



Food Relief Network 2025 – 2026 Budget Submission  
February 2025

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VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra Region and recognises any other peoples or families with connections to this Country. VolunteeringACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their vital ongoing contribution to our lands.

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.



## Background and Summary of the Food Security Project (funded until June 2025)

The Food Security Program aims to ensure food security for all Canberrans through specifically identified activities. Although VolunteeringACT holds the responsibility for the Program, the work of the Program is not carried out in silo, rather, VolunteeringACT collaborates and partners with the food security sector to deliver upon its outcomes. These groups co-design and co-produce these activities.

During the first phase of the project these activities included the Database Project, the Communications Strategy, and the Food Relief Network. The Communications Strategy activity was completed, with two successful communication campaigns to highlight the work of the Food Relief Sector. The Database project was also completed with many food pantries adopting the new database to record their interactions with clients. A second stage of the Data project has been launched, the development of a data-warehouse to collate collected data to provide more comprehensive analysis of food security needs across the Canberra Region into the future. This is critical data to inform future food insecurity policy.

The Food Relief Network is made up of around 50 organisations that support Canberrans experiencing food insecurity and vulnerability. The purpose of the Food Relief Network is to bring together those working in food relief services to share resources, ideas, and best practice approaches. The Food Relief Network also allows the co-design and co-production of activities, members of the network were involved in codesigning both the Communications Strategy and Database Project.

Without further investment these activities will be ceased at end of June 2025.

## Food Insecurity Budget Submission Summary of Recommendations

If the funding for the Network, which is due to end in June 2025, is not continued, it will have a major impact on the coordination and provision of food relief to those people in the Territory experiencing food insecurity in the ACT.



The Canberra Food Relief Network Survey 2024 found most services experienced a 25% increase in numbers of people using their services with a small number indicating between a 50 - 75% increase.

This submission highlights the key priorities that need to be funded in the 2025-26 ACT Budget and over the forward estimates and also considers the work needed to develop a coordinated Food Relief Action Plan and associated implementation actions that was agreed by all members of the Legislative Assembly on 4 February 2025.

Immediate funding priorities include:

1. Facilitating a coordinated approach to food relief in the ACT through ongoing sustainable funding of the Canberra Food Relief which includes:
  - a. Facilitation and secretariat for Network meetings;
  - b. Supporting the capacity building of frontline food relief staff volunteers through ongoing tailored capability training, resources and support; and
  - c. Ongoing data warehouse management for the Food Relief Database;
  
2. Co-design of the ACT Food Relief Action Plan as accepted by all Members of the Legislative Assembly in response to a private member's motion on 5 February 2025.  
 \*Noting that this budget would enable the co-design of the Action Plan, but that additional funding will be required to implement the Action Plan. The additional funding required will be informed by the development of the Action Plan.

	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	Total over 3 FYs
<b>Maintenance of Food Relief Network includes</b> a) Secretariat for network b) Capacity building /training for volunteers c) Data Warehouse	121,000	141,000	151,000	<b>413,000</b>
<b>Co-design of Food Relief Action Plan</b>	160,000	To be determined through the design of the Action Plan	To be determined through the design of the Action Plan	<b>160,000*</b>
<b>Total all activities</b>	<b>281,000</b>	<b>141,000*</b>	<b>151,000*</b>	<b>573,000*</b>

This Submission is informed by the ACT Government’s *Community Food Pantries Listening Summary* (March 2023) which highlighted the challenges of rising freight costs for community food pantries and their inability to absorb these rises. It also builds on the evidence in the [Food Security in the Canberra Region: a strategic picture](#) report which identifies the opportunities and challenges for enhancing food security in Canberra. A summary of these issues is at [Attachment A](#).

The Food Relief Network has proved transformative in the way food relief actors operate in the ACT. The spread of actors includes larger community organisations with formal infrastructure and dedicated staffing and resources to manage community pantries and smaller, informal and largely locally volunteer run street pantries.

Ongoing funding is needed to maintain a secretariat for monthly Food Relief Network meetings which enable information on gaps and emerging issues to be shared. It is also needed to build the capability of the vast number of volunteers who work in the food relief sector who need to develop skills related to such things as de-escalation and managing difficult conversations given the recent concerns about rising occupational violence from food pantry clients.

Additionally, there is need for ongoing support to the Data Project which received funding in the 2021 budget for a common platform to strengthen the demographic data on the spread of food insecurity in the Territory. This work requires ongoing licencing and subscription costs and engagement with the provider on Privacy policies and training for database users.

