



Report

FOOD INSECURITY IN THE CANBERRA REGION: A STRATEGIC PICTURE

FEBRUARY 2025



ABOUT US

VolunteeringACT is the peak body for volunteering. We also provide community information in the Canberra Region, and we are a service provider of programs for people experiencing disadvantage and isolation, people with disability, and people needing support for mental wellness.

We are a people-driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of more than 200 members, advocates for and supports volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, and engages with the broader Canberra community.

Our purpose is to foster quality of life and an inclusive Canberra by enabling participation and connection. Through our activities, we're not just connecting people with causes; we're transforming lives. We value creativity, inclusion and diversity, leadership, integrity, and collaboration.

VolunteeringACT coordinates and chairs the Canberra Food Relief Network, the ACT Food and Emergency Relief Advisory Committee. The Canberra Food Relief Network was established 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.

We believe there is great potential to leverage this network to strengthen public awareness of food security and food relief issues in the region and collaboratively identify innovative solutions for addressing food insecurity for all Canberrans.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 3

OVERVIEW 4

RECOMMENDATIONS 6

**FOOD RELIEF SERVICES
IN THE ACT** 8



**LOCATION OF FOOD
RELIEF SERVICES IN THE
CANBERRA REGION** 13

**FOOD RELIEF SECTOR
CHALLENGES** 15

BACKGROUND 26





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra Region and recognises any other peoples or families with connection to this Country. VolunteeringACT is committed to reconciliation and will continue to walk alongside First Nations Peoples and embrace the traditions, stories and wisdoms of the oldest continuing cultures in the world.

This report was created on Ngunnawal Country.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges volunteers of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live. We also acknowledge the contribution of the volunteer involving organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.

VolunteeringACT also acknowledges all the people and organisations who have shared their insights and contributed to the development of this report.

Special thanks to volunteers Ashfia Eusufzai, Connie He, Yan Ye, Wenzhou Zhang for assisting with data analysis, and photographer Dan Whittaker for the pictures in the report.



The Food Insecurity in the Canberra Region Report is an ACT Government funded initiative.

OVERVIEW

This report highlights the opportunities and challenges for enhancing food security in Canberra.

Food insecurity continues to grow - but is hidden in the Canberra community

The rising cost of living in the ACT is contributing to a situation where all Canberrans do not have both physical and economic access to the food they need for a healthy lifestyle. Increasingly, Canberrans are having to choose between buying food and meeting other financial responsibilities such as paying bills.

The 2024 Cost of Living report found “The cost of essential goods and services has continued to increase significantly having a disproportionate impact on low-income households in the ACT. While cost of living pressures are being felt by an increasing number of households with higher levels of income, those with the least are being left even further behind. Canberrans with increasingly complex needs are seeking more and more support from the already overworked and underfunded community sector.”¹ Additionally, 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.² However, the high general wealth of the region and distribution of the population can distort experiences of food insecurity in the Territory.



**Canberra Food Relief Network -
50 community organisations and services**

[1] ACTCOSS (2024) [Cost of Living Report](https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2024-Report-2024-ACT-Cost-of-Living-Report.pdf): <https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2024-Report-2024-ACT-Cost-of-Living-Report.pdf>

[2] ACTCOSS (2019) [Food security, food assistance and the affordability of healthy food in Canberra](https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2019-report-food-security-assistance-and-affordability-of-healthy-food-canberra.pdf): <https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2019-report-food-security-assistance-and-affordability-of-healthy-food-canberra.pdf>



Importance of a linked-up Canberra food relief ecosystem

The food relief sector in the Canberra Region plays a vital role in ensuring Canberrans have access to food and essential, non-negotiable items and supports. VolunteeringACT coordinates the Canberra Food Relief Network made up of around 50 community organisations and services providing direct and indirect regular support to Territory residents experiencing food insecurity. These organisations range from emergency food relief and food banks to local food pantries and organisations that collect, store and distribute food and meals in the community.

A sustainable sector requires immediate action and investment

ACT food relief organisations are experiencing increasing demand as cost of living pressures escalate but receive little to no government funding; they are reliant on fundraising, donations from individuals, and philanthropic partners. Many food relief services, including those providing emergency food relief, are wholly volunteer run or are heavily reliant on the involvement of volunteers to collect, prepare, and distribute food or run food relief services.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The ACT Government must provide sustainable funding to the food relief sector including:

- 📄 ongoing funding for the coordination of the Food Relief Network currently managed by VolunteeringACT; and
- 📄 expanding the current funding from freight subsidy only, to ongoing base level funding to ACT food relief services including street pantries and enabling organisations; and
- 📄 considering how the food relief sector is included in commissioning or other funding processes.

2. The ACT Government must:

- 📄 continue to provide sustainable funding to enable food relief network actors to source sufficient quality food to meet demand; and
- 📄 introduce incentives aimed at the ACT retail and hospitality industry that encourage food donation and discourage edible food waste going to landfill and where the cost of food rescue remains with the producers of food waste rather than being a burden for food relief service providers.

3. The ACT Government must:

- 📄 provide funding for the provision and upgrading of storage facilities for donated goods prior to distribution to local pantries and other services; and
- 📄 support the consistent training and management of volunteers involved in the food relief sector.



