Beyond Emergency Food: Responding to Food Insecurity and Homelessness
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Council to Homeless Persons

Jenny Smith  Chief Executive Officer
Kate Colvin  Manager — Policy and Communications
Ian Gough  Manager — Consumer Programs
Lynette Deakes  Office Manager
Noel Murray  Publications Coordinator, Parity Editor
Eddie Staltari and Catherine McGauran  Communications Officers
Angela Kyriakopoulos  HAS Coordinator
Cassandra Bowden  Peer Education and Support Program Team Leader
Trish Westmore  Capacity Building and Policy Officer
Leonie Kenny  Service Coordination Project Manager
Akke Halma  Bookkeeper

Address  2 Stanley Street Collingwood Melbourne VIC 3066
Phone  (03) 9415 6200
Fax  (03) 9419 7445
Email  parity@chp.org.au
Website  www.chp.org.au

Promotion of Conferences, Events and Publications

Organisations are invited to have their promotional flyers included in the monthly mailout of Parity. Rates: $90 National distribution, $70 Statewide distribution only.

Write for Parity!

Contributions to Parity are welcome. Each issue of Parity has a central focus or theme. However, prospective contributors should not feel restricted by this as Parity seeks to discuss the whole range of issues connected with homelessness and the provision of housing and services to people who are homeless. Where necessary, contributions will be edited. Where possible this will be done in consultation with the contributor.

Parity on the CHP Website

www.chp.org.au/services/parity-magazine/ Contributions can be sent by email to parity@chp.org.au in a Microsoft Word or rtf format. If this option is not possible, contributions can be faxed on (03) 9419 7445 or mailed to CHP.

Proposed 2016 Parity Publications Schedule

NB: Please note that this may be subject to change. Please check out the CHP website: www.chp.org.au for updates.

April:  The Future of Youth Homelessness

May:  The Royal Commission into Family Violence: Recommendations and Responses

June:  Outer Metropolitan and Growth Area Homelessness

July:  The Role of Community Development in Responding to Homelessness

August:  Children and Homelessness: Protecting the Most Vulnerable

September:  Indigenous Homelessness in Australia and New Zealand

October:  Sustaining a Home: New Directions in Housing Support

November:  Responding to Homelessness in NSW (TBC)

Artwork

The artwork for this edition was also provided by other participants in the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia. Home is Where My Heart is project and artists from the Jesus Social Services Artful Dodgers art program.

The views and opinions expressed in Parity are not necessarily those of CHP.

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Like homelessness, food insecurity and hunger are the direct consequence of poverty. People find themselves without a roof over their head and no food on the table when structural or economic factors intersect with personal issues. Structural problems like a labor market with increasingly insecure and poorly paid work and an inadequate social security safety net, intersect with the lack of low cost housing, and often, with personal crises in people’s lives, like relationship breakdown, unemployment, or physical or mental health issues.

As a sector we advocate for the structural changes that will end homelessness: adequate income support when it is needed as well as the suite of government policies that produce a pipeline of housing affordable to those on the lowest incomes; as well as the support services that people need to both access and keep that housing.

It is hard to accept, and yet the reality is, that our current policy settings allow a growing and ever widening gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in our affluent community. And while this is the case, our responses to food security have to continue to innovate and evolve.

Several of the contributors to this edition of Parity make reference to the April 2004 ‘One Meal to the Next’ Food Assistance and Food Insecurity edition. In the 12 years that have passed since that edition we have witnessed several changes in the complexion of both state and federal governments in Australia and quite a few different iterations of both national and state/territory homelessness policies and frameworks.

However despite these changes, food insecurity for people experiencing homelessness remains. Inevitably with increasing homelessness, and either no or unhelpful change to policy settings, food insecurity is an even bigger problem than it was in 2004.

This current edition Beyond Emergency Food: Responding to Food Insecurity and Homelessness showcases the changes in the approach to food insecurity in the last dozen years. The edition highlights many of the new and innovative programs and services that have developed.

The emergence of innovations like STREAT, Second Bite, The Right to Food Coalition and Café Meals, to name just a few, now work alongside long established emergency food responses like the Vinnies Soup Vans, Sacred Heart Mission, St Mary’s House of Welcome (here in Victoria) and the now national Foodbank organisation.

Many of these new initiatives propose changing the paradigm of food insecurity and the related response, and viewing for example, food insecurity through a rights-based framework that tackles the causes of food insecurity.

In addition to providers of innovative programs, this edition features several articles by people using, or who have used, food security programs. These authors send a clear message about the value attached to provision of quality food, providing material support where it is needed, but also alleviating the exclusion felt by those experiencing hunger. It is also clear the role meal programs play in supporting social inclusion, providing friendly environments and connection at a time in people’s lives when they are often isolated and alone.

This edition of Parity provides the opportunity to appreciate these emergency food programs and the work and commitment of the hundreds of volunteers and other service workers that make them possible. It also challenges us to consider afresh the injustice of homelessness and hunger, and how we can eradicate them in our community.

Acknowledgements

CHP would like to thank and acknowledge all the edition sponsors and likewise, all those involved in the development and preparation of this edition of Parity.

Our special thanks go to St Vincent de Paul, the major sponsor of this edition and in particular to Livia Carusi and Danusia Kuska for their work in getting the edition off the ground. Our thanks as well to other edition sponsors, cohealth, the Red Cross, St Mary’s House of Welcome, Sacred Heart Mission, the Sydney Food Fairness Alliance and the Right To Food Coalition.

Finally, this edition would not have been possible without the work and input of Rebecca Lindberg at all stages of its development and preparation.
Introduction

The Australian Food Security Research Collaboration:
Rebecca Lindberg, The Australian Health Policy Collaboration, Victoria University,
Sue Kleve and Liza Barbour, School of Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health
Sciences, Monash University,
Sue Booth, School of Health Sciences, Flinders University and
Danielle Gallegos, School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Queensland University of Technology

‘My food budget has disappeared.
My son’s health is affected.
Cheap food, carbohydrates.
You get fat.
No vegetables in nearly three weeks’
— Kate Connelly.

A roof over your head and food in
your stomach are two fundamental
human rights. In a country like
Australia, where food appears
abundant and there is a high standard
of living, we may assume that these
rights are met for all. Tragically this is
not the case. Conservative estimates
suggest four per cent of Australian
households (approximately 884,000)
experience food insecurity and over
105,000 people in Australia are
homeless.

This special edition of Parity is
dedicated to exploring the lived
experience of food insecurity and
discussing a range of initiatives that
have been created to alleviate and
prevent food insecurity. We will briefly
introduce the edition by: discussing
the cycle of homelessness, food
insecurity and poor health to
demonstrate the acute need for
improved policy and practice; and
reflect upon the past decade and the
next, in regards to the pursuit of food
security for all.

The Cycle of Homelessness,
Food Insecurity and Poor
Health

Food insecurity, much like
homelessness, is a symptom of
poverty and social exclusion.
It usually manifests when a personal,
health or financial crisis occurs.
Those who are experiencing
homelessness, in all its forms,
including those with insecure housing
tenure, ‘couch surfers’, staying in
shelters or sleeping rough, may be
forced to acquire, prepare and
consume food via means that are not
considered socially or culturally
acceptable.

Individuals experiencing food
insecurity describe a range of coping
strategies such as reducing meal sizes,
adults foregoing their food for
children, purchasing cheap foods of
poor nutritional value, relying
long-term on charitable food services
or employing unorthodox food
acquisition such as ‘dumpster diving’,
begging or theft. Insecure housing
and changes to social security benefits
have been identified as the primary
triggers for the uptake of food relief.1

Among food insecure households
with children, the harmful health
consequences include higher risks of
some birth defects, iron deficiency
anaemia in children and higher
probability of behavioural and
developmental problems during
childhood.2,3,4 Among food insecure
adults, the consequences include
increased risk of being overweight, nutrient inadequacies, mental health problems and stress.\textsuperscript{5,6,7} Food insecure adults can also have higher levels of risk factors for cardiovascular diseases and diabetes.\textsuperscript{8,9} Older people who experience food insecurity have lower self-reported wellbeing.\textsuperscript{10} People in Australia experiencing homelessness have compromised nutrition and feel stressed and anxious about not having enough to eat.\textsuperscript{11} While national costs have not been calculated, in Tasmania the costs to their healthcare system resulting from food insecurity have been conservatively estimated at $60 million per year.\textsuperscript{12}

Food insecurity is both a by-product of, and can be a precursor to, homelessness, poverty and social exclusion. There is a strong case for action on food insecurity in Australia and the need for comprehensive policy and informed and inter-sectorial practice is paramount.

More than Ten Years On

In 2004 Parity published an edition on food insecurity and homelessness. Since then, our assessment of action and progress is as follows:

- The evidence has grown helping us to understand the underlying causes and consequences of food insecurity. We have more accessible national data on the costs of a healthy food basket, the prevalence of homelessness and food insecurity by household. At the community level, we are starting to see a picture emerge on the use of food relief services and food insecurity measured by two states and some local government areas. At the same time, this valuable data is collected irregularly and without a comprehensive national collation and reporting. Furthermore, people experiencing homelessness are likely excluded.
- The capacity of case managers, volunteers and community cooks that are the frontline workforce for emergency food relief is increasing. For example, Red Cross training program, a community of practice website, and SecondBite’s Fresh NED program are available to staff and volunteers (described on pages 7 and 42). However, the burden on these staff is becoming untenable as demand for services increases without increases in funding.
- The term ‘food insecurity’ has advanced beyond misinterpretations of ‘food safety’. This term is now more mainstream amongst workers and researchers, providing a common language and framework to help respond to the nutritional needs of people experiencing homelessness and poverty, alongside their other needs. Importantly the term should not be applied too narrowly — food insecurity has ramifications for nutrition and health, but the optimal long-term solutions are not necessarily ‘food’ solutions, they are housing, health, and poverty reduction strategies.
- The debate has shifted from one of food poverty and charity to one demanding food as a fundamental human right. This underpins the emergence of food justice groups such as the Right to Food Coalition and Community Food Hubs, and social enterprises like Streat.
- While it is difficult to estimate the number of community food programs that were operating 2004, today there are approximately 3,000 to 4,000 frontline pantries, kitchens and emergency food relief providers, highlighting and incredible volume of community willingness to tackle this issue. Furthermore, a link between these services has been made nationwide through the work of Australian Council of Social Services, the askizzy.com app and the national food rescue/bank services.
- However, the charitable food sector was not designed to deal with regular and persistent requests for emergency food relief. While the work is admirable it signals the failure of our system to adequately address the underlying causes of food insecurity. It has become the major response from government for both short-term and long-term...
food insecurity — and for many households it has become an adaptive strategy. To truly ameliorate food insecurity, the Federal Government must take urgent steps to implement poverty reduction measures such as indexed social security payments, stable full-time employment opportunities and affordable housing.13

Our Hope for Ten Years in the Future

If the next food insecurity edition of Parity occurs in ten years, we would like to report that all of the following has occurred. Our experience suggests, however, that some are achievable and others are aspirational hopes for the next 10 years:

Achievable

• More comprehensive and sophisticated methods to quantify the number of people experiencing food insecurity and other drivers of homelessness and poverty.
• Comprehensive regular monitoring through a national health survey of this issue nationally, and specialised monitoring for at risk-groups, such as people affected by homelessness. This would allow us to track progress and improve accountability for everyone’s right to food, health and shelter.
• Analysis of the national social and economic cost of food insecurity in order to galvanise political action with fiscal arguments.
• Public debate around levels of domestic hunger.
• A responsive charitable food sector, which is supported by adequate funding and training, enabling frontline services to provide nutritious, dignified and inclusive emergency food relief. Along with a charitable food sector that has the capacity, knowledge and skills to support and advocate for an end to food poverty

Aspirational

• Australia fulfils the obligation to ensure every person in Australia to achieves the human right to food. Rights based approaches to food insecurity offer an alternative view but progress on the realisation of food as a human right is likely to be slow. Rights frameworks contribute to re-framing the debate and widening the public discourse (for example, the involvement of those in the legal fraternity).
• Shift the framing of food insecurity responses as charity to being about human rights. This may be realised through an Australian Charter of Rights.
• Index living wages and Centrelink payments to the Consumer Price Index to enable the purchase of healthy food.
• National policy leadership on poverty reduction and food and nutrition security. This will include population level and specialised support for marginalised groups. This will be achieved by a Ministerial portfolio within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, similar to the Minister for Social Inclusion.
• Community voices and engagement helping to co-design workable solutions across non-profits, government and business, emulating food rights projects in the United States of America.

In conclusion, significant work lies ahead, particularly if these aspirational hopes are to be achieved. The Council to Homeless Persons have expertly prepared this special edition on food insecurity at a time where there is pressure for political reform, globally and locally, to better meet the needs of people affected by homelessness, hardship and hunger. In this edition of Parity you will have the chance to read about the perspectives of the people who use emergency food relief and discover their ideas for improvements to service and policy. On pages 12 and 13, there is a unique analysis on Australia’s commitment to the right to food as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Insights from the charitable food sector will be shared, via contributions from food banks, soup kitchens and community chefs and international advocates will impart their experience from abroad. We hope that for those new to this area, this edition will be a spring board into action, and for those who have experienced food insecurity or worked alongside those who have, we envisage lessons shared, courage renewed and a clearer path forward to bring about solutions beyond emergency food.

Endnotes

5. Burns C 2004, A review of the literature describing the link between poverty, food insecurity and obesity with specific reference to Australia, Deakin University, Melbourne.
Chapter 1: Food Insecurity and Homelessness in Context

A Slippery Slope: The Social Gradient of Food Insecurity and Healthy Eating in Australia

Holley Jones, Senior Project Officer and Kerry McGrath, Director, Community Programs, Australian Red Cross

Australian Red Cross believes that easy access to affordable healthy food is a fundamental need and a human right.

‘While it is proper to recognise and laud the success of those that work to alleviate food insecurity, it is also only proper to ask how it is possible for the system and structure of inequality that produces this need to have become an accepted part of our social landscape’

— CHP editorial, 2004

In the 2004 edition of Parity the then CEO of the Council to Homeless Persons closed the editorial with a powerful statement about the casual acceptance of inequality-driven food insecurity in a country as wealthy as Australia.

This paper will reflect briefly on the efforts made to alleviate food insecurity since Parity first focussed on food security 12 years ago. We consider the fundamental issue of inequality that enables food insecurity to persist, noting the related social gradient in diet-related disease. This analysis of the causes of food insecurity has resulted in a promising shift towards considering the social determinants of healthy eating and food access from research and public health institutions as well as organisations such as Red Cross. This is driving a more comprehensive response and providing a promising direction for food and nutrition policy to make a lasting impact on the right to good food for everyone.

