodshare activities

In 2021, Think Impact partnered with Open Food Network to conduct a year-long study on four of the Regional Foodshares. The study found that the Albury Wodonga Regional Foodshare, Bendigo Foodshare, Shepparton Foodshare and Warrnambool and District Foodshare distributed over 2,500,000 kgs of food to an estimated 91,000 adults and children in 2020. The regions they service comprise 42 per cent of Victoria's regional population.

It was estimated that \$96.55 million of social, economic and environmental value was created by the four foodshares. For every dollar of input value invested, \$4.17 of social, economic and environmental value is created. For every dollar of financial investment, \$66.44 of social, economic and environmental value is created³³

Between August 2022 and June 2023, the six funded foodshares collectively sourced 2,831 tonnes of food, primarily through local donations, and distributed 2,214 tonnes of food. They did this through investing in infrastructure, logistics and staffing resources which has allowed for greater collaboration and coordination across regional Victoria.

For example, the provision of food relief to communities in need following the 2022 Central Victorian floods was more effective due to the increased capacity of Regional Foodshares in affected areas, and through improved coordination and collaboration between statewide organisations.

Regional Food Security Alliance

Funding has been provided by the Victorian Government for the Regional Food Security Alliance (RFSA) to support its aims to improve the capacity, efficiency, and viability of the six Regional Foodshares as a collective. The key objectives of the RFSA are to:

- Contribute to strengthening collaboration between Regional Foodshares.
- Strengthen systems used by Regional Foodshares in order to increase efficiency and capacity to collect and distribute food in regional Victoria.

³² Foodbank 2018 Hunger Report, <https://www.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-Foodbank-Hunger-Report.pdf>

³³ Think Impact, Strengthening Victoria's Foodshare organisations, 2022. Available at https://about.openfoodnetwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/J21CGB01_Combined_B.pdf

- Support initiatives that will contribute to the sustainability of Regional Foodshares.
- Improve efficiency in meeting demand for food relief through streamlined food sourcing and distribution channels.
- Improve coordination and logistics across Victoria in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the regional food relief system.

In 2022-23 the RFSA demonstrated positive momentum in building sector collaboration and improved efficiency around the coordination of regional food security in Victoria. Funding supported a co-operative approach by Regional Foodshares to food purchasing and logistics, large scale food donations, fundraising activities, and shared resources, such as data collection, policy sharing, and volunteering engagement and support. As at March 2024, the RFSA estimates this approach has saved \$2.20 million across the six Regional Foodshares.

2024-25 State Budget investments

Victorian Government investment has provided a safety net to many individuals at risk of food insecurity. Recognising the expanding demand and need for food security, the 2024-25 Victorian State Budget invested an additional \$6 million through the Carers and Volunteers portfolio for initiatives to be delivered by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.³⁴

This funding includes \$1.5 million to continue support for the Regional Foodshares and RFSA, and \$4.5 million to deliver the Community Food Relief grants program, including funding for neighbourhood houses.

An additional \$1.1 million has been invested through the Housing portfolio in the 2024-25 Victorian State Budget to provide food relief to support tenants in social housing.³⁵

This additional funding will build stability and sustainability across the sector by strengthening the existing food relief structures to provide communities and local organisations across Victoria with access to food where and when they need it. The investment aims to encourage stronger partnerships across the sector to increase efficiency and coordination.

Data gathered through the delivery of these programs will help to inform consideration of future initiatives. Details of 2024-25 investments are outlined below.

Continued funding to Regional Foodshares and RFSA

Regional Foodshares play a particularly important role in food relief in their communities and increase the capacity and capability of regional supply and distribution networks to better support communities to meet demand for food relief.

Funding of \$1.5 million has been provided in 2024-25 to build upon investment in 2022-23 and 2023-24 and continue supporting core operations of the Regional Foodshares located in Albury-Wodonga, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Shepparton and Warrnambool. Funding will continue to focus on organisational capacity and sustainability, food relief infrastructure, and supporting leadership and collaboration across the food relief sector.

Continued funding in 2024-25 will enhance place-based coordination and distribution of food relief services by strengthening local capacity to receive, sort and store large quantities of rescued and donated food, for distribution to frontline community organisations in regional areas.