Government must provide appropriate resources to food relief agencies in the ACT so that together we can contribute to food security for all Canberrans.



CANBERRA CITY CARE

TODAY'S PRESERVES

ROOT RELISH

Woolworths

FOOD RELIEF SERVICES IN THE ACT

Impacts of the recent cost of living crisis have led many Canberrans who were previously financially and food secure to access food relief services. Food relief services are services that receive and redistribute food to community organisations or individuals in need of safe, nutritious, and quality food. Food relief services are often responsible for sourcing and transporting essential foods to communities and organisations when food donations to organisations are insufficient. Food relief organisations aim to ensure a variety of nutritious, culturally appropriate foods are available to people in need.

The food relief sector in the ACT and surrounding areas is supported by around 50 services providing direct and indirect support to people experiencing food insecurity. For many years the sector was informally organised, sharing information and resources as needed. In 2022, the ACT Government provided funding to VolunteeringACT to formally establish and manage the Canberra Food Relief Network which proved transformative in the way food relief was coordinated to support Canberrans experiencing food insecurity or disadvantage.

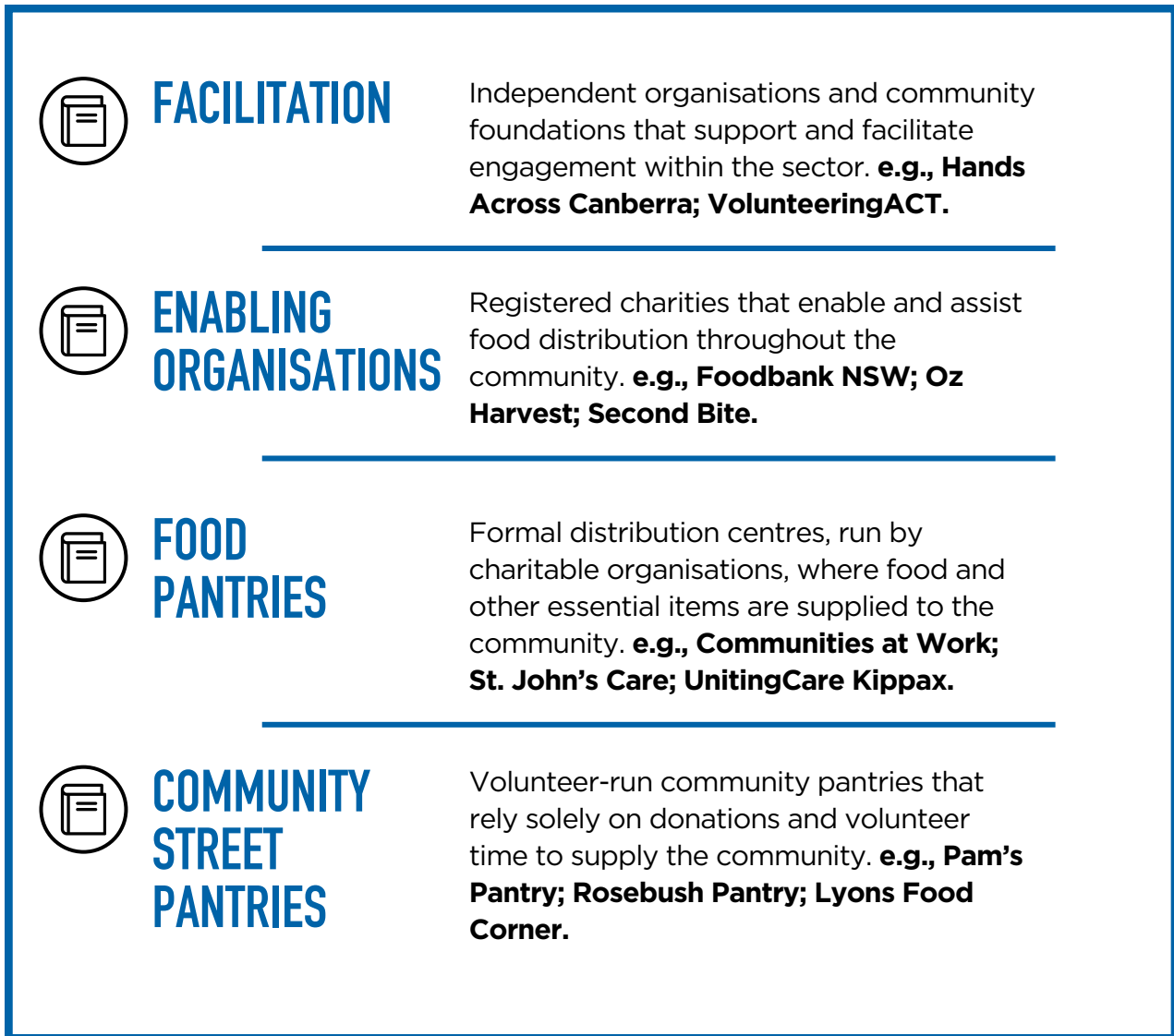
In November 2023, an [independent consultation](#) conducted with the food relief ³ providers in the Canberra Region identified four cohorts of service providers:

- **Facilitators** that support engagement across the sector,
- **Enablers** that redistribute food throughout the community,
- **Food pantries** which act as central distribution centres for collecting, storing, sorting, and supplying food items, and
- **Street pantries** run by local volunteers in neighbourhoods to provide donated items direct to individuals and communities.