Recognising Achievements that Address Food Insecurity
Since Parity last focused on this pertinent and pervasive issue, a raft of activities to combat food insecurity have taken place at local, state and national levels. Examples include the successful local food access work led through the Victorian Local Government Association, the state-wide leadership shown through the Food for all Tasmanians Strategy and the rapid development and expansion of the food rescue and distribution movements such as Second Bite, Oz Harvest and Foodbank. National events have brought thought leaders and policy makers together, including the Public Health Association’s Future for Food, the Right to Food Coalition’s inaugural Putting Food on the Table Forum, the launch of Australia’s Charitable Food Sector community of practice and in February this year the focus of the Nutrition and Dietetics Journal on food insecurity.

Our Work in Food Security at Australian Red Cross
Australian Red Cross has been refining and expanding food security programs while piloting new ideas, working closely with those directly affected to shape our responses. We work with isolated older people, people experiencing homelessness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities, as well as newly arrived migrants and refugees.

With our partners at Sanitarium, we have helped serve over six million healthy breakfasts to school children across the country and are trialling student leadership models and integrating food literacy sessions for students and parents into the primary school community. With the help of ALDI Australia, we’re working on strengthening and expanding our FoodREDi™ food literacy program. This provides people at risk of food insecurity the skills to choose, prepare and cook healthy meals, as well as budgeting techniques and ways to maintain health. Importantly, we’re also using our experience in local
communities to inform our advocacy work in food security and partnering with key institutions to shape the future of food policy.

Getting to the Determinants of Food Insecurity
These program examples are only a small portion of what individuals, communities and organisations are doing to alleviate food insecurity and all efforts are commendable in their diverse approaches to addressing this multifactorial issue. These combined efforts have built momentum and capacity for systemic issues which lead people to access emergency food relief, revert to desperate measures to obtain food and homelessness across Australia where their next meal may come from, and many more compromising their food choices, using emergency relief, relying on friends and family for help, eating less, eating poorer quality food or eating the same basic foods repeatedly to keep hunger at bay.

Despite the diverse and committed efforts of so many, the underlying causes of food insecurity including low income, social isolation, inadequate housing, poor mental health and food access barriers persist. Many of the program responses are unable to touch on the underlying systemic issues where they need to access emergency food relief, revert to desperate measures to obtain food or go hungry. At the same time, we see a growing incidence of diet related diseases including type-two diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and obesity.

Food Insecurity and Diet-related Diseases Have the Same Root Causes: They are Socially Determined
One concept heralding hope is the growing acceptance of the social determinants of health approach. That is, recognition that the conditions in which people are born, grow, learn, live, work and age directly impact their health status and longevity. Accumulated lifetime experiences with food impacted by stress, addiction, homelessness, housing, geographic location, transport, unemployment, mental health, early childhood experiences and working conditions determines that people who are poorer live shorter, less healthy lives. This is unfair and unacceptable. If we consider how many of these social issues affect Australians experiencing long-term homelessness, the compounded disadvantage and impact on health and life circumstance is apparent. It is little wonder that it is difficult but critical to positively impact on an issue as complex as food insecurity.

Yet, we still have hundreds of thousands of Australians wondering where their next meal may come from, and many more compromising their food choices, using emergency relief, relying on friends and family for help, eating less, eating poorer quality food or eating the same basic foods repeatedly to keep hunger at bay.

Despite the diverse and committed efforts of so many, the underlying causes of food insecurity including low income, social isolation, inadequate housing, poor mental health and food access barriers persist. Many of the program responses are unable to touch on the underlying systemic issues where they need to access emergency food relief, revert to desperate measures to obtain food or go hungry. At the same time, we see a growing incidence of diet related diseases including type-two diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and obesity.

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We know that in Australia, people living in the most advantaged areas with higher incomes are more likely to eat a healthy balanced diet, be within a healthy weight range and have better health outcomes and
live longer. Conversely, and unjustly, the First Australians, minority cultural groups, people living with disability and those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods on low incomes are more likely to be food insecure, more likely to be overweight, more likely to develop type-two diabetes and more likely to die from chronic non-communicable diseases. The rate of obesity has been shown to be 20 to 40 per cent higher in food insecure individuals and people with the poorest social, educational and economic resources are at the greatest risk of obesity.

In addition to the personal and societal cost of long-term poor health and premature death, the health outcomes of these come at a significant cost to the country. In 2008, the total direct and indirect cost due to overweight and obesity alone was estimated to be $58.2 billion. Health spending as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product is estimated to increase by 78 per cent by 2050, in part due to the expected rise in diet-related chronic disease.

The Burden of Disease Due to Diet
Poor diet has overtaken tobacco as the leading cause of Australia’s burden of disease, yet this is entirely preventable. The disease burden is predominantly due to Australians eating too much salty, sugary and fatty foods and too little nutrient-dense whole foods like fruits, vegetables and wholegrain cereals. The burden falls heavily on those who are least able to manage or afford it.

The answer is not just in providing more emergency food relief or more breakfast clubs. Our food system is broken, and our food environment presents a major challenge for people to eat well. To impact on the incidence of food insecurity a holistic, cross sector approach is essential, including addressing the issue of homelessness and its impacts through increasing the provision of affordable housing options.

A social determinants of health approach suggests we cannot individualise such a long-term and complex issue with individualistic approaches alone, instead there is a need to change environments to enable people to lead healthier lives through healthier social conditions and easy access to healthy food. Aggressive marketing of low cost processed food, social norms, healthy food availability, density of fast food outlets, food price, food storage and preparation facilities all drive poor health outcomes for people in times of vulnerability.

Policy Levers Demonstrate Where and How to Act to Reduce Inequities
The research and policy work led by the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health has influenced the recommendations from the Preventative Health Taskforce, VicHealth’s Fair Foundations Framework, the INFORMAS approach and The World Cancer Research Fund’s NOURISHING Framework, all of which are notable examples providing possible actions focussed on the creation of healthier food environments. Underpinned by the social determinants of health approach, these provide evidence-based options for effective interventions suggesting leverage points for action that may simultaneously address some of the social and health related causes and consequences of food insecurity. These policy options could be widely adopted in an Australian food and nutrition policy to address food insecurity and the resultant social and health consequences.

Momentum for a Comprehensive National Food and Nutrition Policy
Capitalising on the current momentum of the Right to Food movement and demonstrating leadership among developed nations would provide a welcome change to the health and social landscape of our nation. A comprehensive national food and nutrition policy would:

- incentivise healthy food choices through a mix of taxes and/or subsidies
- regulate retail planning to restrict the density and proximity of fast food outlets while making access to healthy food easier
- measure and publically report on food insecurity indicators
- regulate unhealthy food marketing.

This policy would create pathways to healthy and affordable food choices for people who are homeless and others on the lowest incomes. It would reduce chronic disease and support environmentally sustainable food choices ensuring future food security for all. Healthy public policies are an important step in changing the social landscape and making easy access to affordable healthy food a reality for all.

Endnotes
2. ibid
3. Burns C 2004, A Review of the literature describing the link between poverty, food insecurity and obesity with specific reference to Australia, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.
7. National Health and Medical Research Centre 2013, Dietary Guidelines for Australians, Canberra.
An Interview with Rob Rees MBE DL

Rebecca Lindberg interviewed him for the special edition on food insecurity and homelessness …

The UK, like Australia, is one of the wealthiest places in the world. How many people are affected by homelessness and food insecurity there?

Well it depends on where you look and who you ask. And that is one of the problems, actually trying to grasp a true figure. It doesn’t help that governments have changed a number of policies that affect the criteria. The last five years have seen numbers of individuals and families in need of food parcels leap with 13 million people living in poverty and in excess of one million people using food banks. In England, where I have done most of my work, in 2014, 112,330 people made a homelessness application, a 26 per cent rise since 2009/10.¹ These figures are just the people we know about.

So what are the biggest drivers causing people to face this hardship in the UK?

The UK finally, thanks to Frank Field MP, gathered an all parliamentary group to look at the state of the nation and how to feed Britain. The main reasons that came up for those having to use food banks was the delay in any benefit payments and the extra burden this places upon an individual. Once you are in the cycle of deprivation and chaos and all that brings, trying to focus on priorities such as food, water and clothes becomes difficult to cope with.

The gradient of inequalities feels like it is just getting bigger. It’s important to say ‘feel’ and bring in an emotional state to such a global issue. Evidence can often contradict matters, but more and more communities will say that they are affected as pay has been frozen, tax credit systems changed and employability has become harder for those at risk.

I know of hard working families where parents will be going without food to provide for their children. Thirty per cent of teachers have said that they also have brought in food to give to their pupils and we have the dichotomy similar to the United States of the double burden of malnutrition and obesity. We also know that, while school is 190 days a year in the UK, it leaves a huge amount of holiday time where children go hungry.²

The UK minimum wage changes later this year which may well help, but it’s not necessarily a living wage as calculated by the Living Wage Foundation and supported by Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

What is making a difference to people in the UK?

We are finally starting to see many aspects of food poverty focus on the quality of what is provided. There is a movement away from calorie dense to the utilisation of fresher, natural and more wholesome ingredients. More sectors are working better to minimise their food waste issues and create good quality food rescue projects (where surplus edible food is donated by food business to charities). We don’t have the Good Samaritan law like Australia and this has made the utilisation of surplus food from the hospitality industry harder to manage.

School food in the UK has improved dramatically over recent years. ‘Let’s Get Cooking’ has over two million participants in 5,500 settings and is developing, amongst those taking part, a better food culture with a higher percentage eating healthier as a result and feeling confident to cook from scratch. Breakfast Clubs have improved their offer providing better choice and giving young people at risk a better start to the day.

Importantly the UK has now realised you can’t talk at or to. You have to really involve a community in developing its asset-based approach, seek out ownership and develop solutions. This may well take longer and has greater risks, but can bring fantastic sustainable results.
Can you tell our readers more about the ‘No Child Hungry’ campaign?

Well I don’t know about you, but I believe no child should go hungry. We also know in law it’s a humanitarian right and yet too many are doing just that — going hungry. We developed a project in Gloucestershire to address this. Gloucestershire is a rural county which to be honest has average problems in the health league table. Yet nearly 25 per cent of its children live in poverty. One in four are going hungry every day and 60 per cent of those actually had working parents. We rescued fresh ingredients to produce nutrition rich, tasty dishes that were served to children and families. Within time each community took on their own food surplus project and teams became trained in food preparation and budgeting, alongside volunteer meal crew teams. These communities defined their own solution within a suite of options for them. By doing it this way you break the cycle of the dependent system user and bring about empowerment, innovation and enterprise.

You arrived in Australia last year. From what you have seen so far, what do the UK and Australia have in common in terms of food insecurity and the response to food insecurity?

Australia has more people doing more things. The system here on food insecurity seems really strained and urgent action needs to take place to integrate the organisations better so that more people can be helped in an effective manner.

The common theme is a real desire by people and organisations to stop this modern humanitarian crisis in our society. Government will struggle to intervene in a joined up manner. It’s important that education, economy, health and others produce a cohesive agreement to tackle these issues. There is a real need for someone to lead on an agreed implementation plan.

What are you excited about here in Australia?

The scale of social enterprise here is awesome in comparison to anywhere I have seen, with a real philanthropic heart. Such social investments if used wisely with open and transparent governance could bring about a tipping point of change and positive difference that could halt the growing obesity crisis, reduce those needing emergency food relief and improve chances for the most vulnerable in society gaining meaningful employment.

Finally, after many years of working as a chef and food campaigner, what three pieces of advice do you have for people and services that are fighting against food insecurity across our nation?

1. Remember your core purpose, values and mission — don’t dare to mission creep.

2. Don’t give up on making the right things happen just because they are the harder things.

3. However much we don’t like it, if you can make the Minister of the moment look good then you are in with a chance of positive action.

Endnotes


The Right to Food Coalition: From Conference to Coalition

Liza Barbour, Lecturer, Public Health Nutrition, Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Monash University

The Right to Food (RTF) Coalition exists to improve the health and wellbeing of all Australians by working to ensure equitable access to nutritious food. Practitioners and researchers have linked together to form a coalition of effort. We have a united agenda — our vision sees everyone in Australia with the right to good food, no matter their income, age, address or race.

The Conference
In late 2013, in response to reports of rising demand for emergency food relief and observation of increasing problems with food insecurity, a number of agencies and organisations working in south west Sydney came together.

It was decided to hold a conference for practitioners, policy makers and communities to highlight the issue of food insecurity, discuss the underlying issues and to canvass solutions. An organising group was formed under the title Right to Food Coalition, and in October 2014 the conference Putting Food on the Table brought together over 200 delegates, many of whom travelled from interstate. The keynote speaker, Joel Berg from the New York Coalition against Hunger, also travelled to Melbourne, Canberra, Adelaide and Perth to speak at a series of additional events. More information and presentations from the RTF conference are available here: www.righttofood.org.au

What started as a local initiative continued to gather momentum. Many conference participants were keen to know if the RTF Coalition, originally set up to organise the conference, would continue. Participants were sent a post-conference survey seeking feedback about priority action areas, preferred structure of an ongoing coalition, and ideas for national and local organising.

There was broad support for the proposal to create a national RTF Coalition, with state and local chapters. Over 70 per cent of respondents were willing to meet with others at a state level to work on local priorities; 61 per cent were interested in advocacy.

The Coalition
During 2015, a structure was established whereby a National Right to Food Coalition comprising representatives from a number of state RTF ‘chapters’ meets via teleconference every couple of months. To date there are chapters in NSW, Victoria/Tasmania and South Australia. We also have individual participation from Queensland and Western Australia. The full terms of reference for the National Coalition can be viewed on the website.

The Right to Food Coalition has four key action areas:

1. Collaborate across Australia to support collective advocacy efforts to address the key determinants of nutritious food access

2. Promote collaboration across Australia’s food security workforce to maximise collective impact

3. Identify areas for policy-relevant research to enable evidence informed decision making and policy development; scrutinise public policy and identify areas for action

4. Equip partners to strengthen their advocacy in their own spheres

The Right to Food Coalition will be officially launched in April 2016. If you are interested in joining us to either contribute to an existing chapter, establishing a chapter in WA, NT, ACT or QLD or joining the National RTF group, please contact us at righttofoodcoalition@gmail.com

Keynote speakers from Putting Food on the Table
The Human Right to Food

Nick Rose, Sustain: The Australian Food Network, William Angliss, Rebecca Lindberg, The Australian Health Policy Collaboration, Victoria University and Martin Caraher, Centre for Food Policy, City University London

Introduction
The idea of universal human rights is a powerful one. Every person, wherever they are born and regardless of their social status, is entitled to the enjoyment of certain inalienable basic rights. Human rights are indivisible: the denial of one right affects the enjoyment of others; hence the intrinsic link between the basic rights to housing, food, and health.

