



## VolunteeringACT 2026-27 ACT Food Relief Budget Submission

### **Budget priority: Funding for the coordination and capacity building of the ACT Food Relief Network**

The continuing escalating demand and significant unmet need within the food relief sector needs to be urgently addressed. According to the 2026 Canberra Food Relief Service Provider Survey ([Attachment A](#)), organisations experienced a 47% increase in the cost of food purchases from 2024 and, alarmingly, all organisations surveyed stated that clients require more food than they are able to provide. The 2025 OzHarvest survey<sup>1</sup> conducted with frontline food relief charities showed that in Canberra the number of people requesting food support for the first time was 37 per cent — the highest rate in the country.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges the ACT Government's 2025–26 budget commitment to establish a three year- Food Bank Fund to supplement existing food relief funding, as well as the development of the ACT Food Relief Action Plan to guide its implementation<sup>2</sup>.

At the time of writing, the Action Plan has not been published, and it is unknown how the Food Bank Fund will be allocated to food relief services in the 2026-27 and 2027-28 financial years. The future of other programs relating to food security are also not known. Our previous budget submissions highlighted other initiatives that would benefit the broader food ecosystem. These initiatives were raised in the ACT Governments food relief action plan consultation process last year. As the Plan is in final stages of approval, we have not included these initiatives in this submission. We anticipate the release of the Food Relief Action Plan to see which of those were identified as priorities. However, it is important to note that there is a significant systemic issue that must be addressed.

VolunteeringACT would like to highlight that the ongoing and concerning trends demonstrate the urgent need for additional investment to ensure the food relief sector can meet growing demand and enable a coordinated approach by service providers. We strongly support calls from the food relief ecosystem for additional investment and for many services, investment for the first time.

VolunteeringACT currently leads the coordination of the ACT Food Relief Network (FRN), with funding ending in June 2026. The FRN brings together a diverse range of food relief services from large community organisations with formal infrastructure and dedicated staff to small, informal, volunteer run street pantries ([Attachment B](#)).

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<sup>1</sup>[2025 OzHarvest Survey](#)

<sup>2</sup>[ACT Government Community Sector budget fact sheet 2025 to 2026](#)



VolunteeringACT calls on the ACT Government to prioritise continued funding for the ACT Food Relief Network to provide a coordinated approach to address this growing demand and meet community need.

Since its establishment in 2023, the FRN has significantly reshaped how food relief organisations operate across the ACT. Through monthly meetings, members collaboratively identify service gaps, share critical information and respond to emerging issues. Essential capacity building opportunities for network members including volunteers and staff have been delivered. Training has included de-escalation, managing difficult conversations, and wellbeing and boundaries. These have contributed to a more skilled and well-resourced workforce, capable of supporting community members with complex needs.

Throughout 2025, VolunteeringACT led consultations with the FRN and collated their feedback on the development of the ACT Government’s Food Relief Action Plan.

To sustain the progress achieved to date, continued funding is essential to ensure the sector remains actively engaged in a coordinated approach to assist the ACT Government in guiding the implementation and delivery of this Plan. Continued funding will support:

- Facilitation and secretariat for FRN meetings
- Coordination of FRN contributions to ACT Government food security initiatives, including further development and implementation of the Food Relief Action Plan
- Delivery of training and capacity-building activities, including identifying sector training needs, designing and delivering tailored learning opportunities, facilitating access to specialist expertise and resources and supporting continuous improvement and knowledge sharing across the Network.

<b>Budget Priority: Food Relief Network</b>	<b>FY2026-27</b>	<b>FY2027-28</b>	<b>Total</b>
Secretariat support	\$60,000	\$60,000	\$120,000
Capacity building	\$30,000	30,000	\$60,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$90,000</b>	<b>\$90,000</b>	<b>\$180,000</b>

This initiative aligns with the ACT Wellbeing Framework domains of *Health, Living Standards, Safety and Social Connection*. Funding is sought through the Health and Community Services Directorate (HCSD), which holds responsibility for community services in the ACT, including food relief. We welcome contact from HCSD to expand on our priorities and explain budget costings below.



### **About VolunteeringACT**

VolunteeringACT is the peak body for volunteering, representing over 200 community organisations. We advocate for volunteers and organisations that involve volunteers.