[3] Scyne Advisory (2024) Canberra Food Relief Community Action Plan.



Figure 1. Four Cohorts of Food Relief Services in the Canberra Region



The Network also has a number of cascading members who are often supported by the Network's larger organisations. These members have a primary focus away from food relief and support vulnerable community members who are experiencing challenges such as family and domestic violence, mental ill health or alcohol and other drug issues.

Based on data generated through the ACT's Food Relief Network database launched in March 2023, it is possible to create a snapshot of food relief service in the network. Canberra's food relief sector is made up predominantly of food pantries that maintain food and street pantries, and two drop-in centres that provide free or low-cost meals and food items.





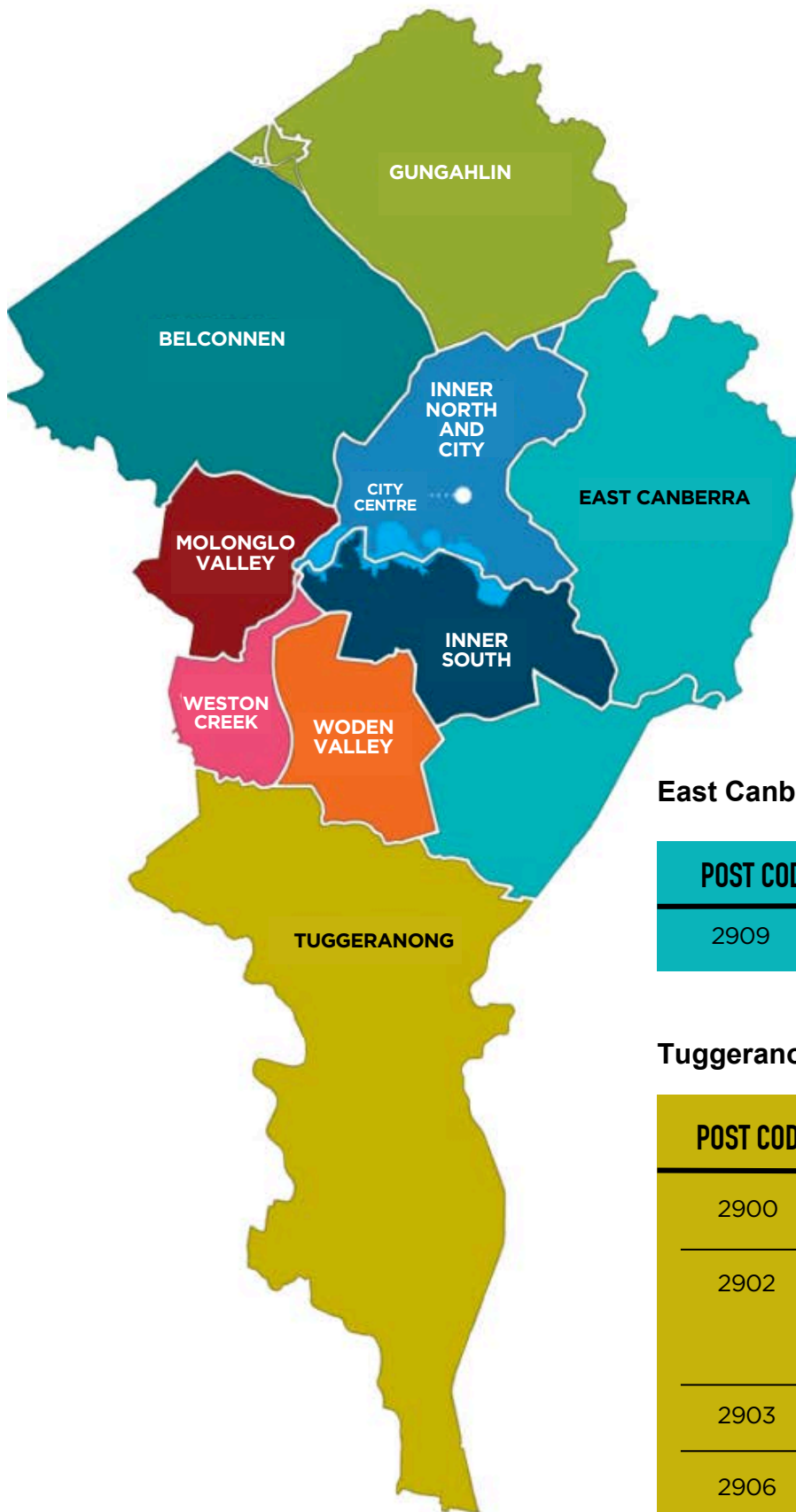
In Central Canberra there are four (4) food pantries providing emergency food relief. Northside communities have access to nine (9) food pantries and approximately six (6) identified street pantries providing affordable grocery items and emergency food relief. Southside has ten (10) food pantries and only a handful of identified street pantries.