These fundamental rights were for the first time enshrined in the historic Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), proclaimed in Paris on the 10th of December, 1948. Australia, largely due to the outstanding efforts of Dr. Herbert (Doc) Evatt, was one of eight nations involved in drafting the UDHR.

The UDHR is not legally binding. It sets out basic norms and standards to which all countries are expected to adhere. It has been followed by several international legal instruments that are legally binding; in particular, the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both explicitly name adequate food and housing as basic human rights. Article 11 of the ICESCR states that:

‘The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions’

In the modern global economy such rights are often seen as ‘barriers to trade’; and the assumption is that the food industry, via ‘normal market operations’, will provide affordable and adequate food for all. For some decades, this has been the philosophical and political position of Australian governments. However, the food industry’s role is to maximize profit and provide a service to customers, and herein lies a crucial distinction: consumer choice versus the rights of citizens.

The Role of Nation States
According to international law, all State parties to the ICESCR are obliged to ‘respect, protect and fulfill’ the rights which it establishes. While securing the full enjoyment of the universal right to food is understood...
to take place over time (the principle of ‘progressive realisation’), Article 11, Part 2, says that everyone within a State’s territory must be free from hunger now, and that a State violates this obligation unless it has insufficient resources to fulfill its duties.

The duty to respect the right to food is essentially a negative obligation: States must not do anything that would prevent citizens and residents from accessing food. An example of this is states creating deliberate starvation through blockades in a time of war — as is tragically occurring in Syria right now.

The duty to protect the right to food means that States must take measures to prevent third parties, including private businesses, from doing anything that would deprive individuals from accessing affordable, adequate and appropriate food on an on-going basis. This could include the development of a ‘food desert’ through so-called ‘land-banking’ whereby households are excluded from access to healthy food outlets.

Finally, the duty to fulfil is a positive obligation, which requires states to ‘establish political, economic and social systems that provide access to the guaranteed right for all members of society’. This includes ensuring the affordability and safety of culturally appropriate staple foods, the protection of resources for food production and the provision of emergency food relief. Food polices which link health and ecological-sustainability are seen as setting the international benchmark regarding the duty to fulfil the right to food.

Since 2002, the office of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has mapped out best practice for all countries on the legal and institutional steps to fully implement the right to food. Read together with the Food and Agriculture’s Organisation’s Voluntary Guidelines the key steps are as follows:

- incorporating the right to food in national constitutions
- passing enabling domestic legislation: a ‘national Right to Food framework law’
- identifying and targeting the hungry and the poor
- conducting a thorough assessment of existing policies, institutions and laws
- developing participatory ‘national strategies based upon the right to food’, such as national agriculture, food security and nutrition strategies
- designing and resourcing appropriate institutions and implementing actions of a participatory nature
- monitoring the implementation of the national strategies
- enforcing the right to food through judicial means where necessary.

As of 2011, 23 countries had explicitly incorporated the right to food in their Constitutions, and another 33 recognised the right to food implicitly as part of broader human rights guarantees. A further 19 had adopted or were drafting a framework law to implement the Constitutional right to food; several had adopted national food and nutrition strategies, and established institutions charged with their oversight. In some countries the right to food has been legally enforced through the courts, providing citizens an opportunity to hold their governments to account.

**Human Rights in Australia**

Australia is not amongst any of these countries. Australia, at the Federal level, does not have a Bill of Rights, or a Human Rights Act. As noted, Australian governments take the view that economic and social rights should be satisfied by individuals selling their labour in the marketplace, and buying access to food and housing. This is essentially a neoliberal model of rights and obligations, according to which basic necessities are regarded as commodities, and access to them can be achieved by a successfully performing economy.

Following the ‘golden era’ of post-war growth from 1950–1975, times have changed drastically; and increasing numbers of Australians are living precariously, either in or on the edge of both food insecurity and homelessness. Now there is a new group of food insecure: the working poor, those who are massively over mortgaged and who survive from pay check to pay check. From research we know that such groups cut down on healthy food in the family budget as it can be squeezed, unlike other fixed items of household expenditure.

In a wealthy country like Australia, this situation has structural roots in the ongoing dismantling of the welfare safety net, the increase in low-paid and precarious employment, and the associated steep rise in income poverty and income inequality. Fundamentally, as Silvasti and Riches conclude following their survey of the alarming rise in food insecurity in rich countries in the past 30 years: ‘...an end to hunger [and homelessness] requires living wages, adequate benefits and full employment’.

All countries must make periodic reports to the United Nations (UN) on their progress to meeting their human rights obligations. As regards to the right to food, Australia’s most recent report in 2006, contained a single brief paragraph on the development of *Eat Well Australia*, a public health nutrition plan. Meanwhile, non-government organisations have provided shadow reports to the UN detailing Australia’s government’s failure to tackle food insecurity and fulfil basic food rights.

A health education approach to structural problems within the food system ignores agriculture, processing, marketing and retail. A truly comprehensive food policy would address the rights of farmers as the primary producers of the nation’s food supply, and ensure that the food produced was linked to a national nutrition strategy. Yet both the 2013 National Food Plan (NFP) and the current Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper (ACWP) fail to make any such connections, focusing largely or entirely on increasing the production of food as commodities for profit and export.

**Improving Rights**

As a rich country that exports two-thirds of the food we produce, and will spend $1 trillion on military forces over the next two decades, the notion that we ‘don’t have the financial means’ to eradicate hunger and homelessness is absurd.

Arguments abound over food waste and the way that this can be used to feed the ‘hungry’, but within a rights
framework this ignores the issues of adequate, appropriate and healthy food; and citizens’ rights to access food in a dignified manner.  

The provision of food through charity and left-overs from a dysfunctional food system does not equate to fulfilling the right to food for all people in Australia. 

How we raise taxes, and how we spend them, as well as how we offer emergency relief, are questions of political will; and the resulting ‘solutions’, say a great deal about the nature of our basic values, the level of understanding about the devastating consequences of inequality in Australia, and our level of compassion as a people. 

The good news is that many conscientious individuals, organisations and institutions do take our obligations seriously, and are seeking to improve human rights in Australia. 

At the local governmental level, many Councils are taking the lead by the participatory development and implementation of holistic food system policies. Many of these explicitly acknowledge the human right to adequate food, and the Council’s responsibility to do what it can to guarantee this right. These activities build on years of grassroots work, which is now leading to the participatory development of multi-functional community food hubs, which can transform the model of food charity to one of empowerment and focus on systemic causes of disadvantage.

Non-government organisations, including the Council to Homeless Persons, have persistently raised awareness about welfare, social and health injustices, urged for accountability and brokered partnerships for improved services for vulnerable Australians. Human rights principles, such as participation and non-discrimination, does and should continue to influence this work. 

National networks such as the Right to Food Coalition and Sustain: The Australian Food Network, are bringing together research and practice partnerships to bring attention to this issue in a sustained way. Shadow reporting to the UN and inviting the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food to visit Australia, may offer an under-utilised opportunity to tackle homelessness and food insecurity. In doing this it is important to provide a voice and platform for marginalised and hidden groups. It is not enough for advocates to talk on their behalf. 

The human right to food, and the precedents for its successful implementation in dozens of countries around the world, is a powerful means by which to achieve the goal of a truly fair and just Australia, in which everyone is well housed and everyone enjoys nourishing food every day. 

It’s up to us to make this a reality. We can begin by reflecting human rights in how we deliver services, set policies and hold Australian governments to account. 

Endnotes 


To put ourselves out of business — the line I used repeatedly as a founding staff member of food rescue organisation SecondBite. I loved it, lived it, and fought for it. We should not be throwing away over $8 billion dollars’ worth of food every year and we certainly should not have people lining up for food relief in the lucky country.

It was this type of injustice, hunger amongst plenty, which lead me to take a role in the community food sector back in 2006. The sector was relatively small, the challenge was huge, and the potential for impact seemed obvious. I enjoyed this work and was humbled to work amongst business, community and government to tackle food waste and food insecurity for nigh on a decade.

As the organisation grew rapidly, so the problem we were charged with addressing seemed to as well. Seeing firsthand the multiple effects of rising food insecurity on our most vulnerable and the resultant challenges on the staff and volunteers working to improve it, coupled with the ever increasing demand for significant philanthropic investment, I began to wonder… are we heading in the right direction?

In mid-2015, in an attempt to answer that question, I went on a Churchill Fellowship to the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and Canada to see the impact food rescue and community food initiatives were having on addressing food security for vulnerable populations, and came back with some key lessons for Australia.

1. Charities are not the solution to food insecurity
The charitable sector across the developed world is bursting at the seams, and no amount of food banks or volunteer driven community goodwill seems to be addressing the problem of hunger.

All the available evidence from 30-plus years of formal food banking and food rescue across the UK, US and Canada tells us the solution to hunger does not lie in surplus food warehousing and redistribution.

Whilst the embodiment of compassion, the caring nature that just wants to put food on hungry plates, we need to ask what does the food future we want to live in look like, and what role, if any, does emergency food relief and the charitable food sector play. How do we, in a country that produces enough food to feed over 60 million people, adequately ensure that the third of that amount that is required to feed us all, is ending up on every person’s plate?

As the food banking sector of the US, Canada and the UK has grown into an industry, somewhat stratospherically, not dissimilar to the food banking sector here in Australia since 2005, the problems of food insecurity and hunger have risen concurrently. So if the goal is to ‘end hunger’, then clearly it is not working. If the goal is to redistribute surplus food, then we have a great success.

Some argue that food rescue organisations ‘that obtain nutritious food, can offer a practical way to make public health gains and change the culture of providing non-nutritious food in the emergency space’.¹ However, it has also been argued that food rescue may pose a threat to public health and client wellbeing and that the ‘sector inadvertently contributes to poorer outcomes for people in poverty by reducing their human right to food’.²

There is also the well versed critique of the nutritional quality of food banking and food rescue, with the major proportion of non-perishable, barcode laden and subsequently nutrient lacking foods. This view is summed up best by New York researcher Janet Poppendieck’s 1999 critique of the sector which certainly pulls no punches, and is as relevant today as it was then.

Despite this critical evidence over many years the emergency food sector is growing, quickly, in Australia. If the food warehouse and redistribution rescue sector is to play a role, it must be one focussed on collaboration, dignity and nutrition. The SecondBite Commitment to Nutritious Food Rescue is an example of a positive direction where organisational KPIs are focussed on what type of food is moved, not how much of it. When we as a community are relied on to make
Imagine if we had a commitment for regular reporting structures and comprehensive measures of household food security included in the ABS census or national health surveys in the same way homelessness was. We could then understand the problem in more detail, target our response more effectively, and have a policy platform from which to campaign for the hidden issue of hunger. The current out of mind, out of sight strategy must be altered if we are to see change on this issue.

4. Focus on poverty, not on hunger
Food alone will not end hunger, and it will certainly not end homelessness. Hunger and food insecurity are the direct result of poverty, empty wallets and empty stomachs. This statement may subsequently imply the simple way to address food insecurity is to simply address poverty. We know it is far more complex than that, but with money the driving factor in food choices, higher welfare payments, increased wages and employment opportunities will go a long way to redress the rising need.

In Washington the DC Central Kitchen, along with The Stop in Toronto and the indefatigable Joel Berg from Hunger Free America in New York C, all state that ‘food will not cure hunger’, a seemingly incongruous statement, yet one that was a consistent theme across the majority of organisations I visited. Nick Saul from Community Food Centres in Toronto, and good food pioneer, describes himself as an anti-poverty campaigner, not anti-hunger.

5. Collaboration
In a community sector fighting for the same food and for the same funders, collaboration is not often easy and too many times we are found knocking on the same doors with the same ask.

Both overseas and here in Australia a lack of collaboration is not just obvious but has diminished the potential impact across communities. If we all want to end hunger, fight food insecurity and reduce waste, then we must learn to work more cohesively. Drop the competition, leave the ego at the door and unite. Together we can be much stronger.

6. Provide opportunities for people to share their story
What is also evidently lacking in the policy campaigns, both here in Australia and overseas, is the absent voice of the end user, the people we exist to serve.

The sullen face of a well-lit child, picked and paid for from the world wide web of image misery, expelling the obvious effects of hunger, poverty and bad luck, may be a good strategic fundraising move by the marketing gurus of the social sector, as the repetitive use alludes to, but surely the real way to make change is for the people living the lives we want to improve having a real voice in the mainstream media, policy and advocacy debate. The least we can do is show their strength and resilience through positive images that truly reflect the hope and opportunity they embody.

When it comes to mealtime at the policy, strategy and development table, the people we exist to serve are lacking seats, and it seems the door to access the dining room is well and truly closed.

We can learn a lot from those who have gone before us in similar settings overseas. Are we able to work together more collaboratively as a sector, connect in a united voice with an evidence-based and lived experience informed strategy alongside the people we exist to serve, to improve food security for all Australians? Sounds good to me. I’m in.

Endnotes
Chapter 2: Consumer and Client Perspectives: The Experience of Food Insecurity

Six Mouths to Feed

Haley Price, Marketing and Communications Manager, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

This is Gill’s story. She receives assistance from the Vinnies Soup Van and wanted to share her story in the hope that people will understand why she is caught in the poverty cycle.

It’s Monday morning. Gill* is tearing around the front yard winding up the hose.

‘So sorry, I’ll just be a minute!’

This is her world — a world where every single minute counts. Gill is a single mother of six kids aged nine to 21 years and an expert at coping in varying waves of chaos.

‘I’ve spent some time in a refuge, which provided one bedroom for five children and no cot for my baby. I’d never do it again — I was really desperate,’ she says.

These days she lives in a three-bedroom home with her five boys and one girl, which she was lucky to secure through public housing 13 years ago. She’s been on the waiting list for a larger home for over ten years, with limited alternative options to explore.

‘Private renters don’t like people like me, with lots of kids. I’ve never had my own room — I still share with my daughter. I don’t know what it’s like to have my own space.’

But she says a lack of space is a small price to pay for keeping her kids.

‘I’ve never put my children in [government] care, I don’t believe in care, but it’s been very, very hard.’

She’s even opened her doors to others in need, her kids’ friends, often caught in the throes of the foster system or family conflict.

‘I haven’t been a foster parent, but I’ve had a lot of children come and go over the years — they used to eat and sleep at my house. I refuse to throw a kid out on the street just because they’re having problems with their family. Some of these kids were very young, early high school,’ she says.
During this time, the Vinnies Soup Van volunteers would often offer a hand up and her only avenue for feeding everyone under her roof.

‘I used to try to do it all on my own, but then the Soup Van came. We got extra sandwiches, which is what these kids were eating for dinner.’

With six young mouths to feed Gill has become extremely resourceful with how she provides food for her family. Hunting down grocery specials and vouchers has become a special skill and is part of her daily routine.

