



Environment, Planning and Sustainable
Development Directorate
Via email: cbrfoodfibre@act.gov.au

19 October 2023

Re: Draft Canberra Region Local Food Strategy 2023-28

VolunteeringACT welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Draft Canberra Region Local Food Strategy ('the Food Strategy') and makes the following recommendations:

- 1) The Food Strategy should have a greater focus on food security and food relief and how these issues need to be tackled within the overall aim to build and support sustainable rural and urban agriculture systems.
- 2) The Food Strategy should give greater recognition to the vital roles volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) play within our region's food systems.
- 3) The Food Strategy should highlight the importance of providing more investment and sustainable funding for food relief programs, including adequate funding for volunteer management, to ensure volunteers remain safe and supported.

We support the development of the Food Strategy and in particular its focus on increasing equitable access to local healthy food in the Canberra Region. While we recognise that the draft Food Strategy is focused on building and supporting sustainable rural and urban agriculture systems, there is a need to incorporate food security and food relief issues currently being experienced in our region as an integral part of the development process. It is also important for ACT Government to recognise the key role volunteers and VIOs play within our region's food systems.

VolunteeringACT can confirm there are currently a minimum of **49** organisations known to be providing regular food relief services (i.e. food pantries, meal distributors etc.) in Canberra and the surrounding area, and all 49 have advised us they are able to assist with providing food relief during crises or emergencies. Only a handful of these providers receive any funding, and most are totally reliant on donations, the volunteers who give their time freely, and the wider community to run their operations. Many food relief services, including those who provide emergency food relief, are wholly volunteer run and, as recognised in the draft Strategy, numerous local food initiatives such as community and school kitchen gardens are also heavily reliant on the involvement of volunteers.

It is critical to engage the volunteering sector and the ACT's food relief providers in the finalisation and implementation of the Food Strategy, as the lack of funding to support these services is simply not sustainable and must be highlighted and addressed as a key priority.

Developing a fit for purpose Food Strategy requires a systems approach that takes into account all of the actors, processes and interactions involved in growing, processing, distributing, consuming and disposing of food.¹ A sustainable food system is one that delivers food security and nutrition for the whole community in a way that takes into account the economic, social and environmental bases to food security and nutrition.² As recognised in the draft Strategy, “*long term food sustainability is a key priority for the ACT Government to ensure that all Canberrans, no matter their individual circumstance, have access to food and can live with dignity*”. Supporting food security initiatives in Canberra, including food relief activity, is central to achieving this priority.

It is important to recognise that the provision of food relief is not something that only occurs during emergencies. Many people living in Australia suffer food insecurity and regularly rely on food relief.³ The latest available regional data from 2019 shows that more than 12,500 Canberrans were living in households that, in the previous 12 months, had run out of food and had not been able to afford to buy more.⁴ The increasing cost of living pressures also means that food insecurity is on the rise across Australia, with 23% of households surveyed in 2022 perceiving that they now struggle financially to access food more often compared with last year. The main reasons reported for experiencing severe food insecurity in 2022 were increased/high living expenses (64%) and reduced/low income or government benefits (42%), followed by change of household living arrangement (24%) and natural disasters (19%).⁵

The Food Strategy should incorporate engagement and alignment with existing food relief activity and providers in the ACT, as an important aspect of addressing food security. VolunteeringACT coordinates four key ACT initiatives that aim to ensure food security for all Canberrans. These are the Food Relief Network, the Food and Emergency Relief Advisory Committee, the Food Relief Communications Strategy, and the Database Project.

The **Canberra Food Relief Network** was established earlier in 2023. The Network brings together food pantries and food relief services from across the Canberra Region to share resources, ideas, and best practice approaches. The meetings have been well attended, enabled new collaborations, and strengthened communication between emergency food providers. The finalisation and implementation of the Food Strategy would benefit from collaborating closely with this Network moving forward and drawing on the insights and expertise of its members.

¹ Amy Carrad A, Aguirre-Bielschowsky I, Reeve B, Rose N, Charlton K (2022) Australian local government policies on creating a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system: analysis in New South Wales and Victoria, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 46(3): 332-339, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.13239>

² Nguyen H (2018) *Sustainable Food Systems: Concept and Framework*, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation.

³ Amy Carrad A, Aguirre-Bielschowsky I, Reeve B, Rose N, Charlton K (2022) Australian local government policies on creating a healthy, sustainable, and equitable food system: analysis in New South Wales and Victoria, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 46(3): 332-339, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.13239>

⁴ ACTCOSS (2019) *Food security, food assistance and the affordability of healthy food in Canberra*, <https://actcoss.org.au/publication/report-food-security-food-assistance-and-the-affordability-of-healthy-food-in-canberra-2/>

⁵ FoodBank (2022) *FoodBank Hunger Report 2022*, available: <https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Foodbank-Hunger-Report-2022.pdf>


VolunteeringACT also chairs the **Food and Emergency Relief Advisory Committee**, which brings together key stakeholders and government representatives to provide advice and advocacy to relevant Minister/s and the ACT Government in relation to addressing food insecurity in the Territory, and identifies and develops opportunities for community, government, and corporate partnerships/collaborations to drive more effective and supportive food and emergency relief structures. We recommend this Committee is also closely engaged with as part of the Food Strategy finalisation and implementation.

Earlier in 2023, a Communications Working Group, with representatives from across the community sector, designed a **Food Relief Communications Strategy** to promote food relief service provision across Canberra. Only two in five (38%) Australian households experiencing food insecurity in 2022 reported having received food relief help from a charity or community organisation.⁶ This was primarily due to feelings of shame and embarrassment around accessing food relief, as well as a lack of awareness of services. There is great potential to leverage this work as part of the implementation of the Food Strategy to strengthen public awareness of food security and food relief issues in the region.

There is a need for more data to more fully understand and address food insecurity and its impact on healthy living in the ACT. **The Database Project** contributes to addressing this need by capturing more accurate data on the food relief services being provided across the region to facilitate evidence informed decision-making regarding food security in the ACT. The Food Strategy would benefit from supporting this project and utilising the data captured to inform Strategy implementation.

VolunteeringACT would welcome the opportunity to have greater involvement in the finalisation and implementation of the Food Strategy in Canberra and would be more than happy to meet with the Directorate to discuss the issues raised in this letter, coordinate any further discussions with our ACT Food Relief partners in the sector, and provide any additional food relief data you feel may be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,



Jean Giese
CEO
VolunteeringACT

⁶ FoodBank (2022) *FoodBank Hunger Report 2022*, available: <https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Foodbank-Hunger-Report-2022.pdf>