³⁴ 2024-25 Victorian State Budget Paper 3, p. 36. Available at <https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/2024-25-state-budget/2024-25-service-delivery>.

³⁵ *ibid.*

Taking a networked approach, the Regional Foodshares will continue to partner with local food producers and distributors, businesses, statewide food security agencies, local governments, volunteers, and social service and community organisations to get food to those Victorians who need it most.

In addition, the Regional Foodshares deliver a range of services and supports in response to the specific needs of their communities which will continue in 2024-25. These include:

- Mildura Foodshare (delivered by Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council (SMECC)) men's group opened a community garden in 2023, providing free produce to multicultural community members in the region.
- SMECC has also partnered with Sunraysia Institute of TAFE to deliver a Youth Homework Club, which includes information on food production and horticulture.
- Shepparton Foodshare has partnered with Mooroopna Park Primary school to provide meals and education on food skills for students.
- Albury-Wodonga Foodshare is partnering with Albury Wodonga TAFE to develop a food precinct with wrap around community support and education services³⁶.
- Bendigo Foodshare's 'Grow Cook Share' Food Hub has delivered cooking and baking classes, and food relief workshops including multicultural cooking classes.

This funding will also continue support for the RFSA. The RFSA will continue promoting a collaborative approach between the six Regional Foodshares and testing and gathering evidence on the benefits of coordination and shared services approaches across the regional food relief system.

Community Food Relief grants program

In addition to further investment in the Regional Foodshares and RFSA, the 2024-25 Victorian State Budget included \$4.5 million which will deliver a new grants program to support local and regional food relief initiatives.

The Community Food Relief program comprises two streams – local grants and coordination grants – in order to strengthen key elements of the food relief ecosystem.

Local grants stream

The local grants will support neighbourhood houses and community and volunteer-led organisations to increase the supply of food relief, strengthen food security initiatives in local communities and begin to address the related drivers of food insecurity.

Competitive grants of up to \$50,000 (and \$75,000 for projects delivered in partnership between two or more providers) are available to community and volunteer-led organisations through an open process, with consideration given to ensure grants are reaching areas and cohorts of highest need.

Applications are sought from organisations with demonstrated capability to deliver food relief programs and a well-developed project proposal aligned with their existing services and identifying relevant partnerships in the local community.

This approach to supporting community level organisations has been demonstrated to be effective with the Pop-up Food Relief Markets program in 2022-23. This approach enabled grant recipients to establish or strengthen partnerships to holistically support people experiencing financial

³⁶ FoodShare Precinct, <https://www.wodongatafe.edu.au/about-us/major-projects/foodshare-precinct>

vulnerability, while also providing healthy, low-cost, and culturally appropriate food relief in a dignified way.

With close knowledge of their local communities and needs, small community and volunteer-based organisations are often best situated to provide targeted and tailored support to the community, including specific geographical areas, groups experiencing higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage, and hard to reach groups. Supporting community-led organisations helps ensure equity of access for people who experience barriers to accessing support, including First Peoples, people living in regional and rural areas, people from multicultural communities and older people. Community organisations will be equipped to respond quickly to emerging local needs, ensuring that everyone who needs it can access food relief.

A multi-pronged approach to supporting food security involving immediate relief and capability building will lead to meaningful, longer-term outcomes for the community. In doing so, the fund will support organisations to meet unprecedented demand and alleviate pressure on their volunteer staff base now and over time.

Coordination grants stream

The coordination grants stream will support large-scale regional and state-wide food relief providers and promote partnerships and coordination to enhance the distribution of food relief across Victoria.

The program will support the food security sector's capability to meet the growing demand for services. Grants will be aimed at encouraging stronger partnerships across the sector and funding will support the transport of ambient, chilled, and frozen food across metro and regional Victoria. This will result in more efficient food distribution, reducing waste and ensuring that food reaches those in need in a timely manner.

This initiative is designed to complement the Regional Food Security Alliance. An open grant program will require large scale providers to demonstrate their capacity and ability to partner and collaborate with other state-wide or regional providers to improve the coordination, supply, and distribution of food relief across the state.