‘I usually shop at Coles and Safeway, but I also go to Aldi, the markets, or anywhere I can get a special. I don’t do big shops anymore, I get the basics, but even milk costs me an arm and a leg. I can go through six litres in less than two days in my household, but I can’t tell my kids not to drink milk or not to eat bread,’ she says.

Despite the cost, Gill ensures there is always something in the cupboard to eat.

‘We don’t have chocolate, chips or lollies. If the kids look in the cupboard or fridge there’s crackers, cheese, and fruit. The basics.’

Meal times usually include a hearty serve of filler food, purchased with whatever source of income or goodwill she can find week by week. Pancakes, eggs on toast and cheap cuts of meat are regulars on the menu.

‘If we eat meat it’s usually because I’ve got a voucher. I make a lot of spaghetti bolognaise and lasagne from mince. But things like roast chicken are very rare — it takes two or three chickens to feed my family,’ she says.

Kids are Gill’s life. She has very little contact with her own friends and family and often feels isolated within the community.

‘I have medical issues — I suffer from anxiety and depression. I’ve been on medication and have been hospitalised,’ she says.

It’s made the prospect of obtaining paid work problematic. She worked as an office administrator before she became a mother, but is now competing against people half her age who have greater flexibility with their time.

‘My skills mean nothing anymore — I don’t have any courses up my sleeve or qualifications. There’s not much out there for me,’ she says.

Even so, Gill is proud to be feeling stronger and determined to put her best foot forward.

‘I don’t have anything brand new. Everything is second hand, from the side of the road or donated — but you wouldn’t even know. We don’t wear holey clothes or holey shoes, I just won’t allow that,’ she says.

The Vinnies Soup Van still comes on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays to help her along too.

‘If I didn’t have the Soup Van, I’d be worse off than I am now.’

* The true name and identity of the person featured in this story have been suppressed for privacy and safety reasons.
I have said many times how ‘lucky’ I was in my homelessness — I was only in homeless crisis for seven months in 2011. I never had to sleep rough. I never had to sleep in a rooming house of any description (good, bad or horrific). The places I stayed were hygienic and I never felt my personal safety was at risk as a result of where I had to sleep. I was housed in transitional housing with a fairy Godmother support worker without ever filling in an application form and ended up in quality public housing. Retrospectively, it was a pretty easy journey with relatively minor trauma inflicted, compared with the horror stories I hear from my peers. While I have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, most of the trauma I associate with homelessness is pretty much under control. There is, however, one area that is an exception, and that is the relationship I have with food.

In 2011, when I experienced homelessness I didn’t know what I know now. I didn’t know about the food vans that operate. I didn’t know about food banks. I had no idea about services that provided meals. I didn’t know how to go about feeding myself without an income or magic Health Care Card. In all reality, even had I known, I probably still would not have gone to these services because I was living in a state of paranoia, and walking into a room of mostly men was not something I was comfortable doing in that state.

I had a period of about six weeks where my only sustenance was tea, coffee and a one dollar bag of Doritos that I managed to make last five days at a time. I was showing up to services with no fuel in my tank, yet expected to be clear thinking and rational. Nobody thought to ask when was the last time I ate — it made life almost impossible. I was attempting to make life decisions with no sugar in my blood and an incredibly light head. At the time, I didn’t know I had options because nobody told me. I didn’t like feeling hungry, yet there was nothing I could do about it. Somehow the messages between my stomach and brain stopped working. To this day that connection is still not back fully. By the time ‘Nostart’ kicked in I had lost all comprehension of the concept of eating. The first three nights I spent couch surfing left me bewildered when my friends handed me dinner, but at the end of my five weeks with them I was eating with them despite the hunger messages not coming through. I’d lost almost 30kgs by that point. Then I found services providing ‘food’ and things went from bad to worse.

To this day I still cannot comprehend what the services I used were thinking when it came to food provision. What we were served was not food. My first meal in the shelter was a dinner we called ‘curry surprise’ because we would all be surprised if we ever found out what it was. Then there was the meal we called ‘spewna mornay’, a meal that still traumatises those of us who had it slopped in front of us. That was the night I decided beggars could be choosers and a friend and I went to tasting night at the market.

I had to sign away so many rights to keep a roof over my head in that refuge. One of their very few obligations was to provide three nutritious meals a day and that was an obligation they did not live up to. By the time I left, food was not even a thought; I was over it.
hungry — I cannot eat it, and I am not the only one. I can go spark up a conversation with a peer about food that is currently being served and nine times out of ten will hear negative comments. This situation is not necessary.

This is Australia. We produce some of the best quality food in the world and we produce a lot of it, but it seems quality food is not for people experiencing homelessness; we have to survive on what is dished up to us and we are expected to be grateful. The thing I find ridiculous about it is that it is us and frontline workers who suffer. How can a person be expected to behave appropriately and be rational when their body is being fuelled by nothing or rubbish? Why do we get blamed for misbehaviour when we are not the ones who control our nutritional intake? Why should frontline workers have to put up with our behaviour caused by malnutrition?

I have advocated several times for ALL services to provide consumers with access to healthy food options in waiting rooms. Sometimes, we can be sitting waiting for hours and it may have been days since we have eaten. By providing us with something healthy to eat while we wait, consumers may have some sugar in their blood by the time they see a worker and may be slightly easier to deal with. I also advocate for all food to be recognisable and identifiable; if you would not put it in your mouth and swallow it — don’t give it to us. Provide women only spaces — we impose enough eating problems on ourselves, we don’t need any more excuses to develop eating disorders and having to sit defensively in a room full of men is not good for our eating habits.

Feeding us properly is not difficult; it just takes some thought. Eating disorders on the other hand are incredibly difficult. They are costly to the individual and to society. They are also one more problem that people who are homeless do not need to be concerning themselves with — we have enough going on. So please, ask your consumers when they last ate. If you operate a service that does not currently provide food, provide it, and if you operate a service that does serve food, engage peer support workers to speak to your consumers and find out whether you are doing as good a job as you think you are or whether you are causing bigger problems than already exist. If you find you are getting negative feedback, please fix it for all our sake. Anorexia is an awful daily struggle; don’t make your lives harder by setting up the conditions for us to develop it.
Consumer Voices

Responding to Food Insecurity and Homelessness

Consumer Voices is a regular feature in Parity. Articles are written by and with consumers to ensure they have a say about the issues that directly affect them.

The Peer Education and Support Program (PESP) is the consumer participation program at the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) in Victoria. PESP is a diverse group of people who have experienced homelessness who are trained and supported to undertake a range of activities to improve the response to homelessness, educate and raise awareness about homelessness and promote consumer input into homelessness policy and service design and delivery.

Introduction
All members of the PESP team have experienced issues with food insecurity. The group came together to discuss what those issues were, the context around the development of those issues, service responses to food insecurity and what they would like to see change in order to address food insecurity.

Personal Experiences of Food Insecurity

Trevor
Health issues, a death in the family and a disagreement with the landlord led Trevor to close his business and ‘go bush’. Trevor was homeless, surviving in the bush on $38 a fortnight over eight fortnights. Trevor survived by living off the land. He had no refrigeration, so had to eat anything he caught.

Karuna
Government changes to the Sole Parent Pension mean that when a child turns eight, the parent is moved to the Newstart payment. Through the Newstart benefit, single parents with one child receive only $21.45 more per week than single people without a dependent child on Newstart. This creates many challenges for Karuna who is a sole carer of a child with a disability, who is also living with her own disability. She does not receive child support as it became too difficult to collect, due to further risk of violence and abuse of an offender (assessed by Centrelink) and can only earn about $60 per week before her Newstart payment starts to get cut. Karuna lives in public housing, so if she earns any more her rent increases. These circumstances create unnecessary stress for Karuna and her child, making studying at university, working and raising her child very challenging at times. All of these factors result in a cycle of poverty for Karuna and her son. Fresh, healthy food costs more than junk food, putting extra strain on an already tight budget.

Suzanne
When Suzanne became homeless, she stayed in crisis accommodation, which was when food insecurity was at its worst for her. She was under a great deal of stress and would just eat anything. Suzanne resorted to eating frozen meals because they were cheap and the crisis centre offered them three days a week. John
Eight years ago John was working as a furniture removalist. When the truck motor blew up and he couldn’t afford to fix it, he became homeless and ended up living in it. Each morning John went to the city but could not access any assistance because he was out of his catchment area.

Jody
When Jody and her daughter went to stay in crisis accommodation, she found there were no cooking facilities and only a bar fridge. The effect of this was she had to shop daily for food. Jody suffers from a wide range of allergies, mental illness and physical disability, making daily shopping and access to appropriate food responses very difficult. Jody also had competing priorities with medical appointments. Frozen meals were the only option at times.

The Service Response
PESP went on to discuss the responses to food insecurity by services. The issues individual PESP members encountered in service provision related to the following themes.

Access
Food vouchers cannot be accessed regularly or as needed. Other barriers to access include prioritisation processes. Some PESP members discussed the difficulty they experienced accessing vouchers when not living in crisis accommodation. Some services required evidence of health issues from specialists, which requires appointments which cost money, making accessing food assistance extremely difficult.

At many services young people cannot access assistance when parents are earning a high income or without parental consent, which is problematic if the young person experiences violence in the home.
Several PESP members had experience of a food service not turning up when they were supposed to, which meant they were unable to access food at those times.

PESP also discussed the access to information and assistance regarding food services. Some people were not asked if they needed assistance with food when they were at intake and assessment, so they did not know about their options. Other people talked about finding out through others who were experiencing homelessness, which took some time. PESP members who were further out from the city said there were very few food services, which led to them coming to the city for access.

Every time consumers access a service they are required to tell their story. This can also be a barrier to access.

**Discrimination**

People who presented being accused of not needing the food services and being treated disrespectfully.

**Dietary and Health Issues**

People who have specific dietary needs because of health issues or those who have allergies find it difficult to find food services which meet their needs. Some services provide only unhealthy options; which clearly does not meet the dietary needs of anyone.

These issues result in stress, which inflames health issues.

**Cost**

Healthy food is more expensive, yet food vouchers are only for small amounts, such as $30 for a couple of months, which doesn’t go far, especially if you have a child.

One PESP member commented that he was not impressed with a meal service which charges people for a meal.

**Service Delivery**

Services require consumers to fit to them; they do not develop creative, appropriate solutions for people with a disability.

Food hampers were an option at some services but these are not helpful for people staying in accommodation without cooking facilities.

**Benefits**

Meal services can play an important role in social interaction, which people may not otherwise have. This was valued by some PESP members.

Several PESP members were very impressed with the food services and their response. One person particularly appreciated having somewhere to go for Xmas lunch and others pointed out the valuable role they play in social interaction for people experiencing homelessness, who may have limited social interaction otherwise.

Food services which rescue food leftover from markets and use it to cook vegan meals and provide fresh fruit and vegetables for people to take home with them were considered valuable and do not require consumers to tell their story, which is highly appreciated.

**Solutions**

PESP members provided their ideas for addressing the issue of food insecurity. They each came up with a range of ideas, which can again be arranged under themes.

**Access**

- increase meal services on weekends, nights and holidays
- increase rural access to food services
- provide active referrals to food services from intake and assessment
- provide more independent services, which are not linked to church or government
- at initial intake provide people with a list of services in the area
- increase funding for food vouchers and improve access to these for people who need them. Look into the barriers to access and work to address them, with input from consumers.

**Government Policy**

- do not force people onto a cashless welfare card
- services and government should be willing to look at the institutional problems which lead to food insecurity; tax people at the top of the income ladder before cutting back Centrelink benefits
- initiate a government inquiry into charges by utility companies
- government should address the high cost of living, especially the cost of housing
- increase job security.

**Conclusion**

Poverty, homelessness and food insecurity are closely connected. As suggested by PESP, if we are to address food insecurity we need to investigate the structural causes, the barriers to accessing a service response and an improvement in the types of services offered, where they are located and how they are delivered. If we are genuine in our intention to get it right, we must be working alongside people with a lived experience of food insecurity to intervene early and design appropriate responses.
What is the Meaning of Food for Young People Experiencing Homelessness?

Rowena Yamazaki, Community Nutritionist, Community Health Services, Denise Fry, Evaluation Officer, Community Health Services, Sydney Local Health District and Jessica Fielding, Policy Officer, Yfoundations

Yfoundations, the New South Wales peak agency supporting young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness advocates for the positive development of young people and promotes their rights. Access to food is a fundamental part of these rights. Yet in Australia, some young people, especially those who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, don’t have enough to eat.

According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, food insecurity is the term used to describe ‘limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or limited and uncertain ability to acquire food in socially acceptable ways’. Food insecurity in Australia occurs more frequently than most people think and is higher among young people. For example:

• Five per cent of the Australian population is estimated to be food insecure.³
• The prevalence is higher amongst certain groups including young people (15 per cent).⁴
• In 2013, 14 per cent of children in New South Wales went to school without breakfast.⁵
• Almost one in ten children will not eat for an entire day on a regular basis.⁶

For young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, the prevalence of food insecurity and risk of malnutrition is significantly higher. A recent study exploring food insecurity amongst young people engaged with Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in Sydney found 70 per cent were food insecure.⁷

Young people experiencing homelessness often struggled to find enough food to meet their daily nutritional requirements. They also endured the constant anxiety, hunger, stress and embarrassment and stigma associated with having to beg and steal for food. As one said:

‘Imagine waking up in the morning … and you have to go to the chapel [emergency food relief], where there are 4,000 other people in exactly the same position as you or worse … and you’re classified as one of those people’.⁸

To have food security is defined by the World Health Organisation as having access at all times to ‘sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life’.

The Yhunger project was developed in response to the needs described above. It is based in Sydney Local Health District’s Community Health Services and run in partnership with Yfoundations and a network of youth health services and health promotion services in Sydney. Yhunger aims to increase food security for young people, aged 12 to 25 who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness, by working with youth services that offer support and temporary housing to these young people.

The Yhunger project has developed practical resources, which help youth services to develop young people’s independent living skills in regard to cooking healthy and affordable food, and is running workshops with youth workers to introduce these resources and support their use. These one-day workshops use an interactive ‘train the trainer’ format and are based on the central tenant of ‘learning by doing’: cooking and eating together are important parts of the workshop. Other activities include opportunities for youth workers to reflect on how their policies and practices can lead to the provision of healthier food and drinks in their services and increase physical activity options.

The workshops have been made possible through a grant received by the Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation (Eldon and Anne Foote Trust Donor Advised Program).

The Yhunger workshop gives participants an opportunity to ‘unpack’ the Yhunger Living Skills Kit. The Kit comes in a pizza box, and contains Tabletalk (a manual of activities for youth workers to run with young people), Brainfood (a series of 32 associated fact sheets for young people), and two Yhunger cookbooks. The cookbooks are custom made for young people and contain simple nutritious recipes that cost between one dollar and four dollars a serve, and can be prepared in two, four or six serves, depending on a young person’s living situation.