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All parties agreed to an ambitious timeframe to consult and develop a Food Relief Action Plan drawing on the knowledge and expertise of the community sector. Funding is sought to undertake the relevant consultations and co-design the Action Plan.

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\*Noting that this budget would enable the co-design of the Action Plan, but that additional funding will be required to implement the Action Plan. The additional funding required will be informed by the development of the Action Plan.

VolunteeringACT has a suite of related research and documents, through which the above submission was developed. If further information would be useful please reach out to the nominated contacts on Page 1 of this submission.





### About VolunteeringACT

VolunteeringACT is the peak body for volunteering and provides community information services in the Canberra region. Our Vision is for an inclusive Canberra that values volunteering and connection as central to wellbeing and a thriving community.

VolunteeringACT is part of the National Network of Volunteering Peak Bodies in Australia

We deliver inclusive services and information that connect people with their community and enables participation. We lead the design and delivery of high quality, safe, ethical and sustainable volunteering. We also deliver programs for people experiencing disadvantage and isolation, people with disabilities, and people needing support for mental wellness.



The Report highlights the following insights into **food insecurity** in the Territory from the **perspective of the community sector organisations** that support people experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage:

1. the **Canberra Food Relief Network**, which VolunteeringACT coordinates, is made up of **around 50 community organisations and services** that provide direct and indirect regular support to Territory residents experiencing food insecurity.
  - i. 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.
  - ii. The Network also has **cascading members** who are supported by the Network's (larger) enabling organisations. Cascading 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**.
2. Organisations are **experiencing increasing demand as cost-of-living pressures escalate**:
  - i. The Canberra Food Relief Network Survey 2024 found most services experienced a **25% increase** in numbers of people using their services with a **small number** indicating between a **50 - 75% increase**.
3. Many ACT food relief organisations receive **little to no government funding**; they are reliant on fundraising, donations from individuals and philanthropic partners.
  - i. Additionally, 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 (eg street pantries).

4. **Cost-of-living pressures** are also impacting organisations through **increasing fuel and freight costs**.
  - i. The 2024 Network Survey found that 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.
  - ii. The 2021 [Counting the Costs Report](#) found that 62% of organisations said that funding levels did not enable the sector to meet levels of demand and less than a quarter (22%) reported receiving sufficient funding to cover staffing costs.



ACT Legislative Assembly private member's motion as agreed on 5 February 2025.

“That this Assembly:

- (1) notes that:
  - (a) the ACT Council of Social Services published data in 2019 showing that more than 12,500 Canberrans were living in households that, in the previous 12 months, had run out of food and not been able to afford to buy more;
  - (b) in the five years since 2019, a global pandemic, persistently high inflation and interest rate rises have precipitated a cost-of-living crisis, exacerbating the ongoing need for food relief in the ACT;
  - (d) during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACT Government established the Canberra Relief Network which was transitioned through the 2021-2022 Budget to the Canberra Food Relief Network;
  - (d) funding ends partially in June 2025, with the remainder ending in June 2026;
  - (e) the 2024 Canberra Food Relief Network Survey found that most food relief services had experienced a 25 percent increase in numbers of people using their services in the prior 12 months; and
  - (f) given the ongoing need across our community for food relief and uncertainty of government policy beyond 2025-2026, it is vital for the ACT Government to determine its food relief policy and associated programs before the cessation of current arrangements; and
- (2) calls on the ACT Government to:
  - (a) build on the work of the Canberra Relief Network and Canberra Food Relief Network by engaging with community organisations, food relief providers, and people with lived experience of food insecurity to develop and deliver a coordinated ACT Food Relief Action Plan, co-designed with the community sector, to ensure the provision of sufficient food relief services across the ACT;
  - (b) as part of the development of the ACT Food Relief Action Plan, consider:
    - (i) the scope and scale of government support required to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the ACT's food relief sector;

- (ii) opportunities to address challenges faced by community organisations in sourcing, receiving, storing and distributing quality food across the ACT; and
- (iii) incentives aimed at the ACT retail and hospitality sectors to encourage food donation and reduce food wastage;
- (c) ensure that government responses to the challenges of providing food relief do not add unnecessary administrative or bureaucratic burdens to those hard-working community organisations and businesses;
- (d) report back to the Assembly by the last sitting week of 2025 on progress toward a coordinated ACT Food Relief Action Plan; and
- (e) consider providing additional surge funding from 2025-26 to meet the needs of the community for food relief;
- (f) by March 2026 table in the Assembly a finalised ACT Food Relief Action Plan with associated implementation actions, so that its findings can be considered for ongoing funding in the 2026-27 Budget and provide funding certainty to the sector.”—

be agreed to—put and passed on 5 February 2025.