Food relief for social housing tenants

Through the housing portfolio, funding of \$1.1 million has been provided to Homes Victoria for food relief to support tenants in social housing including in high rise towers.

The program is under development. This will complement existing food relief mechanisms through the Commonwealth Government and Victorian Government's existing investments including the new Community Food Relief grants program.

Funding will be provided to organisations in the 2024-25 financial year.

Food security investments – Other departments and agencies

Department of Education

School Breakfast Clubs program

The School Breakfast Clubs program, delivered through the Department of Education, was established in 2016 and seeks to address the impact that disadvantage can have on education outcomes by offering free and healthy food for students in Victorian government schools.

Research shows a child's ability to concentrate in class, self-regulate and learn is negatively impacted if they are hungry.³⁷ It has been reported that the rising cost of living makes it increasingly difficult, particularly for low-income families and families experiencing disadvantage, to provide enough healthy food for the family each week.

The School Breakfast Clubs program is currently delivered in 1,000 Victorian government schools. The Victorian Government committed a further \$21.1 million through the 2024-25 Victorian State Budget to expand the program and ensure that by 2026, the program will be available to all government schools that choose to participate. This builds on the \$141.2 million invested in the program since 2016.

The Victorian Government's current delivery partner is Foodbank Victoria. The program provides:

- Healthy breakfasts to students in participating Victorian government schools.
- Nutritious lunches, snacks and take-home packs for students in need.
- Cooking classes for families at participating schools.

The program is a universal program, made available to all students at the school. A key feature of the program is the flexible delivery model. Schools can tailor the program to suit their local needs, which may include a café style breakfast set up or a 'grab and go' service.

The program delivers a menu that meets Healthy Eating Guidelines, prioritises green rated and fresh foods and where possible, uses locally produced and manufactured supplies.

Since the program's establishment, it has delivered more than 40 million healthy and nutritious meals to students in participating schools across the state.

School Breakfast Clubs program – Cooking classes

Learning about healthy and nutritious food supports young people to develop the skills, knowledge and habits they need for growth, learning and development, and happy, healthy lives.

The cooking classes program aims to support families to learn new skills in cooking, food safety and meal planning, with a focus on the daily consumption of the five food groups recommended for good health.

The cooking classes are delivered in selected schools across the state each year. School eligibility is determined using the Student Family Occupation Education (SFOE) index data. SFOE is a measure of socio-educational disadvantage of a school, based on educational and employment characteristics of the parents/carers of students enrolled at the school.

³⁷ Ke. J., & Ford-Jones, E.L. 2015. Food insecurity and hunger: A review of the effects on children's health and behaviour. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 20(2), 89-91.

Classes take place once a week for four weeks in participating schools. All families in each of the eligible schools are invited to participate, and up to 10 families (approximately 1–3 students and 1 parent) are selected from each participating school to take part.

Cooking classes have been delivered to 100 schools since the program's establishment. A further 25 schools each year over four years will receive cooking classes as part of the 2023-24 State Budget funding.

Department of Health

The Department of Health provides policy frameworks that support action to improve access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food, in alignment with the Inquiry objectives and terms of reference. The Department of Health also funds key partners to deliver health promotion initiatives that support access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food. The Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2023–2027³⁸ (the plan) sets the direction for improving public health and wellbeing of Victorians and provides a framework for coordinated action among partners including local government, community health services, and local public health units. Under the “Increasing healthy eating priority” of the plan, there are actions to:

- Increase access, availability and consumption of a wide variety of nutritious foods such as fruit and vegetables, as recommended by the Australian Dietary Guidelines.
- Prioritise implementation of policies that promote the uptake of healthy foods and drinks in key public settings (including health services, schools, early childhood services, workplaces, sport and recreation settings and events).
- Promote healthy and more equitable, sustainable food systems across Victoria, with a focus on priority populations.

The Healthy Choices³⁹ policy framework improves the provision and promotion of healthier foods and drinks in key public settings, such as hospitals and health services, sport and recreation centres, and parks. Funded health promotion partners and other organisations support implementation of the policy guidelines in these settings.