The revised Yhunger Kit was informed by our research in 2010–11 across four local government areas in the Inner West and South Western Sydney. The study involved a needs assessment, which included interviews with 16 youth service managers and 50 young people and nine focus groups. Extensive pilot testing of activities and recipes with youth services were also done. The cookbooks can be downloaded for free at www.healthykids.nsw.gov.au/campaigns-programs/yhunger/yhunger-cookbooks.aspx but you need to attend a workshop to receive the whole Yhunger Kit.

Lunch at the Yhunger workshop is self-catered: participants work together to cook some of the recipes from the Yhunger cookbooks. This is a popular part of the day, when youth workers discuss their work and solve
problems together in the kitchen and over the lunch table. This experience confirms that cooking and eating together creates bonds.

A similar process takes place when youth workers shop, cook or eat alongside a young person, despite the chaos a young person may be experiencing in their life. Developing ‘food literacy’, that is the collection of knowledge, skills and actions that enable people to access sufficient and healthy food, includes being able to join in and eat in a social way. Sitting down and eating at the table together is a valuable and sometimes new experience for young people.

Another poignant moment of the workshop is when the Hunger Scale game is played. Participants are asked to stand on a scale of ‘starving’ to ‘stuffed’ at different stages of the day, in response to their own hunger cues and appetites. This is a visual reminder that until a young person’s hunger and food insecurity are addressed (that is, they are offered something nourishing to eat or drink), it is unlikely other issues can be dealt with. Food is a basic need in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and essential to his concept of self-actualisation.15 Healthier eating is an important step for young people working toward this process.

We know that food insecurity can lead to obesity,11 underweight12 and that eating disorders such as hoarding, binge eating and food obsessions are more prevalent among young people experiencing homelessness.13 We also know that these disordered patterns can ease as food becomes more available.14

Food insecurity is directly linked to increased hospitalisations, poor physical health, vitamin deficiencies, developmental delays and poor academic performance, behavioural problems and poor mental health including anxiety, depression and attention deficient disorders.13 Longer-term, nutritional deficiencies are associated with low educational attainment, employability, poor oral health and other health issues including obesity, diabetes and heart disease.16,17

Given this, how much would young people’s physical and mental health improve if we were able to improve their food security?

The Yhunger workshops also discuss ways in which youth services’ policies and procedures can foster an environment and culture supportive of young people’s health and wellbeing. This can be seen as an approach to food and health based on rights: young people, especially the most vulnerable, are entitled to services that respect, protect and fulfil their human rights, including an adequate standard of living with greater food security. Human rights are interrelated and interdependent.14 This means social and welfare policies that affect young people should not take away other rights such as access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food or their civil liberties.

Youth participation in policy development, implementation and evaluation is critical. The shared understanding of young people’s lived experiences and their everyday reality can enrich policy processes. Youth services can take a rights-based approach to their work in many ways: by asking at intake and case meetings if young people are food insecure, by listening to them non-judgementally, by providing policies and services that address food insecurity, and by empowering young people to become agents in these changes. This rights based approach to addressing food insecurity is just and fair.

Increased food security amongst young people also brings social and emotional benefits. A 2011 evaluation of Foodbank’s WA School Breakfast Program of 271 participating schools found 92 per cent agreed that the program contributed positively to the social skills of students, and significantly increased social relations between students and staff.19 In Yhunger’s qualitative study exploring food insecurity in Sydney’s specialist youth homelessness services, social connectedness emerged as a common theme. Young people viewed food as a powerful tool to connect (and reconnect), develop relationships and bring people together.20

When young people’s growing bodies and minds are nourished, their ability to learn and engage in work increases. They are more likely to participate in positive activities including regular physical activity and connecting with others and less likely to engage in risky or criminal behaviours.21

**Conclusion**

The food security of our children and young people should be a national priority, as it is essential for their current health and future development and wellbeing. It is important to consider our duty of care for young people experiencing homelessness and who carry the added stress of food insecurity. We can help them learn to cook healthy and affordable food and to be able to eat with others: these important and relevant independent living skills are essential for physical and emotional health and social connectedness. In the process, young people experiencing homelessness teach us about resilience, strength and hope.

The extensive list of references used in this article can be found on the CHP website www.chp.org.au

Follow the link to the current edition of Parity.
A New Chapter

Haley Price, Marketing and Communications Manager, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

This is Ben’s story. He receives assistance from the Vinnies Soup Van and wanted to share his story to highlight the financial constraints of single parenting and housing insecurity.

It has been a pretty good year for Benjamin Bell. He recently secured a flat in West Footscray with his 10-year-old son, following an extended period of uncertainty with housing options as a single parent.

‘I’ve been in Footscray for two years. I was moving around, but I’ve finally got this permanent place,’ he says.

They previously lived in a rooming house with ten other people paying $600 per month and the only alternative was a room for $280 per week. It was a stressful living situation that precluded him from having a secure environment for his son.

‘I didn’t want to live with junkies. I was on Gumtree for months trying to find a house.’

They are finally settled now, but not without financial pressure.

‘My rent is $1,000 per month and my income is $1,800 per month in welfare payments, so I have $800 left for me and my boy to pay the gas, electricity, water, school payments, food, travel and everything else. Now you tell me how you can live on that?’

Ben has struggled to find work that is flexible enough to accommodate his needs as a single dad. He was previously an event manager at a major telecommunications company and even had his own business in industrial heating and air conditioning; but these days he is just making ends meet.

‘When I don’t have credit on my phone, I can’t report to Centrelink, so I get docked money. Sometimes I don’t even have enough money to get on the bus to go to Centrelink,’ he says.

‘I’m one of the lucky ones, but we do still struggle, bad.’

Food is one thing that is non-negotiable. They have never gone hungry, but they have gone without proper nutrition at times.

‘You end up just having to fill your stomach,’ he says.

These days, Ben cooks in the small kitchen in his flat and the Vinnies Soup Van stops by too, which is the only way he can afford to meet his other financial obligations.

‘We budget on having the Soup Vans. They often provide my son’s food for the night or lunch the next day,’ he says.

As he has moved around from house to house, Ben has not always been near one of the Soup Van’s regular nightly stops and he has often lost touch with available aid services.

In his new home, he is now embracing a more certain, settled chapter and the Vinnies Soup Van is helping to make his transition a little easier, by providing the basics.

‘No one wants to hear their child say they’re hungry. They might say they want something different, but you never want to hear that they’re hungry,’ he says.

Ben proudly says that he and his son have never gone hungry — but he knows of other parents who are watching their kids eat and sacrificing their own meals. To keep full, some things are simply off the menu.

‘We never eat red meat, that’s out of the question.’

Thankfully, Ben does not really miss these luxuries. He definitely feels frustrated with the welfare system and as a single dad, largely powerless to change his circumstances — but he is pretty content right now.

‘It’s waters off a ducks back now. It angers me at times, but I’m coming out the other side of it.’
Chapter 3:
Responding to Food Insecurity

Responding to Food Insecurity: The Role of Dietitians and the Challenges they Face

Katrina Doljanin, Dietitian cohealth

Introduction
Food security is the result of complex systems — it involves a diverse range of variables that influence the food that is available to the local community. It also involves a great many factors that determine how individuals interact with this food supply.

Dietitians working in community health have the unique opportunity to work with individuals and community to improve their access to food at an individual and systemic level. Through their work with individuals, dietitians can learn much about the particular factors that influence individuals’ food access issues and be able to identify which of those factors are modifiable. Dietitians also have the potential to understand the local food system, and where possible, have an influence on that food system.

This paper will explore the diverse ways that dietitians can work to influence the food security of individuals and also the challenges inherent to their role.

Recognising Food Insecurity
Food security is defined as:

‘The ability of individuals, households and communities to acquire food that is healthy, sustainable, affordable, appropriate and accessible.’

This would ideally mean that food is acquired without the need to use emergency relief — a challenge for anyone who is living in poverty. A person who is homeless or at risk of homelessness tends to experience absolute poverty and poverty is understood to be strongly correlated with food insecurity. People who are homeless are therefore particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.

Food security involves the complex interplay of many variables that work together. The Second Bite fact sheet on Food Security illustrates these variables, divided into three main categories: food availability, food access and food utilisation.

Food availability refers to what is physically available to the individual or community and can be influenced by the local food landscape — where are food outlets located, what type of food is available and how much does it cost?

Food access includes factors that influence how easily food can be acquired. Available funds to buy food, transport/mobility to get to food outlets and personal capacity to plan for shopping can all influence food access.

Food utilisation encompasses the way food is prepared once it has been accessed. Factors influencing food utilisation include the presence and suitability of storage and cooking facilities, food preparation skills and personal knowledge (including nutrition and food safety knowledge) as well as cultural considerations.

When assessing individual and community food security, it is important that all three pillars of food security are considered.

Addressing Food Insecurity
Improving Food Utilisation
Dietitians’ training equips them with competencies that enable assessment of an individual’s nutritional status. This assessment encompasses personal skills and social environment. Much of the work with individuals centers on improving their food utilisation — improving skills and knowledge to be able to prepare nutritious meals. This can include providing meal ideas on a budget, providing nutrition information and guidance regarding safe food practices. Dietitians are also able to make this information more widely available by developing and disseminating resources that enhance food utilisation. Examples of this include: developing recipe books designed for people with low literacy or that take into account that some people may not have a kitchen and pamphlets with low cost meal ideas.

Dietitians may also design and/or implement groups targeting improvement in food handling and cooking skills.

Figure 1. The pillars of food security — adapted from Second Bite Fact sheet, ‘Food Security: What is It?’
Improving Food Access

Working on food utilisation can be a frustrating process or at times completely useless if the individual cannot access the local food supply or if food availability is constrained in some way. For the homeless population, the cost of food is often too great for them to access enough food to meet healthy eating guidelines. This increases the likelihood that individuals become more reliant on emergency relief as a regular source of food.

Dietitians can have a role in improving access to the local food supply. A huge component of this is having an understanding of mainstream and alternative food systems. What is available to our local homeless population and how can we help them navigate all food systems to access a variety of food in a way that is acceptable? Once this is understood we can not only help people to navigate this system but make this information more widely known through capacity building measures. Examples of this include regularly updated brochures that show a wide variety of local venues that provide free or cheap meals as well as programs that offer the opportunity to grow food or prepare food in a communal setting.

Capacity building can also include the development of food security assessment tools where questions focusing on various components of food security are attached to locally available resources or services that can help. cohealth has such a tool embedded into their assessment form for the Yarra Café Meals Program. It assists referring workers to identify areas contributing to food insecurity and to offer a range of options to improve food security.

Social Café Meals Programs are programs where meals provided by a café or restaurant are subsidised, thereby enabling people to access café meals that were previously unaffordable. While people are on the Café Meals Program, they have improved food security but they also have the added benefit of a sense of social inclusion, enjoying a meal amongst the community and developing relationships with staff and other patrons. Café Meals Programs have led to the improvement in nutritional, physical and mental health for many of its members. Café Meals Programs rarely follow up clients who exit the Program so it is uncertain whether these benefits remain once people are no longer a part of the Program.

“It has improved nutrition and my energy which means I feel stronger and more balanced when my mental health is low. It is the difference between eating and not eating. I was missing four meals a fortnight now I’m eating every night.”
— quote from a member of the cohealth Yarra Café Meals Program

Social exclusion is often experienced as a part of poverty and food insecurity and so it is important that when measuring the effectiveness of programs addressing food security that we also look at whether programs lead to improvements in social inclusion.

‘With Café Meals you meet different people. I like to sit and observe people and I hear interesting conversation. It’s pleasant to do this.’

’[Café Meals] helps with self-esteem, made me feel part of the local community.’
— quotes from members of the cohealth Yarra Café Meals Program
groups, gardening groups and food swaps. These programs can enhance both food access as well as food availability. If these programs do not exist, it is worthwhile to explore partnerships that can help to set them up in your local community — if there is community interest! Such community food systems are a great option for people with limited finances and facilities but my experience and the literature show that not everyone is keen to participate in these alternative food systems. Programs such as these should definitely be community led.5

**Improving Food Availability**
Food availability is a more difficult component for dietitians and other professionals working with food to influence, and often beyond the scope of our practice — many have not been trained to do so. However, there are now many professional development opportunities for dietitians to enhance their public health skills and to collaborate with other dietitians and professionals with expertise in this area.

Dietitians can have a strong role in collaboration and advocacy to influence the local food supply. Initiatives such as mapping and pricing ‘studies’ can be useful tools to illustrate the local food landscape — what type of outlets do we have, where are they located relative to pockets of disadvantage locally and how affordable is the food at these outlets relative to the available funds of an individual living in poverty?6 The information gathered can be used to justify funding and support for local food security initiatives or to lobby for policy changes that can support a more affordable and accessible food environment.

**Looking Ahead — Where to From Here?**
Food supply and the service sector are subject to reform that is often outside the scope of our influence. We have seen recent changes that impact on the dietitians role — cuts to state health promotion funding, the pending reform of Home and Community Care funding and other changes that are making a move to working more with individuals and less capacity to work with social determinants of health. Dietitians in community health may need to seek alternative funding options or utilise students to enable health promotion and upstream community nutrition work.

Food pricing is influenced by many factors and we do see food prices rise each year — particularly for prepared meals. There have been suggestions to increase the goods and services tax (GST), which may include increases to fresh food. This will have a significant impact on people already experiencing food insecurity; making nutritious food even less affordable. Advocacy to prevent further GST increases needs to be a part of everyone’s food security agenda.

Food pricing and availability will continue to be a challenge but more so with the impacts of climate change. Climate, soil quality and water resources will all impact on food availability. How will we mitigate these impacts to encourage healthy eating? More importantly what are we doing now? Where possible, food programs and food security initiatives should aim to reduce their carbon footprint. A focus on reducing packaging and waste, promoting a more plant-based diet, encouraging seasonal eating and promoting local food systems is definitely compatible with a diet that is affordable and nutritious.

**Endnotes**
A Decade of Good Food — Café Meals in the Geelong Region: A Ten Year Reflection

Alyssa Huxtable and Jill Whelan

In essence, the Café Meals project enables a young person to purchase a healthy meal for $3.00 from a member café. Members have a card (like a coffee card) that is stamped with each visit and after 12 meals, they return to their youth worker and another card is issued if still required. The underlying premise is about choice: choice of venue, what to eat (within limits), when to eat and with whom to eat. At first glance Café Meals is about food; however its impact is far greater than that. It is social inclusion; it is subtle education about healthy choices; it provides safe and warm places and it is mainstream access to food. A homeless young person sits on the table next to a high profile business person — and everyone is the same. It is empowerment.