VolunteeringACT has a vision of an inclusive Canberra, and a mission to foster inclusion by enabling participation and connection. VolunteeringACT is part of the National Network of Volunteering Peak Bodies in Australia.

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.

### **Authorisation**

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of VolunteeringACT.

#### **Contacts:**

Jean Giese  
Chief Executive Officer  
e: [ceo@volunteeringact.org.au](mailto:ceo@volunteeringact.org.au)  
p: 02 6251 4060

Heather Fitt  
Senior Manager: Policy and Advocacy  
e: [policy@volunteeringact.org.au](mailto:policy@volunteeringact.org.au)

# CANBERRA FOOD RELIEF SERVICE PROVIDER SNAPSHOT 2026

In December 2025, VolunteeringACT surveyed service providers across the ACT who supply essential food support to people in Canberra. These organisations range from large charities to small volunteer run street pantries with no formal funding. This snapshot reflects responses from 23 organisations, acknowledging that the broader food relief ecosystem extends beyond this group. It summarises major insights into their funding, costs, unmet demand and the challenges faced by both providers and service users.

## Food relief demand in 2025



Food relief providers that were surveyed support, on average, **390 households** each per month

Some organisations are supporting up to **96 households per day**.

## Growing demand



**9%** of organisations surveyed reported that their demand had **doubled** in the last 12 months

**61%** of organisations reported a **25% increase** in people accessing their services compared with 2024.

## High levels of unmet need



All organisations surveyed stated that clients require **more food than they are able to provide**

**91%** of organisations are aware of clients trying to access food when they are not open.

## Spending on food



In 2025 the average amount of money each organisation spent on food per month was \$8,672, a **47% increase** from 2024

**94%** of organisations reported that they purchase food through supermarkets where they have to **pay retail prices**.

**All** organisations reported that they **must purchase food** as donations alone are not enough.

## Funding sources



**70%** of organisations surveyed report their current **funding is insufficient to meet demand**

**Only 30%** of ACT food relief organisations surveyed receive **government funding**.

**61%** rely on fundraising and philanthropic contributions to be able to continue to operate.



## Operational challenges for organisations



The **top five** challenges reported by organisations were

1. **Insufficient food** to meet demand
2. **Lack of volunteers**
3. **Rising cost** of food
4. Limited **funding**
5. Managing **psychosocial hazards** for staff and volunteers

## Challenges faced by clients



The **top five** challenges affecting clients reported by organisations

1. Physical and mental **health challenges**
2. **Homelessness** or insecure housing
3. **Financial hardship**
4. Underemployment or **unemployment**
5. **Loneliness** and social isolation



Across the organisations that responded to the survey, **997 volunteers** supported food relief efforts in 2025 to keep their doors open.



“We cannot provide 4 large families with the quantities of food they need”  
Canberra Food Relief Network member

“Our food pantry operates from a very small space, which significantly limits our capacity to store food and essential items. While demand continues to increase, our physical space and resources restrict our ability to expand the service to a broader community at this time.”  
Canberra Food Relief Network member



Attachment B: List of members of the ACT Food Relief Network

- Ainslie Community Pantry
- Anglicare
- Gordon Community Centre
- Arawang Emergency Relief
- Food Fair at Anglicare Retail
- Blue Door Drop-In Centre
- Braddon Soup Kitchen Salt House Community Centre
- Braddon Street Pantry
- Canberra City Care - Hand Up Food Pantry
- Capital Edge - Community Care Hub
- Cato Place Pantry
- Communities at Work
- Community Services#1
- Companion House
- Early Morning Centre
- Dignity and Desire Women's and Baby Street Pantry
- Foodbank
- Fyshwick Soup Kitchen (vision church)
- Nations Heart FoodHut Co-op
- HelpingACT
- Holy Cross Tuckerbox
- Lanyon Food Hub (YWCA)
- Lyons Food Corner
- MARSS Multicultural
- Mustard Seed Pantry
- O'Connor Community Pantry
- OzHarvest
- Pam's Pantry
- The Pantry at Watson (YWAM)
- The Pantry
- Vinnies Roadhouse
- Rosebush Street Pantry
- Salvos Assessment Line
- Second Bite
- Soup With Soul
- St Benedict's Community Centre
- St Johns Care
- St Vincent de Paul
- UCX Food Pantry
- Uniting Care Kippax
- Woden Community Services - The Little Pantry
- Vine Community Food Car