Community Health Agencies

Community Health agencies are funded by Department of Health to deliver health promotion initiatives in their communities. In 2023-24, 63 of the 75 community health agencies included healthy eating as a priority in their annual Community Health - Health Promotion plans. In 2022-23 Community Health agencies actively supported improved access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food across 432 different settings, including schools, out of hours school care, community and council facilities, sport and recreation facilities and sports clubs.

Community Health 2023-24 annual plans with a specific focus on food security and priority populations include Swan Hill District Health, delivering the Food for All program, a multi-year community partnership; Portland District Health supporting food security initiatives such as community pantries and food relief in Glenelg Shire; IPC Health working with suppliers to increase healthy food options in emergency food relief parcels; and healthy cooking on a budget programs delivered by Sunbury Cobaw Community Health, and by CoHealth in Vietnamese communities.

³⁸ Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023-2027, <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/victorian-public-health-and-wellbeing-plan-2023-27>

³⁹ Healthy Choices policy framework, <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/preventive-health/healthy-choices>

Local Public Health Units

Local Public Health Units (LPHUs) are funded by the Department of Health in their population health catchment planning. In 2023, seven of the nine LPHUs adopted healthy eating as a priority in their population health catchment plans to support improved access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food, and implementation of the Healthy Choices policy framework. Loddon Mallee PHU is working with partners to develop a food system framework and support cross sector partnership action to address local issues, including food insecurity. Western PHU is collecting data through partners to get a better understanding of the root causes of food insecurity in their catchment and monitor progress towards reducing it.

Municipal public health and wellbeing planning

Local governments are required under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* (Vic) to develop plans to guide health and wellbeing action within the municipality. The 79 local governments in Victoria are guided by the directions set in the Victorian public health and wellbeing plan. Many councils have adopted actions in their municipal plans that reference food security and related actions such as supporting community kitchens and food hubs (Nillumbik), mapping food access across their local government area (Melton) and reducing food waste (Darebin). Many councils have also adopted standalone food policies or food system policies including Ballarat, Banyule, Cardinia, Greater Bendigo, Melbourne and Merri-bek.

Healthy Eating Advisory Service

The Department of Health funds the Healthy Eating Advisory Service (HEAS), delivered by Nutrition Australia. HEAS supports settings (including early childhood services, schools, sport and recreation clubs, health services, workplaces) to increase access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food in their settings, via menus, canteens, cafes, vending machines and catering. HEAS ensure culturally appropriate choices are available through menu planning resources and training, culturally diverse recipes, and working with caterers that supply culturally diverse menus.

HEAS supports hospitals and health services meet the Healthy Choices policy directive that directs public hospitals and health services to ensure that healthier food and drinks are sold, provided and promoted at their facilities. It applies to in-house managed retail food outlets, vending machines, staff/event catering, and items purchased by staff and visitors from patient/resident menus within public health services. HEAS supports long day care centres meet mandatory menu planning guidelines to ensure that menus provide at least 50 per cent of the nutritional requirements of children attending care. This is particularly important for children within families experiencing food insecurity, that might have less opportunity to have their nutritional needs met outside of care/at home.

Healthy Loddon Campaspe

The Department of Health has also funded and supported the Healthy Loddon Campaspe (HLC) initiative since 2018, in collaboration with other Victorian Government departments. Through this initiative, food security was identified as a significant challenge, particularly for vulnerable community members. The HLC initiative recently released the Flourish Regional Food Systems Strategy in June 2024 with a vision of a vibrant and sustainable regional food system that puts community and Country at its heart to promote health, equity, and resilience for all.

Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth)

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) was established as an independent statutory authority under the *Tobacco Act 1987 (Vic)*. VicHealth receives core funding from the Department of Health to deliver its health promotion objectives, and has a remit to undertake innovative, evidence-informed work to fulfil its vision for a healthier, fairer Victoria, including providing policy advice.

VicHealth has a significant strategic and investment focus on food systems,⁴⁰ defined as the web of actors and activities influencing the access, availability, affordability of health, sustainable, culturally appropriate food. VicHealth is a key implementer of the action identified within the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023-2027 to “promote healthy and more equitable, sustainable food systems across Victoria, with a focus on priority populations”.