During 2005, dietary data was collected and analysed on 25 young people experiencing homelessness from Geelong and Colac. The data identified multiple nutrient deficiencies and was validated through interviews with youth workers, social workers and managers of youth agencies who regularly engaged with and supported these young people. In reviewing what could be done to improve the food security and reduce the hunger of these young people, Café Meals was floated as an idea in September 2005. When a variety of options was presented to two focus groups of young people, Café Meals was the project unanimously supported by the young people, and separately by the staff and managers of Time for Youth (TFY), now amalgamated with other agencies and known as Barwon Child, Youth and Family (BCYF).

In 2005, when the data was collected, it was common for young people to pool their resources and ‘buy $10 worth of chips’ because that would ‘fill us up’. The affordability of two litre bottles of soft-drink also meant that a tasty, affordable meal comprised largely of fat, salt and sugar could stave away the hunger that others reported as ‘feeling like my stomach was eating itself’.

In May 2006, the Percy Baxter Foundation provided $25,000 for an initial pilot project of Café Meals. Café’s that exhibited a youth friendly environment (outdoor eating areas, a variety of communal and quiet spaces, food on display rather than written menus) and a social conscience were invited to join. Although the funding path has not always been smooth, Café Meals has operated continuously since that time and will soon celebrate its tenth anniversary.

Since Café Meals started, almost 300 young people have been assisted. In 2010, Time for Youth was successful in obtaining funding from The William Buckland Foundation to evaluate the Café Meals program and develop a ‘kit’ that could be used to help other regional and rural centres set up a similar program. The Café Meals Kit is available for download at www.bcyf.org.au and supporting documents are available by calling Café Meals on 52214466.

The evaluation in 2010 was conducted by Jill Whelan, in partnership with Time for Youth and RMIT University and funded by The William Buckland Foundation. The evaluation looked at Café Meals from the perspectives of the young people, the café owners, the youth and social workers and the management of the youth agency.

The project was overwhelmingly supported by all sectors. When data was compared with baseline information it was clear that young people’s meal frequency and vegetable consumption were increased. Importantly they valued the social connectivity that Café Meals enabled. They specifically valued being able to meet with their support worker at a café rather than an office and also meet with estranged family members in a ‘neutral environment’. These were just some of the many unexpected outcomes of what started as a food relief strategy.

These same social outcomes continue today, with a young person recently reporting that Café Meals assisted with food security, budgeting, confidence and encouragement. After a day of ‘going out job seeking, it is the reward of the day, (going to) the café.’ The 2010 evaluation reported a young person visiting a café and proudly telling the staff she no longer needed a café meals card because she had a job. Another young person obtained a job at one of the café meals cafes. In some ways these are isolated stories, in other ways they are individuals whose life has been changed through multiple supports. One of these supports involves food relief in a socially inclusive environment.

Challenges

The major challenge for Café Meals has always been funding. It is clear that despite the significant funding issues, Café Meals has survived because it has always looked for multiple funding supports and has enjoyed unwavering and very strong multi-level management support from both Time for Youth and Barwon Child, Youth and Family. Ongoing support from cafes, referring staff, executive and senior management
has played a huge role in ensuring the survival of Café Meals.

Currently Café Meals is undergoing a change in data collection which is hoped to assist in securing future funding by proving need and impact through pre and post program evaluation.

**What the Young People Say**

‘I feel that the service that the Café Meals program provides is excellent and very helpful. I have found it helps me afford to eat meals in town, while I am on the go and busy with appointments or job seeking and unable to carry a large bag with lunch while job seeking/cold canvassing.’

‘I have found the experience an awesome privilege and a valuable gift for individuals and youth, who are trying to save money to manage bills and use public transport who are often looking for work or struggling financially. I am happy to say having my Café Meals card handy is a reassuring thing …’

‘Every meal, …, thanks to the Café Meals program has been top quality, fresh and satisfying. I haven’t had to go hungry when I have been low on money because of Café Meals.’

In what aspects has Café Meals helped you?

‘…it has helped me not go hungry’.

‘Confidence — to sit and eat at the café, meet people, make connections.’

**What the Café and Youth Support Agencies Say**

Dave, owner and manager of Courthouse Café (Café Meals café) when reflecting on the program, mentioned the unique position cafes are in to help young people try new and healthy things from the menu. Dave has been an ongoing support and asset to the Café Meals program for a number of years and his passion for nutritious food is passed on to Café Meals patrons.

Ria Bua, reflecting back on the inception of the program ten years ago, said:

‘TFY first introduced Jill Whelan to us and wanted staff input to assist her with her PhD around what we call today food security. Jill arranged focus groups and role plays in a café setting; it was a success and then came rolling out the (Café Meals) cards; still today I support the Café Meals program and believe it is fantastic; the young people really embrace eating healthy food in the cafes. Time For Youth and now BCYF were very lucky to have met Jill ten years ago and have a strong program still running today.’

Ben (Youth and Family Support Worker) adds that ‘having access to healthy and cheap food is usually not the highest priority for many young people who are accessing our services but Café Meals is a great way to start the conversation around food security. I have found that food security has the ability to affect a person’s behaviour, problem solving skills, social engagement and mental health.’

‘A number of other clients have been living on one to two meals a day for multiple weeks because it is too difficult to afford food while being transient. When a young person has not eaten or has eaten poorly it can be difficult for them to make informed decisions surrounding support. Having the option to meet over lunch helps them focus on important choices that they need to make as well as make the setting more informal which helps increase the rapport that workers have with a young person.’

‘Barwon Child, Youth and Family are continuing the commitment made by Time For Youth to the Café Meals program. We recognise there is a need for Café Meals within the community and particularly within the vulnerable population we, as an organisation support. We are committed to creating a sustainable future for Café Meals and working to expand the program as our organisation continues to grow.’

— Kate Morrissey, Executive Director, Organisational Development, BCYF.

**Broader support**

As part of anti-poverty week, the Governor General and Lady Cosgrove visited Geelong and BCYF to hear about the Café Meals program and to lunch with some of the young people involved. BCYF CEO Sandy Morrison volunteered to join the staff of one of the Café Meals cafes as part of the event. The day was a success, with great awareness raised about Café Meals through the political and media presence (see photo and short video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rksa-aNEtKM).

**A Growing Movement**

The Geelong Café Meals program learnt much from the City of Yarra’s café meals program which continues to operate. There are various iterations of Café Meals. ‘Inner South Community Health has been delivering their version of a social cafe meals program, ‘Social Spoons’ since 2012. Social Spoons targets one of the key determinants of homelessness: social isolation. For more information, and a short video, please visit http://socialspoons.org.au/

Other variations of the Geelong Café Meals program include cohealth’s City of Melbourne Café Meals Program and new to the café meals network is Ballarat’s Meals for Change program.
Exploring the Experience of Food Insecurity Among Mothers Seeking Asylum in Melbourne Using Photovoice

Chrystal Yam, Registered Nutritionist, National Nutrition Programs Manager, Secondbite

Political Context
In 2014, Australia received 8,960 applications for asylum from individuals seeking protection visas. The rights an asylum seeker has to access public healthcare such as Medicare, welfare payments, and the right to work and study is affected by their method of arrival in Australia and the timeframe which their visa application was submitted. Some asylum seekers who are living within the community waiting for the outcome of their visa application may be eligible to access limited financial assistance through the Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme (ASAS) and the Community Assistance Support Scheme (CAS).

Problems Faced by Asylum Seekers
Asylum seekers may carry significant trauma from their country of origin, during relocation, and through the difficult process of seeking asylum within another country. Although resettlement offers many opportunities, asylum seekers and refugees often carry the burdens of their past which can include social disconnection, displacement, famine, war and overcrowding.

Unlike individuals who have been granted refugee status, asylum seekers are subjected to considerable hardship such as limited income and poor access to affordable healthcare and housing while waiting on immigration decisions. Poor health may be experienced by asylum seekers upon arrival in Australia and may be worsened by language difficulties, low self-esteem and mental illness, cultural and religion-related barriers, and economic stress. In addition to these experiences, asylum seekers are also at risk of experiencing food insecurity and homelessness which can have negative social and psychological implications.

Food insecurity among asylum seeker and refugee populations is predominantly associated with economic factors such as limited income to purchase food or competing financial priorities. However, non-economic factors such as difficulties navigating the food environment in a new country when shopping for food, language difficulties, and limited access to transport also contribute to food security. Studies from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom have demonstrated levels of food insecurity among asylum seeker or resettled refugee populations between 71 and 100 per cent.

The only estimate of food insecurity among refugees in Australia comes from a study conducted in Perth, Western Australia, which found 71 per cent of refugee households were food insecure. In Australia where there is evidence of poor nutrition among migrant communities there is a need to addresses food insecurity to ultimately improve health outcomes for asylum seekers and refugees.

Emergency Food Relief
Food banks are a form of charitable food assistance intended to provide temporary relief for people experiencing food insecurity. In Australia, Booth and Whelan in their 2014 article Hungry for Change agree that the food banking industry as it stands is a temporary solution to food poverty while masking the underlying causes which require serious government attention. Although initially designed as a community intervention to provide short term food relief, in reality food banks and other forms of food assistance may be frequented by households on an ongoing basis as a coping mechanism to alleviate food insecurity.

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) was founded in 2001 and is Australia’s largest asylum seeker organisation, offering support and delivering services such as legal assistance, healthcare, material aid, English classes, counselling, orientation and settlement assistance. The ASRC also provides emergency food relief through the ASRC Foodbank and Community Meals program. In 2013–2014 approximately 160 families accessed the ASRC Foodbank and almost half of these asylum seekers had no work rights or access to welfare payments, demonstrating the vital role ASRC Foodbank plays in relieving hunger among asylum seekers in Melbourne.

The ASRC Foodbank is set up in the format of a supermarket to offer members a dignified way to access food relief. Foods are categorised by core food groups according to the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating and ASRC members ‘shop’ based on a points system which prioritises foods considered healthy, such as fruits and vegetables and promotes equitable food distribution among members. The quantity of food provided to ASRC members (term used to describe asylum seekers who access ASRC services) is dependent upon availability, family size and access to income. Similar to other food banks, the ASRC Foodbank is staffed predominantly by volunteers and the majority of food is donated by individuals and businesses, or food...
charities such as SecondBite, FareShare and Foodbank Victoria.

The ASRC Foodbank aims to provide healthy food and equitable distribution, and the organisation supports a vision to improve food security amongst asylum seekers. Despite this, the ASRC is unable to meet the complete nutritional needs of ASRC members. A study conducted in 2009 assessed nutritional quality of the ASRC Foodbank via a basket audit and concluded that participants were unable to meet their minimum nutritional requirements for vegetables and legumes, fruits, dairy, and meat and meat alternatives according to the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating, and despite some participants accessing food externally to the ASRC, the ASRC Foodbank remained the main source of food for all participants.

There is limited data describing the experiences of food insecurity, however understanding these lived experiences is fundamental to providing an effective response for people seeking asylum. This article presents data collated through the author’s Master of Public Health thesis supervised by Dr Claire Palermo at Monash University and supported by the ASRC.

A Photovoice Snapshot: Lived Experiences of Food Insecurity Among Mothers Seeking Asylum

A Photovoice study was undertaken to explore the experiences of food insecurity amongst mothers seeking asylum in Melbourne, Australia. Participants were recruited through the ASRC Foodbank (n=3) and qualitative participatory research methodology Photovoice was applied to collect and analyse data. Photovoice promotes the individual realities of disenfranchised people, encouraging photography of subjects of importance to them that are related to the topic of investigation. In this study, Photovoice allowed participants to define their concerns and priorities in relation to food and the factors which contribute to food insecurity. Participants were provided with a camera and asked to take photographs to answer the research question, ‘What aspects of your everyday life affect what you eat and how much food you have to eat?’. Photographs to share in a focus group were selected individually and major themes were identified and discussed by participants by sharing their stories and photographs.

Despite the ASRC’s best efforts to reduce vulnerability and hunger, significant issues contributing to overall hardship included inadequate quantity and variety of food to meet nutritional requirements, limited understanding of where to obtain specific foods of cultural importance, and low finances. Overall two major themes emerged; resilience in the face of these hardships and continued practice of strong nutrition principles.

The study indicated that participants were resourceful in seeking additional help to access food through vouchers or coupons, adapting to unfamiliar foods and making the most of what they had access to. Despite dependence on the ASRC Foodbank, all participants described purchasing food when they could afford it. Common coping strategies to overcome food shortages included purchasing discounted meat and vegetables, and freezing bulk

Child's lunchbox at the start of the week

Child's lunchbox at the end of the week
ingredients. Participants shared experiences of constructing meals from unfamiliar foods and adapting recipes to the food available at the ASRC Foodbank.

‘Last week I come here (ASRC) so I find that a kind of food. I believe I don’t know what was that. So I went home and just slice that and try to cook that.’

Despite low finances being a major contributor to food insecurity among participants of this study, limited transport options were considered a major contributor which influenced the quantity and types of food participants selected from the food bank. To cope with public transport difficulties, participants took less food and considered lighter food items which were easier to carry.

‘I would take little things. That way, like I remember what is there in the home still where I can use for more days So I don’t take that thing, I take another thing.’

All participants demonstrated applied knowledge of nutrition principles and the importance of trying to source meat and dairy products beyond the ASRC Foodbank, due to the inconsistent availability of these foods. Food insecurity is often associated with limited food variety and consumption of high energy, low cost foods,” however this study did not reveal an increased consumption of high energy foods. Unhealthy foods were described by participants as ‘treats’ or ‘snacks’ which indicates a low frequency of consumption, with the exception of one participant who provided confectionary in her children’s lunchboxes.

‘I think this is the end of the uh week. Less is. No more carrot or cucumber there. (pause) We run out of things.’

**Conclusion**

Despite the small sample size, this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of food insecurity among mothers seeking asylum and accessing a source of emergency food relief in Melbourne, Australia. Although emergency food relief is critical in relieving immediate hunger, the charitable food sector’s inability to sustainably meet recipients’ nutritional requirements may compromise the health and wellbeing of individuals relying on food relief in the long-term. Emergency food relief should seek to meet the cultural and nutritional needs of community members such as those seeking asylum by providing more variety and greater quantities of food, while simultaneously reviewing the needs of users and advocating for policy reform to address the underlying social and political causes of food insecurity.

Contact: chrystalyam@yahoo.com.au

**Endnotes**


4. ibid


29. Lambie-Mumford H 2013, ‘Every town should have one’: emergency food banking in the UK, Journal of Social Policy, no.42, pp.73–89.


40. ibid.

The Sacred Heart Mission Meals Program

Chris Middendorp, Manager, Sacred Heart Central, Sacred Heart Mission

The term food security has a rather hollow Orwellian ring to it and strikes this writer as a limp euphemism for something that should be understood in more emphatic terms. In an Australian context at least we are saying that people are going hungry in a land of plenty.