Communities in the neighbouring NSW regional towns of Queanbeyan and Yass have one main food pantry each for people on low incomes with concession cards. Information on many of these services is available in [Community Info Guides](#), along with an [interactive map](#) of food relief services published on the VolunteeringACT website. Figure 2 below shows the location and distribution of food relief services in the ACT and surrounding region.





Figure 2. Location of Food Relief Services in the Canberra Region



East Canberra

| POST CODE | SERVICE |
|-----------|-------------------------|
| 2909 | Vision Church, Fyshwick |

Tuggeranong

| POST CODE | SERVICE |
|-----------|---|
| 2900 | Communities at Work, Tuggeranong |
| 2902 | Arawang Emergency Relief, Kambah The Pantry, Kambah |
| 2903 | Capital Edge, Wanniasa |
| 2906 | Lanyon Food Hub & Emergency Relief Gordon Community Centre |

Belconnen

| POST CODE | SERVICE |
|-----------|---|
| 2614 | Companion House, Cook |
| 2615 | Uniting Care, Kippax Canberra City Care, Hand Up Food Pantry, Charnwood |
| 2617 | FoodHut Co-op, Nations Heart Christian Community, Belconnen UCX Pantry, University of Canberra, Bruce |

Inner North & City

| POST CODE | SERVICE |
|-----------|--|
| 2601 | Early Morning Centre, Civic Vinnies Roadhouse, Civic The Junction, Civic |
| 2602 | Ainslie Street Pantry Holy Cross Tuckerbox, Hackett O'Connor Community Pantry The Pantry, Youth With a Mission, Watson |
| 2612 | Blue Door, Campbell St John's Care, Reid Braddon Street Pantry |

Gungahlin

| POST CODE | SERVICE |
|-----------|---|
| 2912 | Communities at Work, Gungahlin MARSS, Gungahlin Mustard Seed Uniting Food Pantry, Gungahlin Uniting Church |
| 2913 | Dignity & Desire Women's & Baby Street Pantry, Ngunnawal Helping ACT, Franklin Pam's Pantry, Ngunnawal Rosebush Street Pantry, Ngunnawal |

Inner South

| POST CODE | SERVICE |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|
| 2604 | Community Services #1, Narrabundah |

Woden Valley

| POST CODE | SERVICE |
|-----------|---|
| 2606 | Lyons Food Corner The Little Pantry, Westfield, Woden |

New South Wales

| POST CODE | SERVICE |
|-----------|--|
| 2620 | St. Benedict's Community Centre, Queanbeyan |
| 2582 | Vine Community Food Care, Yass |

FOOD RELIEF SECTOR CHALLENGES

The food relief sector is, like many households and businesses, struggling with the cost of living crisis and the resulting increase in service need. In a submission to the 2024 Federal Senate Select Inquiry on Cost of Living, FoodBank noted the food relief sector has been experiencing “years of sustained, heightened demand for food relief, with supply of nutritious, culturally appropriate food simply not keeping up” with demand.⁴

These pressures can affect the capacity of food relief organisations to effectively and safely deliver services and severely limits the amount of resourcing available to manage and coordinate collection and redistribution of food throughout the Canberra Region.

The 2023 independent sector consultation and the Canberra Food Relief Network Survey conducted by VolunteeringACT in 2024⁵ identified key challenges experienced by food relief services in the ACT, namely:

1. RELIABLE FUNDING AND DONATIONS,
2. LACK OF CONSISTENT ACCESS TO QUALITY FOOD,
3. LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES INCLUDING FOOD STORAGE AND DISTRIBUTION, AND MANAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS.

These challenges are detailed below with proposed recommendations to address the issues.

[4] Foodbank Australia Ltd, Supplementary to Submission 1, pp. 3–4, 7–8.
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Cost_of_Living/costofliving

[5] Canberra Food Relief Network Survey (2024) and Scyne Advisory (2024) Canberra Food Relief Community Action Plan

1. LACK OF SUSTAINABLE, RELIABLE FUNDING ACROSS THE COMMUNITY

Many ACT food relief services are either heavily or wholly reliant on donations of money and time (volunteers) to operate, receiving no base government funding. Government funding and philanthropic donations make up a small proportion of overall funding. This is reflective of national data which suggests individuals are the largest source of donations going directly to charities.⁶ However, donors of both food and funding are feeling the squeeze of the cost of living crisis.⁷

In 2023, there was an overall decrease of 7% of households earning between \$30,000 and \$95,000 per annum reporting that they were totally food secure between 2022 and 2023. The same period saw a decrease of 5% of employed people reporting total food security. Further, data suggests that although the total amount being donated by individuals has increased in recent decades, the overall proportion of people who donate has declined. That is, fewer people are giving (or claiming tax deductible donations), but those who are giving, are giving more.⁸

Increasing demand

Across the food relief sector, all service providers have seen a change in the number of people accessing their services in the last year according to the responses from the Canberra Food Relief Network Survey 2024. The survey found most services experienced a 25% increase in numbers of people using their services with a small number indicating between a 50 - 75% increase.

[6] Productivity Commission (2024) Future foundations for giving: Inquiry in Philanthropy in Australia report.
[7] Foodbank Australia Ltd, Supplementary to Submission 1, pp. 3–4, 7–8.
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Cost_of_Living/costofliving
[8] Productivity Commission (2024) Future foundations for giving: Inquiry in Philanthropy in Australia report.