VicHealth’s most recent major investment related to food security is a \$4.4 million investment over 3 years in seven Future Healthy Food Hubs (Food Hubs)⁴¹, supporting grassroots or community-led organisations in regional Victoria and outer metropolitan metro growth corridors to build on local relationships, infrastructure and services to create spaces where community members can buy affordable, local and culturally appropriate food.

Aims of the Future Healthy Food Hubs investment include:

- Increasing access to locally sourced, healthy, culturally appropriate food for more Victorians, particularly those who experience greater barriers to accessing these types of food (including First Nations and multicultural communities)
- Increasing opportunities for young people, with diverse lived experience, to engage and advocate for better local food systems, and find meaningful training and employment in the sector
- Supporting local food producers and enterprises and increasing opportunities for communities to celebrate and showcase food cultures and literacies, supporting intergenerational connection and knowledge sharing.

Most Future Healthy Food Hubs (**Figure 6** below) 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 community-led strategies to support equitable food access.

⁴⁰ VicHealth 2023-2033 Strategy, <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/resources/vichealth-strategies/strategy-2023-2033>

⁴¹ VicHealth Future Healthy Food Hubs, <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/programs-projects/our-future-healthy-food-hubs-partners>

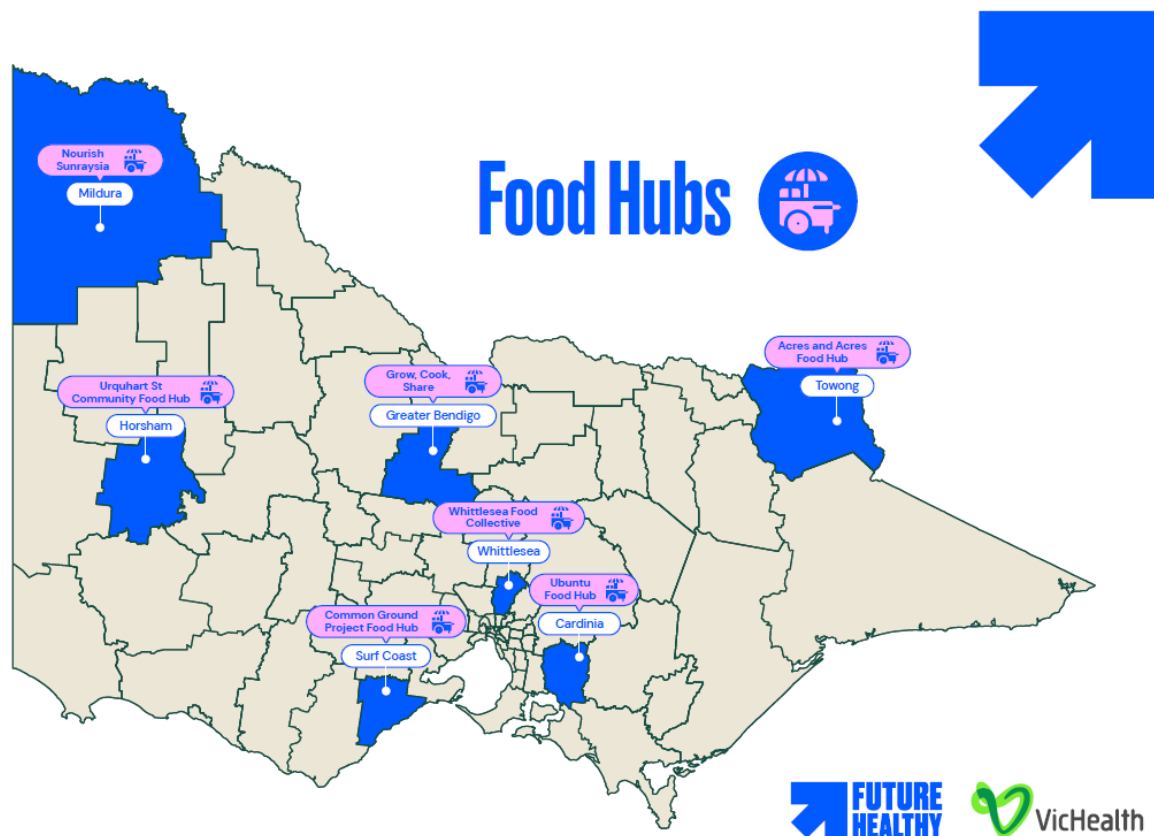


Figure 6 VicHealth Future Healthy Food Hub locations

In collaboration with Deakin University, VicHealth is currently undertaking an evaluation of the Food Hubs which will cover five outcome categories (based on prior reports and guided by global evidence regarding food systems impacts of food hubs): economic development and viability, ecological sustainability, access to and demand for healthy local food, personal and community wellbeing, and agency and re-localisation of power.