Starvation or deprivation in a culture so earnestly obsessed with fine food and coffee, not to mention interior design and real estate prices suggests a culture of uncertain principles. ‘Twas ever thus. The more radical welfare services that provided sandwiches to disadvantaged people in the early 1960s, during the lacklustre but contented Menzies period, were founded on the notion that poverty in Australia was unnecessary, verging on blasphemous. But here we still are.

As the ugly term ‘soup kitchen’ reminds us, homelessness services and food provision have been connected all over the world for most of the modern era. Traditional charity models of welfare delivery have generally provided food to people identified as ‘needy’ because it’s the most practical and possibly the easiest need to meet. It is also the easiest aspect of service delivery for the general public and philanthropists to understand and get behind. Feeding the hungry is a readily accepted virtue, not to mention a Biblically endorsed one.

These days even the inescapable celebrity chef Jamie Oliver has fashioned a side career showing us how disadvantaged people generally have less access to nutritionally sound food than other members of our community.

Clearly this is a well understood phenomenon and it doesn’t require a Churchill Fellowship to uncover the reasons. In Australia it’s generally a combination of education (not knowing what ingredients to buy and how to prepare them) and financial disadvantage (not having the financial resources to purchase good ingredients in the first place).

In the case of people who are homeless, there is one other obvious consideration — the absence of a kitchen. How do you prepare nutritional meals for yourself when you are living on the street or occupying a room without cooking facilities? And if you are struggling to survive on the street, there isn’t much occasion to contemplate your diet.

Sacred Heart Mission is well known for its extensive meals program which in a typical year provides around 130,000 meals to people experiencing homelessness. Although feeding people is in itself a critical function of our service, it should also be understood that our service uses food as an engagement tool. In other words, we hope that people will come for the food but stay on for the professional support our staff can provide — whether that is case management, medical care or linkages to our aged care, mental health and drug and alcohol services.

Many people with histories of trauma and complex behaviours find approaching a shop front welfare service a difficult and unpleasant task. By providing free food to encourage people to attend a service, our staff can gradually build trust with people and from there encourage them to seek assistance with some real challenges.

There’s a great deal of diversity amongst the 400 people who come to us for a meal every day. Many have no access to a kitchen or a fridge. Others have access to both but do not know how to cook. Others still come for the social contact and enjoy the experience of sharing a meal with others.

A client of Maori origin once told us, ‘When you eat alone you are lonely, when you eat alongside others, you feel like you belong somewhere.’ That’s as good a description of what we try to achieve with the meals program as anything else I have heard. Bringing people together for a meal in a safe and welcoming place is a foundation point of community.

The nutritional benefit of the meals isn’t always of primary importance to our service users. One of the more common items of client feedback provided is the request for more soft drinks, pies, hot dogs and sweet desserts. These are items we rarely serve, since we believe our role is to provide nutritionally sound food with low fat, sugar and sodium content. Every year we conduct an independent nutritional analysis to ensure we’re still on the right track. Sometimes we turn down donations of soft drinks or other junk food on the basis that these are not in the health interests of our service users, some of whom struggle with obesity and diabetes.

Any organisation offering a meals service to a disadvantaged cohort has a responsibility to do it appropriately; attending to every food safety and hygiene practice and ensuring that menus are carefully considered and planned. In our case, because we are open every day of the year, this requires a great deal of logistical effort. Providing food security is complex work.
Every day it takes five paid meals staff and around 23 community volunteers to provide and clean up after 400 meals are served. Dishwashing alone takes a team of four people working over four hours each.

Storage is a critical factor. Our food is sourced from a range of locations. We have generous donors in the meat and produce industries, local businesses and schools donate ingredients to us and we get solid support from food rescue organisations. But we can only accept what we can safely store. We have a dry store, two large freezer containers and two cool rooms — not an abundance of storage. Thankfully a generous company also allows us to store pallets of frozen meat off site.

The challenge for meals services like ours is to develop a range of responses past simple meals provision and encourage clients to build independence. We must work to embolden those with access to cooking facilities to source and cook their own healthy ingredients and, for the past year, we have been exploring how we can provide more sophisticated opportunities for people to improve their general wellbeing, including informal nutrition and cooking classes.

Food rescue organisations do some of their best work in distributing ingredients and meals directly to people who can prepare or serve food where they live. We do some of our best work when we link a client into mainstream services and build their independence. All this starts with a meal.
Dignity on a Plate
Towards Tony McCosker, CEO, St Mary’s House of Welcome

‘Would you like fries with that?’
The art of up-selling has been very much to the fore in the retail industry in recent years. It is an art that has been practiced by social welfare workers in ‘emergency food’ centres for many many years. They have provided the essential — the food, but they have also sought to provide ‘the extras’. What are those ‘extras’ and how have they assisted people to survive, to thrive and to exit homeless services?

If we look at Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, we see food and shelter as the most basic and essential of human needs closely followed by health, hygiene and the need for relationships/community and education. Many needs can be met at the meal table.

Soup Kitchen to Soup Kitchen Plus: A Charity Model
An historical look at the gradual development of a model of service at St Mary’s House of Welcome (SMHOW) in Fitzroy over 55 years is instructive in demonstrating both the link between the communal meal table and access to multiple social welfare services, as well as the maturing of service responses to the question of food insecurity.

Established in 1959 by the Daughters of Charity as a soup kitchen, SMHOW was initially a very basic response to a very basic need, that is, food for the hungry provided by a local group to meet a very apparent local need. Soon other elements were added to the service to meet other very basic needs, that is, free showers and hygiene kits and a change of clothing from a very basic Opportunity Shop. This basic ‘charity model’ response was managed by religious Sisters and numerous volunteers, financed through donations and the good will of the community. It is not surprising that a ‘welcoming attitude’ and a sense of ‘community’ became the focus for all involved.

From Soup Kitchen Plus to Welfare: Social Justice Model
Social justice imperatives based on the Gospel values and the founding spirit of the Daughters of Charity demanded that something further needed to be added to the service in order to address the causes of food insecurity and to address the individual needs of each service user. It was seen that the charity response could be built on and developed into a social justice response. The soup kitchen and the charity response was the base platform: additional services and responses needed to be added so that a more holistic approach could be taken to addressing the causes of food insecurity.

For this reason, SMHOW applied for government funding (Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program in 1987; Mental Health 1994; and Alcohol and Other Drug in 2002) in order to enable a more professional and holistic response to service users. It was at this point that the meal service, while essential, was seen more as an ‘engagement tool’, a stepping stone into addressing the other life issues that caused the service user to be food insecure, accommodation insecure, facing addictions and multiple exclusions from social engagement opportunities.

With funding for the professional services established, the ‘extras’ were possible. Fortunately many elements of the ‘charity response’ were continued with further development of volunteer engagement and philanthropic funding. The move to a ‘social justice response’ opened the way for a deeper and more broad-ranging response to service users and meal service participants. Some of the mental health services were offered on a ‘drop-in’ basis and SMHOW became known or referred to as a Drop In centre.

From Drop-In Centre to Open Access Engagement Centre
In 2005 the Board of SMHOW made the huge decision to redevelop the premises so that it reflected both the founding values of the organisation and the needs of a modern welfare service and, based on 55 years of knowledge, the needs of service users who experience homelessness, mental health and addiction issues and are generally excluded from community on many levels.

The new purpose-built facility was designed with the following needs in mind: a welcoming and dignified communal space, a safe space, a bright and lively ambiance that would be open to all on the ground floor (Open Access and Engagement), including space for external service providers; and on the first floor a collection of self-development, group educational spaces where service users could opt to be engaged in specifically designed activities relevant to their needs.

SMHOW has gradually moved towards an Active Support and Advocacy Model of service delivery. This model has four focal points:

1. Centre Based — focusing on a safe supportive environment for all comers; culturally sensitive with structured programs and activities. (Open Access)
2. Relationship focused — client centred, welcoming episodic presentations, active support. (Engagement)
3. Flexible and responsive — providing advocacy, information
and referral and community linkages. (Client Informed Multifocal response and External Linkages)

4. Community connection — providing social inclusion and linking to broader community; supported referral to mainstream services. (Social Inclusion, Internal and External)

Towards Dignity on a Plate
And how are all of these enhanced services and the new service model addressing the issue of food insecurity? There is no doubt that the meal service remains the draw card that attracts people to the Open Access hub. Annual evaluations of the meal service over the past ten years have indicated clearly that service users value the meal for the ‘extras’ that come with it — the communal engagement, a sense of being valued, the experience of being treated with dignity and the engagement with volunteers who respect them.

The mantra for the catering staff and the volunteers has become ‘Dignity on a Plate’. Facets of the service are that meals are served in a dignified manner with volunteers waiting on tables (no queues, no lining up), service users being trained to participate in the food preparation and delivery. The pathway from being waited on to being a waiter is a pathway to social inclusion for some.

As a result of a review of the meal service in 2012, SMHOW decided to introduce a ‘co-payment’ for the midday meal. Breakfast has always been a free service and the midday meal has been by donation if the service user so desired. The rationale for introducing the two dollar co-payment for lunch was two-fold: firstly, many service-users felt dignified by the fact that they were making a contribution; and secondly, it gave social support staff the opportunity to engage with service-users who were experiencing extreme financial hardship and to assist in addressing the issues around food insecurity.

Future Developments
It is clear that the movement away from block funding and towards individual support packages will have a big impact in the social welfare sector. For better or worse, agencies will be required to adapt in order to be in a position to supply client-driven choices. Since food security is so fundamental in the hierarchy of needs, it is hard to image that the demand for food services will decline.

Based on the premise that the demand for meal services will follow homelessness and health trends, there is every indication that the demand for meal services will increase. Australian Bureau of Statistics data predicts that there will be a continual growth in the Melbourne population. At the same time, unemployment rates have grown. The back-log from the 20 per cent homelessness growth in Victoria between 2006 and 2011 is, and will continue to be, a major factor.

Locally, for SMHOW in Fitzroy, the picture is even bleaker. The City of Yarra has a rate of homelessness five times greater than the state average. Many of these people are sleeping rough or squatting in the local area. Their immediate needs are food and shelter in a safe place followed by hygiene and health requirements, the sorts of services that have traditionally been provided by charities.

As the historical development outlined above indicates, the ‘charity response’, while valued and honoured, is only part of the solution in addressing the food security issue. In order to provide a more holistic and social justice based response to the issue, there needs to be some additional layers of response that address the broader social issues and individual needs of those seeking food support. A holistic and socially responsible response will require the input of the local community, volunteers, philanthropy, social enterprise and government. All will have a part to play and there will be no room for devolution of this responsibility.
The Western Australian community faces increasing numbers of people vulnerable to food insecurity due to their economic or social circumstance. This is partly due to geographic isolation and the cost of food, as well as the demise of the mining boom and a stalled economy. For example, food costs more in remote areas, 26 per cent more for a healthy food basket than in the Perth metropolitan area. Welfare dependent families in WA would need to spend 44 per cent of their disposable income to purchase a healthy diet compared to only 14 per cent average income earners. This simply does not happen, as food is the one area families can sacrifice to pay for other expenditures.

As a result of these factors and combined with cost of living pressures, many more West Australians are suffering food poverty and turning to charitable food relief to feed themselves and their families. People at increased risk of food insecurity include those living alone, single parents, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, homeless people, migrants and refugees. Food insecurity is occurring in middle income Australia as the cost of living bites deeper.

The charitable food sector (CFS) is a key part of the emergency relief response comprising of direct service providers (who provide food directly to people), food banking stakeholders (including donor or food rescue operations who re-distribute food), and other agencies including advocacy groups. Food relief is offered by faith-based organisations, social service agencies, drop-in centres, community development programs, and health centres. In 2013, Foodbank Australia estimated that 60,000 people could not be assisted each month, and these findings rang true for Western Australia. The urgent need to understand current and future capacity and ensure appropriate services was expressed at meetings with emergency relief organisations in November 2014. Furthermore, CFS stakeholders raised questions about their capacity to meet the food and nutrition needs of their recipients. As well, the number of people who were homeless was increasing in inner-city Perth. The 2014 Vulnerability Index for homeless Perth people found 25 per cent had diabetes, 40 per cent asthma and 60 per cent had dental health problems with health care costs escalating. Follow up discussions with Food Bank, West Australian Council of Social Service, Anglicare, and the Salvation Army highlighted a range of issues in Perth. Specifically, the complexities and increasing demand for services in an environment of reducing resources; the potential for competitiveness among agencies;
changing government policies; and the lack of information regarding recipients’ dietary needs. There is a lack of information about the relationship between and coordination of direct services, client awareness of services and the adequacy and appropriateness of the services offered.

Healthway funded Curtin University in collaboration with Flinders and Deakin Universities to define the scope and nature of CFS activities required to enable recipients to achieve adequate nutrition. Research comprised of inventory audits of the types and adequacy of food provided, assessing recipients’ dietary intake and perceptions of the appropriateness of food provided, as well as assessing direct services from an organisational and provider assessment of effectiveness. The target groups are: inner city Perth CFS stakeholders; direct service providers; and recipients. To the author’s knowledge this is the first time a systematic mapping and thorough investigation of the charitable food sector has been undertaken in an Australian capital city.

Research is to be conducted in three consecutive parts:

1. A comprehensive mapping exercise describing the players, relationships and key functions of the inner-city Perth CFS.
2. An assessment of direct services’ perspectives on the appropriateness and effectiveness of their services.
3. An assessment of the direct service recipients’ perspectives on the appropriateness and effectiveness of services and their dietary intake and food sources.

The research findings will be used to develop effective approaches to feeding those people who are going without food in Western Australia. The study results are expected to be released around December 2016.

Preliminary findings are consistent with the initial concerns that the CFS is operating in an environment that is not conducive to being able to adequately meet the current and future food and nutrition needs of those needing food assistance. In inner-city Perth alone, almost 6,000 instances of food aid are provided each week, and this is likely to be an underestimate because it is difficult to capture providers not associated with the 17, largely faith based or philanthropic agencies. Increasing demand, reliance on volunteers, inconsistent donations, and unreliable or reducing funding are some of the ongoing challenges for services. Currently the data are being analysed, but already the work has yielded valuable insights for the design of a multi-pronged intervention in the next stage. All involved are eagerly awaiting the findings and the opportunity to use them to look for ways to improve the situation.

Endnotes
Every Thursday, for the past 40 years, there has been one familiar and friendly face greeting people in need on the streets of inner-city Melbourne: Vinnies Soup Van volunteer, Frank Mullins.

At 77-years-young, Frank hasn’t skipped a beat. Volunteering, in his words, is ‘part of my life and a real privilege’ and the spark in his eye when he arrives at the Soup Van kitchen in North Melbourne is proof.

‘The first night out on the van was a bit of an eye opener, to see how people live. It’s been over 40 years now. It’s just flown,’ said Frank.