Organisations report
an increase
in demand



“The number of visits to Canberra City Care’s Food Pantry in West Belconnen **has increased from an average of 400 per week mid-last year to over 500 per week** from the beginning of 2024. We are receiving a constant flow of new members and expect to have nearly 1000 customers on our books by the middle of this year. Both of these measures reflect a 25% increase in 6 months highlighting the “Cost of Living Challenges” for many households.

Canberra City Care supports 12 other food pantries across Canberra, and they are all reporting substantial increases in demand. This places stress on our access to affordable food, especially our food rescue program and the volunteers who ensure the centre functions.”

**RANDOLPH ALBRECHT,
MANAGER OF CANBERRA CITY CARE**

Demand is not being met

Additionally, food item donations alone do not meet the level of demand in the ACT for food relief, and all organisations surveyed reported that they need to purchase extra food to meet demand. When asked what the main challenges faced by food relief services, respondents said:



“Increased need and decreasing donations.”

“Not enough funding to meet demand, limited space to store food.”

“We receive the same amount of funding but have seen an increase in clients signing up...”

“Not enough healthy, nutritious food. Demand exceeds supply.”

“Sourcing food and sanitary products at low costs to ensure we have enough stock to service the increasing number of students.”

“Not being funded, the irregularity of food that is donated, being able to manage the pantry just through volunteers.”



Murphy's Dinner

Beef Massaman

Beef Goulash

Chicken Ho

Ve





The Counting the Costs Report⁹ found that 62% of organisations said that funding levels did not enable the community sector to meet levels of demand and less than a quarter (22%) reported receiving sufficient funding to cover staffing costs. Funding access within the food relief sector is limited with many services not funded, and responding to a minimum of 25% increase in demand for services.

Volunteers bearing the costs

The [State of Volunteering Report 2024](#)¹⁰ identified that volunteers and volunteer managers are increasingly bearing the costs associated with volunteering at an average of \$243 per month or \$12.76 per hour they volunteer. Additionally, according to the Canberra Food Relief Network Survey 2024, some frontline staff (including volunteers) are purchasing food using their own personal money to cover gaps relating to supply and demand. Organisational responses varied from a few hundred dollars up to \$15,000 per month depending on the size of the organisation and the demand.

[9]Cortis et al (2021) [Counting the Costs: sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector](https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2021-report-Counting-the-Costs_1.pdf)
https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2021-report-Counting-the-Costs_1.pdf

[10] VolunteeringACT (2024) [State of Volunteering](https://volunteeringact.org.au/get-involved/state-of-volunteering-in-the-act/): <https://volunteeringact.org.au/get-involved/state-of-volunteering-in-the-act/>



With increasingly more people feeling the strain of financial stress and demand for food relief services growing, the number of people able to give to charities is shrinking and there is an increased need for governments to step in and fill funding gaps. This is despite a historical 4-year average growth rate (7.9%) of total giving to all charities between 2017 and 2021.¹¹

The need for increased investment from all levels of government in food relief has never been greater, given food relief is currently the most common type of emergency relief in Australia.¹²

RECOMMENDATION

1.

The ACT Government must provide sustainable funding to the Food Relief Sector including:

- 📄 ongoing funding for the coordination of the Food Relief Network currently managed by VolunteeringACT; and
- 📄 expanding the current funding from freight subsidy only, to ongoing base level funding to ACT food relief services including street pantries and enabling organisations; and
- 📄 considering how the food relief sector is included in commissioning or other funding processes.

2. LACK OF CONSISTENT AND REGULAR ACCESS TO GOOD QUALITY FOOD

Food relief organisations are heavily reliant on public donations, with foodbanks and enabling organisations regularly collecting food from large supermarket chains and businesses for redistribution to community organisations and food pantries. All of these organisations face challenges in their supply chains.

However, access to food is only one of the four domains of food security. Food utilisation – individuals having sufficient energy and nutrient intake from a variety of quality foods for an active and healthy life – is equally important.

[11] Productivity Commission (2024) Future foundations for giving: Inquiry in Philanthropy in Australia report.

[12] Foodbank Australia Ltd, Supplementary to Submission 1, pp. 3–4, 7–8.
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Cost_of_Living/costofiving

Tackling food waste and inspiring change

Food waste in households and businesses is the single biggest contributor to food insecurity in Australia. The Australia Institute found that Australia wastes 7.6m tonnes of food each year, costing households \$19.3 billion. Based on industry average profit margins, food retailers make \$1.2 billion profit from this waste.¹³ Hospitality accounts for approximately 16% of all Australian food waste. Approximately one-third of horticultural output is rejected on 'cosmetic' grounds. This food is generally edible and should never be sent to landfill. FoodBank has found that for every dollar invested in food waste prevention, there is a \$7 economic return.¹⁴

Further, research identified a lack of knowledge among local food pantries and food pantry donors about what constitutes 'quality food' to ensure retaining the nutritional quality of donated foods to optimise utilisation. Food insecurity is not just about the plate being empty, but also about what's on the plate.