In addition, 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 health⁴². 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.

⁴² VicHealth Growing Healthy Communities Grants, <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/funding/growing-healthy-communities-grants>

Food relief in emergency contexts

It is important to note the distinction between non-emergency community food assistance and security, which has so far been outlined in this submission, and emergency food relief.

While this submission is not focused on emergency food relief, a brief outline is provided below of key recent initiatives in this space, noting the likelihood of more regular demand for this kind of support given the impacts of climate change.

People who have experienced natural emergencies are significantly more vulnerable in the longer term to ongoing food insecurity. The financial impacts of emergencies on individuals and community are significant and last for many years, due to underinsurance, the increased costs of rebuilding and the impact of the emergency on the local economy and employment, which can have profound and lasting impacts on household budgets.

State Emergency Management Plan

The Victorian State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) outlines the arrangements for emergencies including emergency food relief. Under the SEMP, the Australian Red Cross is the lead agency responsible for the coordination and delivery of emergency food relief with support from supporting agencies, Foodbank Victoria, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions and the Salvation Army. The Australian Red Cross has coordinated food relief during all recent major emergencies in Victoria.

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency relief packages were provided to Victorians with no access to food and essential supplies. The program supported people in mandatory self-isolation, who had little or no food, and no network of family and friends to support them. Each eligible household received a two-week supply of essential goods.

Personal Hardship Assistance Program

The Personal Hardship Assistance Program is activated by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing following natural emergency events including:

- bushfire
- flood
- storm and storm surge
- landslide
- earthquake
- meteorite strike
- tornado
- tsunamis

The program provides two forms of emergency financial assistance:

- (i) Emergency Relief Assistance to meet the immediate relief needs of families/individuals.
- (ii) Emergency Re-establishment Assistance to help families/individuals re-establish a principal place of residence.

People are eligible for emergency relief assistance if meeting immediate needs has caused (or is likely to cause) hardship for an individual or family affected by an emergency. Immediate needs include accessing accommodation and transport (to leave the affected area) and purchasing essential items (such as toiletries, medications, clothing, food, or water).

COVID-19 Priority Response to Multicultural Communities program

The COVID-19 pandemic involved a surge response to meet increased demand for material and food relief. As part of this broader response, particular initiatives were delivered to support priority cohorts experiencing a disproportionate impact from the pandemic.

For example, the Priority Response to Multicultural Communities grant program addressed critical service gaps for Victoria's multicultural and faith communities and ensured all Victorians were provided with equitable access to support during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program was delivered through the Multicultural Affairs portfolio.

The Victorian Government worked alongside over 300 community organisations, community leaders and the Victorian Multicultural Commission to deliver food relief support across 70 Local Government Areas in Victoria. This allowed individuals to remain in isolation when required and supported individuals and their families who had their income reduced by the pandemic.

Conclusion

In summary, demand for food relief is rising in Victoria, likely driven by current cost-of-living pressures. Some cohorts and geographic areas experience greater challenges in accessing quality, culturally appropriate food. Food relief can either be delivered in an emergency response context, or more generally to support individuals and families experiencing chronic or periodic food shortages, the latter being the focus of this submission.

The Victorian Government's food relief investment and activities have been delivered through a range of portfolios and departments, including Health, Emergency Management, Multicultural Affairs and Education, with the portfolio lead for community food relief sitting with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and the Minister for Carers and Volunteers.

Significant data-informed investments have been made to strengthen the food relief ecosystem in Victoria, acknowledging the key roles of both statewide and regional food relief providers, and community and volunteer-led organisations.