Frank is the longest serving ‘Vannie’, as they’re affectionately known, and over the years he has seen the issue of food insecurity from many angles. When the Vinnies Soup Van first started in 1975, with a motivated group of young people at the helm, food preparation was tedious.

‘It would take hours and hours to make the sandwiches every night,’ he says.

These days there are now more efficient and cost effective avenues for sourcing good food. Generous donations from corporate partners means the Vannies can provide a greater variety and quantity of food each night, and also save considerable time preparing food. Although, some traditional legacies of love still continue — namely, the art of making the very best soup.

‘The biggest change I have seen in my time on the van is the impact of Tasty Trucks. They have made such a big difference to the variety of food we serve — sandwiches, pies, pasties, chicken rolls,’ says Frank.

The Tasty Fresh Food Co (Tasty Trucks) donates around $1m worth of food to the Soup Van operation every year and has been supporting the service for two decades, which has made an enormous difference to the quality and efficiency of the food they serve.

The Australian foodservice industry throws away an average of 23 per cent of the food they buy for business every year, which generates more than 5.25 million metric tons of food waste* annually. Tasty Fresh Food Co’s partnership with Vinnies Soup Vans directly addresses the issue of leftover food waste and its associated costs, together with an initiative their customers are proud to support.

‘This food is verymuch appreciated by the people on the street, especially in winter.’

There’s also a regular and varied flow of ‘seconds’ foods including bread, cakes, fruit and milk from other food service agencies. While nutrition remains a recurring point of discussion among the volunteers, it’s a well-known fact that people regularly share their food and prefer calorie dense food to keep them satiated for longer — an important consideration for many people who often only have one meal a day.

‘We find that there are a lot of people on the street who know where other people in need are and they’ll take sandwiches to them.’

Then there are people who hang back, too timid to approach the Vannies or unaware that help is available, which indicates that there is potentially a large portion of the population still going hungry.

‘Mental illness is the main problem blocking people from accessing services or knowing that they’re available. Some people also don’t have the confidence to come and approach us for food.’

The Vannies’ helping hands arrive holding cups of hot soup and sandwiches too; but through shared meals and conversations, volunteers like Frank often change lives.

‘Thinking back on my life, I started off pretty young appreciating what help can do for a family. We try to provide companionship — if you haven’t got support it’s very hard to survive,’ he says.

As the years tick on, he’s now hopeful that others will also make volunteering a staple part of their lives.

‘I’d just like to see it continue, with the same goals that we have now — that the people on the street always come first. We need new people and new minds, people who think differently to us.’
FoodMate by SecondBite: Paving the Way to Food Security Through Hands-on Nutrition Education

Nicole Vaughan, Volunteer SecondBite, Liza Barbour, Monash University, Chrystal Yam, SecondBite

Introduction
In Australia, we have an abundance of food. The 2012 FoodWise campaign found that up to $8 billion worth of household food is wasted every year.\(^1\)
We produce more food than we need and currently export enough to feed 40 million people.\(^2\) Despite this, we continue to face significant challenges to ensuring access to sufficient, affordable, safe and nutritious foods for all people living in Australia, with approximately two million Australians seeking emergency food relief annually.\(^3\)

SecondBite is committed to ensuring access to fresh, nutritious food for all people across Australia. They take action by rescuing and redistributing surplus fresh food, building community capacity in food skills and nutrition, and advocating for an end to food insecurity. The experience of food insecurity is incredibly complex and requires a multi-faceted approach to address the underlying causes such as low income, food literacy skills, social isolation and physical access to healthy and culturally appropriate foods.

Homelessness continues to be a serious community issue and there is an increasing demand from this community for food assistance.\(^4\) The food bank industry in Australia has expanded over the last 20 years, and while food banks remain the leading solution to food poverty, their ability to ameliorate the problem is limited.\(^5\)
Isolated services for people experiencing homelessness are unsustainable and of questionable value in the long-term.\(^6\) A more sustainable concept is one which considers all services as an integral part of mainstream activities and works with organisations to achieve more equity, food inclusion and social connectedness for vulnerable groups, including people experiencing homelessness.\(^7\)

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Isolated services for people experiencing homelessness are unsustainable and of questionable value in the long-term.\(^6\) A more sustainable concept is one which considers all services as an integral part of mainstream activities and works with organisations to achieve more equity, food inclusion and social connectedness for vulnerable groups, including people experiencing homelessness.\(^7\)
By its very nature, food insecurity has complex causes, however it is integral for community programs to address these underlying causes to evoke lasting and meaningful impacts to break the cycle.

Education Leads to Empowerment
Disadvantaged populations are often lacking the opportunity to engage in nutrition education.\(^8\) This can increase susceptibility to food insecurity, as despite access to an adequate supply of food, quality of dietary intake is essential to ensuring individuals meet nutritional needs, including the necessary nutrients required to ensure optimal growth early in life and protection against chronic diseases. A lack of familiarity with basic food preparation techniques including the ability to write shopping lists, plan meals in advance, budget for food, and store and prepare food can create barriers to the preparation of healthy meals and increase money spent purchasing convenience meals.\(^9\)

The inability to buy healthy food and a reliance on emergency food relief not only has detrimental physical impacts on an individual; it can have significant emotional and social impacts.

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

This analogy perfectly sums up the attitude and efforts SecondBite takes to offer a more food secure future for people living in Australia through its innovative nutrition education program, FoodMate™. FoodMate aims to address the issue of food insecurity in Australia by building individuals’ capacity to achieve food independence. FoodMate does this by engaging and working alongside a wide range of community members and partners, including community and welfare service providers. By recognising that individuals need more than education, FoodMate connects the dots between social exclusion and food insecurity by creating vital community connections to create long-term change. Research indicates that individuals experiencing food insecurity are particularly vulnerable to poor nutrition outcomes due to insufficient access to healthy food.\(^10\)

Program participants are therefore encouraged to develop practical food skills and knowledge relating to food and nutrition to in turn begin their journey to a sustainable, food secure future.

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A FoodMate participant captured joining in one of the educational games.
**FoodMate at Work:**

**What is FoodMate by SecondBite?**

FoodMate was established by SecondBite in 2008, and has since been delivered in collaboration with numerous community organisations throughout Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales. The eight-week nutrition program provides participants with access to fresh nutritious food, information on budgeting, food safety, healthy eating and recipe modification, local food access and shopping tips. Specifically, FoodMate has three key objectives to support participants:

1. Increase post-program access to non-emergency sources of safe, sufficient, affordable, nutritious and culturally acceptable food.

2. Improve food utilisation by increasing skills in cooking, food budgeting, shopping, food storage and food safety.

3. Create connections between program participants and local community food programs (e.g. community kitchens, community gardens, fresh food markets) to enable ongoing support and capacity building with food access and food utilisation.

Each week FoodMate participants contribute to a two to three hour session where they work together to prepare two healthy dishes, engage in an education session and activities to reinforce health-promoting messages. Throughout the program, the delivery team encourage connections with local affordable food outlets such as community kitchens, gardens, and fresh food retailers, and refer participants to additional support programs to develop social support for participants and nurture longevity of the program’s impact. FoodMate participants are encouraged to prepare their own meals outside of the sessions using fresh ingredients from the weekly hampers.

**Why Did SecondBite Develop FoodMate?**

A range of initiatives exist in Australia which endeavour to alleviate food insecurity. SecondBite acknowledges that not only does healthy food need to be available and accessible, individuals need the necessary skills to create delicious, healthy, safe and affordable meals to truly develop sustainable food security. FoodMate was developed to empower individuals to gain access to a nutritious food supply that is long-term, both nutritionally and culturally appropriate, and that promotes human dignity. Other local programs may be delivered in insufficient timeframes and are therefore unable to generate significant outcomes. FoodMate was developed with an aim to not only develop critical food skills, but also equip individuals with the necessary social connections to allow participants to continue on their path to food security after the conclusion of the program.

**Who is FoodMate For?**

The program is designed to develop the food independence of people experiencing or at risk of food insecurity. Until recently, FoodMate has been delivered with several agencies supporting young people.
experience of other positive outcomes have been observed including:
• practical nutrition skills; an improved ability and confidence to read food labels and improved ability to prepare healthy meals using more diverse foods
• increased consumption of fruits and vegetables
• improved outcomes from case management services
• increased ability to engage in social situations and establish social connections
• increased willingness to take part in community activities
• decreased dependence on emergency food relief and increased access to local sources of non-emergency food
• greater confidence and motivation to continue cooking beyond the eight-week program.

How is FoodMate Funded?
SecondBite is a non-profit organisation, relying solely on donations and a supportive team of volunteers to work towards its mission. Every day, the critical support received from partners, food donors and financial supporters, assists SecondBite to move closer to achieving an Australia where everyone enjoys sufficient access to healthy nutritious meals. One of the greatest challenges SecondBite currently faces is a lack of capacity, in terms of human resources and funds, to adequately respond to community demand for FoodMate.

Conclusion
Food security is a basic human right and is strongly linked to the overall health and wellbeing of our Australian population. According to the World Health Organisation (2011), food security is built on three pillars; sufficient access to food on a consistent basis, adequate resources to obtain appropriate foods and sufficient knowledge surrounding basic nutrition care, food preparation and sanitation. SecondBite works towards empowering individuals to improve their food security long-term through FoodMate by addressing all three domains; increasing immediate access to nutritious food through rescued food, improving vital food skills and nutrition knowledge, and by facilitating social connections to promote community inclusion.

Community organisations and financial donors can register their interest by contacting foodmate@secondbite.org or the SecondBite Nutrition Programs team — 1800 263 283.

Endnotes
6. ibid.
Opinion 1
Livia Carusi
General Manager, Membership and Development and
Danusia Kaska
Soup Van Program Operations Manager

The Brazilian Roman Catholic Archbishop Dom Helder Camara said the aphorism, ‘When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist’

From its humble beginnings in France in 1833, the St Vincent de Paul Society was established in Australia (Melbourne) in 1854. Like so many other faith based organisations, inspired by the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Society was established in response to the growing social and economic divide of its day. Fast forward to 1975, responding to a growing food insecurity issue in the inner city of Melbourne, St Vincent de Paul Society established its first of a number of soup van operations.

Since its inception, a great deal of knowledge and wisdom has been gained on the issue of food insecurity. These lessons relate to the practical side of service delivery such as food quality, handling, compliance and cultural requirements, as well as the impact of the social component that the ‘sharing of a meal’ brings to the life of an individual as well as to a collective community. For many, the latter is often more important than the offered meal.

Our ‘Vannies’, often share with us that people yearn for social connection and interaction with others with whom they have built close relationships and shared their life stories. This is a social time for them, a place where they feel safe in a trusted environment, where they don’t have to hide or ‘just survive’. It is a time when they are treated with dignity and respect and honoured by the ‘Vannies’.

The food served is simple, home-made soup, sandwiches and hot and cold drinks prepared by our very dedicated volunteers.

Who are we serving? Over time many of us have witnessed the changing face of people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, and likewise this change has and continues to be the case for our program. Once confined to responding primarily to single, older men in the inner city of Melbourne, today, we offer a response to families, single women, older people, as well as those who are working but are unable to afford food because their incomes are too low.

While there is a need, our commitment to serve will remain in this space. While there remains one person living in poverty, unable to feed themselves or their families, or who are disconnected and excluded from community, the St Vincent de Paul Society will continue to stand alongside the vulnerable and marginalised and ask ‘Why are they poor’ while advocating for a just and compassionate society for all.

Our Vannies Story
• Operating for 40 years, starting in 1975.
• There are over 1,300 dedicated volunteers who give generously of their time seven days a week, 365 days of the year, rain, hail or shine!
• There are over 250,000 meals served to people experiencing hardship every year
• Everyone is welcome, regardless of gender, age or where they call home.
The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) asserts that all people have the right to ‘an adequate standard of living, including adequate food’, as well as the ‘fundamental right to be free from hunger’. This right encompasses three dimensions: availability, accessibility, and adequacy — both in terms of nutrition and food safety.

As a signatory to the ICESCR, Australia is bound to do everything possible to guarantee adequate nutrition for its citizens. The reality on the ground however, is that many of those experiencing homelessness in Australia experience challenges every single day in realising their right to adequate food.

In a post-Industrial world, food in Australia is primarily available not directly from the land, but from third parties — producers and retailers. Consequently, access to food requires access to money, something that the majority of those experiencing homelessness in Australia simply do not have. Even relying on emergency relief, food availability is still not assured, with the 2014 Foodbank Hunger Report finding that almost 600,000 Australians seeking food relief each month are unable to obtain assistance.

The insufficient stock of affordable social housing often means that the majority of available income must go to covering accommodation related costs, leaving little to no money for food.

Those living without access to appropriate food storage or preparation facilities are forced to rely either on purchasing prepared food, which is usually both more expensive and less nutritionally adequate or, on free food or meals which frequently have limitations in hours of operations and are often not available on weekends.

A lack of access to adequate, nutritious food can have far-reaching consequences, many of which can further compound inequality and contribute to ongoing homelessness. In the short term, this can manifest as increased tiredness and stress, and difficulty in concentrating and functioning. Over the medium to long term, food insecurity and poor nutrition places the individual at considerable risk for chronic disease, and is likely to see individuals requiring more hospitalisations and other medical interventions. This can in turn prevent the rebuilding of people’s lives including returning to employment and social participation.

However, it is not just in bellies and bodies that the consequences can be felt. Research has found that the process of eating meals together can bring with it a number of psychosocial benefits, presenting opportunities for socialisation, learning and support. For many people experiencing homelessness, the solitary nature of their access to and consumption of food can result in further social exclusion.

Fortunately, there are many excellent initiatives designed to combat the consequences of food insecurity faced by people experiencing homelessness. For example, the Café Meals Programs brokered by cohealth, which aims to both reduce food insecurity and promote social inclusion by facilitating access to subsidised meals in mainstream local cafés. Under the program, participants receive a card, which they can use at participating cafes to purchase a nutritious meal and drink at a subsidised rate (typically two to three dollars). In this way, the program empowers participants by giving them choice and control over where, when and what they will eat, and enables them to participate in community life — thus moving away from food security as emergency relief towards food security building social inclusion and community engagement. Qualitative evaluations of the program have found it to be effective in improving food access and creating community cohesion, and that delivery of the program also helped to build relationships between vulnerable and marginalised communities, local government, community health organisations, and private business.

There is no question that in a nation as prosperous as Australia, it is within our power to address the underlying causes of both homelessness and food insecurity, and eliminating both should be something we continue to aspire too. Until that ambition is realised, initiatives such as the Café Meals Programs will continue to play an essential role in helping vulnerable Australians — especially those experiencing homelessness — to maintain better physical and psychosocial wellbeing through access to nutritious food and socialisation opportunities.
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