Responses from the Food Relief Network survey also stated that donations are made direct from the public or from local businesses. There has also been an increase in demand for fresh fruit and vegetables, milk and pantry staples as well as personal hygiene products and baby products. Sustainable funding to the food relief sector would enable the key stakeholders of enablers, food pantries, and community street pantries to provide quality, accessible food to Canberrans experiencing food insecurity.

RECOMMENDATION

2

The ACT Government must:



continue to provide sustainable funding to enable food relief network actors to source sufficient quality food to meet demand; and



introduce incentives aimed at the ACT retail and hospitality industry that encourage food donation and discourage edible food waste going to landfill and where the cost of food rescue remains with the producers of food waste rather than being a burden for food relief service providers.

[13] The Australia Institute (2023) [Food waste in Australia](https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/P1432-Food-waste-in-Australia-Web.pdf) <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/P1432-Food-waste-in-Australia-Web.pdf>

[14] Foodbank Australia (2022) National Food Relief Policy Sector Funding Priorities



Volunteers make up an essential layer of the ACT's food relief workforce and are instrumental in the delivery of highly localised and responsive services, including many service offerings that operate out of hours.

3. LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES INCLUDING FOOD STORAGE AND DISTRIBUTION, AND MANAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS

Lack of storage capacity for edible food

The independent consultation conducted with the food relief providers in the Canberra Region in 2023¹⁵ found that there is limited storage capacity in the ACT for delivery of food area by organisations such as OzHarvest and Second Bite. This includes safe cold storage prior to local distribution to services. This issue needs to be addressed urgently, due to the considerable knock-on effect this is having on effective distribution and timely access to enough food across our region - including a north/south divide. An Action Plan produced following the consultation work proposes a shared warehouse concept as a way to share and distribute excess food and resources.

[15] Scyne Advisory (2024) Canberra Food Relief Community Action Plan.

Investing in volunteer capacity and sustainability



Volunteers make up an essential layer of the ACT's food relief workforce and are instrumental in the delivery of highly localised and responsive services, including many service offerings that operate out of hours. However, responses from the Food Relief Network survey indicated that one of the greatest challenges includes getting enough volunteers to manage the pantries. Additionally, volunteers are not 'free', and there are costs associated with recruiting, inducting, training, and supervising volunteers in line with ethical and safe practices outlined within the [National Standards for Volunteer Involvement](#). The 2022 Counting the Costs Report found that only 25% of responding organisations reported they were adequately funded to manage volunteers.¹⁶

Investment in volunteer-led programs has not kept pace with the changing volunteering landscape. Volunteering has evolved significantly, and organisations require training and support to enable them to create safe, ethical, inclusive and sustainable volunteering programs. This becomes more critical as formal volunteering continues to decline, costs of volunteering increase, and demand for services increases.

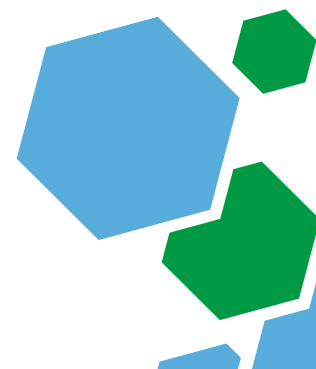
RECOMMENDATION

3.

The ACT Government must:

-  provide funding for the provision and upgrading of storage facilities for donated goods prior to distribution to local pantries and other services; and
-  support the consistent training and management of volunteers involved in the food relief network.

[16] Cortis, et al. (2021), Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector.





BACKGROUND

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR CANBERRANS?

Most Canberrans felt the disruption in the food supply chain during the COVID-19 pandemic. The immediacy of these supply pressures have reduced but for many Canberrans the cost of living crisis has continued to contribute to food insecurity.

Affordability

Increased freight costs of transporting produce, which has remained high,¹⁷ has led to groceries and essential food items becoming increasingly unaffordable. Despite the stabilising of economic conditions in Australia and a decline in inflation, the 2024 FoodBank *Hunger Report* found the cost of living crisis to be the main reason many households remain in financial stress and millions of households found putting enough food on the table each day to ensure each household member eats a balanced diet unaffordable or unachievable due to limited access to healthy food.¹⁸ These findings are echoed in 2024 Federal Senate Select Inquiry on Cost of Living crisis.¹⁹

Cost of living pressures

Similarly, a 2024 ACTCOSS report²⁰ found that the rising cost of essential, non-discretionary goods and services has pushed many Canberrans deeper into housing and financial stress and led to increasing demand for social services. Unsurprisingly, increased demand for services coupled with the rising cost of living has pushed social services into a challenging operating environment. FoodBank noted that the supply of nutritious, culturally appropriate food to the food relief sector is simply not keeping up with the increasing demand.²¹

[17] ACT Government (2023) Community Food Pantries Listening Summary: A summary of what we heard from Community Food Pantries who access the freight subsidy through the ACT Government Food Assistance Program, Community Services Directorate, ACT Government, Canberra.

[18] FoodBank (2024) Hunger Report 2024, prepared by Ipsos Public Affairs, 15 October.

https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024_Foodbank_Hunger_Report_IPSOS-Report.pdf

[19] Australian Government (2024). Paying the Price: The Cost of a Crisis on Australia's Standards of Living.

https://aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Tabled_Documents/8304

[20] ACTCOSS (2024) 2024 Cost of Living Report The cost of living for low-income households in the ACT.

<https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2024-Report-2024-ACT-Cost-of-Living-Report.pdf>

[21] Foodbank Australia Ltd, Supplementary to Submission 1, pp. 3-4, 7-8.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Cost_of_Living/costofliving



Canberra food deserts

When food becomes unaffordable or inaccessible – neighbourhoods have limited places to source fresh, safe, nutritious and culturally acceptable food items – this can create food deserts.

Food deserts are areas where the neighbourhood has limited access to healthy, low-cost essential, non-discretionary foods required for a healthy and active lifestyle. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)²² characterises a food desert as an area where:

- 33% of the population live at least 1.6km from the nearest large healthy food retailer;²³
- the area has a poverty rate of 20% or greater OR the median family income is less than 80% of the median family income in similar urban areas.

Research by Anglicare²⁴ indicated that food deserts may be present in some Canberra suburbs, particularly South Canberra suburbs, Weston Creek, and Gungahlin in the north, where there is an oversaturation of fast-food outlets but limited food retailers supplying safe and fresh vegetables, fruit and other nutritious and culturally appropriate food supplies. While Australia produces more food than we consume,²⁵ an adequate supply of food at the national level does not in itself guarantee household level food security.

[22] United States Department of Agriculture (2012) Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts. https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/45014/30940_err140.pdf

[23] The retailer has a least \$2 million in sales revenue and contains all the major food departments/sections common to supermarkets (e.g., dairy, fresh meats, fruit and vegetables, breads, cereals and packaged goods). Conceptualised as per USDA (2012) report.

[24] Anglican Diocesan Services (2013) South Canberra and Gungahlin contain food deserts [report] <https://dialog.anglicands.org.au/intranet/documents/146/1290/>

[25] Louie, S., Shi, Y., & Allman-Farinelli, M. (2022). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security in Australia: a scoping review. *Nutrition & Dietetics*, 79(1), 28-47.

Unique Canberra food insecurity landscape

Assessing food insecurity in Canberra differs to other jurisdictions. Unlike other Australian states and territories where food insecurity may be more concentrated in areas with a high proportion of low-income households and communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantages, food insecurity is dispersed throughout all Canberra's districts and masked by the overall wealth of communities in the region. This means that current perceptions and understandings of food insecurity may not accurately capture experiences of food insecurity for Canberrans. For example, when seeking to understand which communities in the ACT are more at risk of food insecurity (based on demographic categories typically associated with food insecurity, e.g., employment, education, income, age) risk can be masked when adjusting for population.

To get a clearer picture of food insecurity in the Canberra Region it can be useful to look at the composition and distribution of food relief services, who those services are supporting, and what they are doing in response to increasing demand for food relief. This report is intended to complement existing work by ACTCOSS which has comprehensively explored food insecurity for low-income households in the region. For a more detailed look at experiences of food insecurity in the Canberra Region for low-income households, see ACTCOSS's 2019 *Food security, food assistance and the affordability of healthy food in Canberra report*.²⁶ For a detailed look at the cost of living crisis impacting food security in the Region, see ACTCOSS's 2024 *Cost of Living Report*.²⁷

[26] ACTCOSS (2019) <https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2019-report-food-security-assistance-and-affordability-of-healthy-food-canberra.pdf>

[27] ACTCOSS (2024) 2024 Cost of Living Report : The cost of living for low-income households in the ACT <https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2024-Report-2024-ACT-Cost-of-Living-Report.pdf>





WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

Food security is a complex, multifaceted concept. At its simplest, food security is

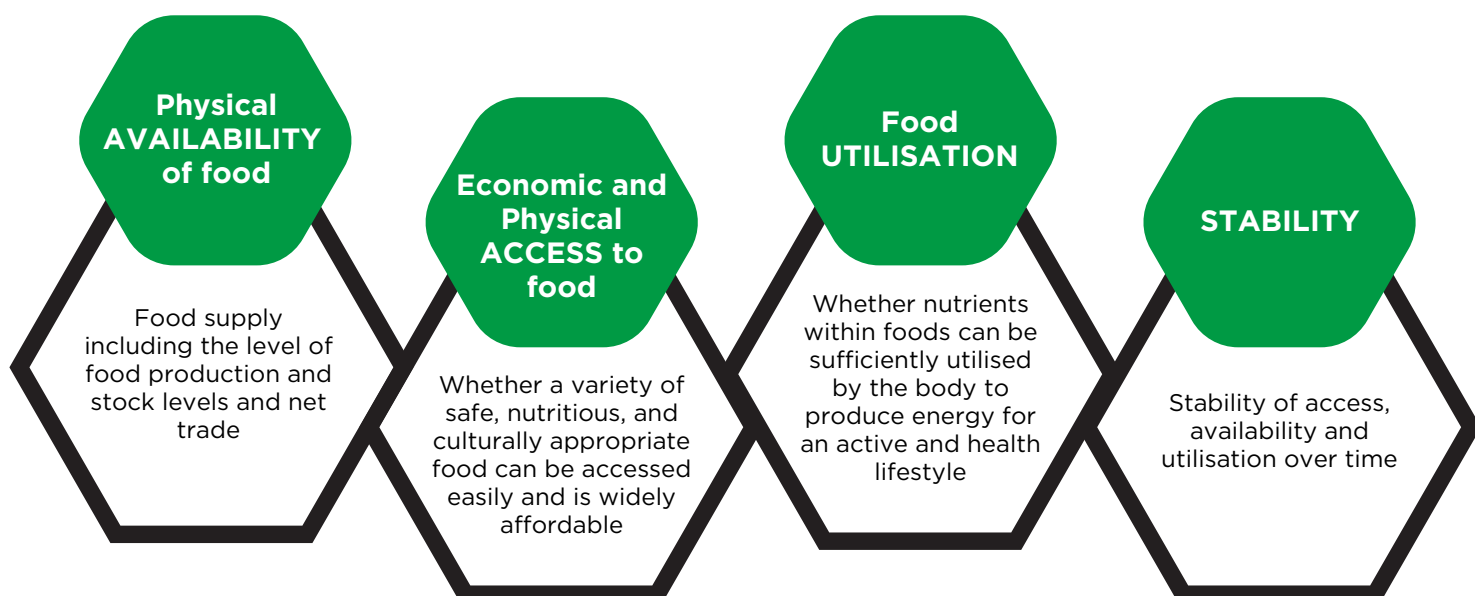
...when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.²⁸

Food insecurity is when

...food insecurity exists when the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.²⁹

Food security is generally accepted to have four dimensions:³⁰ physical availability, physical and economic access, food utilisation, and stability. All four dimensions need to be simultaneously fulfilled for food security to be realised.

Figure 3. Four main dimensions of food security



[28] World Bank (2020) *What is Food Security? There are Four Dimensions What is Food Security? There are Four Dimensions* (worldbank.org).

[29] Bowden, M. (2020). *Understanding food insecurity in Australia* (pp. 1-17). Southbank, VIC., Australia: Australian Institute of Family Studies

[30] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2008), *An introduction to the basic concepts of food security, Food Security Information for Action Practical Guides*, FAO, Rome. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/home>

Food availability relates to the production of food in a region, the levels of available stock at any given time, and the distribution of food from the point of production or storage to a location where the food can be accessed for consumption.³¹

Economic and physical access to food means having the financial means to access enough food that is safe, nutritious, affordable and culturally acceptable and the available produce is safe and of good quality, is nutritious, affordable and acceptable for diverse cultures and dietary needs.³² When a person/group does not have access to food that is culturally appropriate, they are not food secure, even if there is sufficient food available. Research has found culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities often cannot access preferred food items in their area, with some having to travel considerable distances to find the products they want and need.³³

Food utilisation refers to whether individuals can access sufficient energy and nutrients for their food intake. This may be influenced by good care and feeding practices, food preparation, diversity of diet, and intra-household distribution of food. Dietitians Australia³⁴ identified a lack of knowledge of how to prepare unfamiliar foods - especially vegetables - as being an issue that can lead to food insecurity.

Variations in the **stability** of the three dimensions - availability, access and utilisation - over time means food insecurity can be understood as a continuum, represented in Figure 4 below, and will determine whether food insecurity is transient or chronic.

[31] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2008), An introduction to the basic concepts of food security, Food Security Information for Action Practical Guides, FAO, Rome. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/home>

[32] Bowden, M. (2020). Understanding food insecurity in Australia (pp. 1-17). Southbank, VIC, Australia: Australian Institute of Family Studies

[33] Radermacher, H., Feldman, S, & Bird, S (2010) Food security in older Australians from different cultural backgrounds, Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour, 42(5) 328-336

[34] Dietitians Australia (2013) Nutrition and mental health in the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) population, (Reviewed 2020) Dietitians Australia, Canberra

Figure 4. Food Security Continuum - adapted from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2024



The food insecurity continuum,³⁵ ranges from food secure but developing some uncertainty about food availability and access, to buying food that is of a low quality or limited variety due to unavailability or unaffordability, to reducing the amount and frequency of food consumed or not having any food to eat on a given day or days. Chronic food insecurity is often experienced by low-income households, especially those on government financial assistance.³⁶ It may also be a result of combined expenses becoming higher, reducing funds available for the purchase of food. This is something that is becoming widespread in Australia because of the cost of living crisis. Transitory food insecurity may be a result of one-off or occasional financial shocks (e.g., temporary loss of income, unexpected expenses), during and immediately after an emergency or natural disaster, commencement of a new school year, Christmas/birthdays, or a change in personal circumstances. Once the short-term financial shock has been overcome, food security may be re-established.

Conclusion

We know that an increasing number of Canberrans do not enjoy the relative high standards of living for which the city is known. The rising cost of living and food insecurity crises must concern all of us in the Territory. Urgent action is needed to support those organisations that provide relief and services to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in our community. This Report highlights clear, actionable recommendations for the ACT Government to address food insecurity in the Canberra Region. We call on the ACT Government to prioritise support to the Food Relief Network so that together we can contribute to the food security of all Canberrans.

[35] Hunger | FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

[36] ACTCOSS (2024; 2019); Bowden, M. (2020)

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