

Exploring the capacities and responses of the community and
emergency food sector in the Geelong region:

Report 2

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Executive Summary

This is the second report in a series exploring the emergency and community food landscape in the Geelong region. This work seeks to investigate how the emergency and community food aid sector are responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and the constant changes and uncertainty related to welfare payments.

Building on the work of the Give Where You Live Foundation, and their support of the Geelong Food Assistance Network, this study focuses on the various providers of emergency and community food aid in the Geelong region to gain an understanding of how they are responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, and to investigate the relationship between the provider of food aid itself and those in need. This research seeks to enable additional collaboration and assist share results as they come to hand for rapid evidence-informed policy and practice.

Data for this report were collected from 12 of the 40 emergency food aid providers in the region, including community, religious, welfare and/or non-profit organisations. The online survey was open from 14 December 2020 to 6 January 2021.

Around a quarter of responding agencies reported providing food and other aid to more people in the monthly reporting period. Government imposed Covid-19 related public health restrictions continue to impact the operation of services, with many agencies still unable to have face-to-face contact with clients. Some agencies have adapted their services in response to increased need and changes in operational requirements, with some agencies gradually returning to pre-Covid-19 operations. However, the majority of respondents to this survey express continued concern for their clients and the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic continues to have.

This concern appears to be compounded by the added demand for services many agencies experienced during December and the scheduled reduction and discontinuation of government financial support in the form of JobSeeker and JobKeeper. The impacts of these changes to welfare payments will be felt in the coming months as many families will be forced to re-examine their budgets.

We thank all agencies who took time out of a very busy period to complete this survey.

Introduction

While the Covid-19 pandemic has been largely brought under control in Australia, the ongoing impacts including changes to welfare, high unemployment and underemployment, low wage growth, and general uncertainty related to small outbreaks and their implications, will remain into the future. The Christmas and New Year period are known to be challenging for many people. However, this year was especially challenging for many, as family budgets have been put under considerable pressure in 2020. Given we already know that this period is challenging, this survey sought to explore the added impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the responses of emergency and community food agencies.

This is report 2 of 6 exploring the response of emergency and community food agencies in the Geelong region to the immediate and long tail of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This research builds on the work of the Give Where You Live Foundation, and their support of the Geelong Food Assistance Network to explore the response and capacity of emergency food aid agencies in the Geelong region. Understanding who is seeking emergency food relief, the capacity of the agencies to meet this need and any changes in demand will give us a greater understanding of community and emergency food aid provision within the Geelong region. Furthermore, how the sector is functioning in this crisis period, in terms of human resources, food supplies, funding and similar operational functions, will help to illustrate opportunities for additional support and collaboration as we move out of the initial crisis period of the pandemic in Victoria.

Aims

The aim of this project is to explore the various providers of emergency and community food aid in the Geelong region to gain an understanding of how they are dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, and to investigate the relationship between the provider of food aid itself and those in need.

Specifically, the aims of this research are to:

1. Investigate any change in client need as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. Explore problems in meeting demand as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Investigate the implications of food insecurity and food aid use as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Additionally, this research will provide an up to date overview of the emergency and community food aid sector in the Geelong region and will provide a space in which emergency and community food sector and their clients' experiences and inequalities can be reported and recorded. This research seeks to enable additional collaboration and assist share results as they come to hand for rapid evidence-informed policy and practice.

Method

Sample and recruitment

A database of agencies and organisations providing food relief services to people in need in the Geelong region was compiled by the Give Where You Live foundation from information publicly available on the Geelong Food Assistance Network website. This database included information such

as name, email and location, and included 40 individual organisations with 69 email contacts in total. An email containing an overview of the study and a link to the second web-based survey was sent to each organisation. A reminder email was sent out 4 days after the second survey was opened and the survey was open for approximately 3 weeks. Ethics approval was granted by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee [HAEG-H 219_2020].

Data Collection

The survey was open from 14 December 2020 to 6 January 2021. It consisted of 35 closed and open-ended questions with no forced responses. This survey is the second of six and aims to gather continuous data which can be assessed against the first survey to report any changes. This survey covered the following areas of investigation

- General overview of the organisation including; services provided, operating hours, location, and any impacts on the delivery of services due to the Covid-19 Pandemic
- Staffing and funding; including percentage of paid to volunteer staff, where funding comes from and if/how this has changed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic
- Food that the organisation provides; including types of food provided as per the Australian Guide to Healthy eating, sources of the food supply and any changes to this supply, and storage preparation and delivery of food
- Profile of who the organisation supports, including any changes in clientele since the Covid-19 Pandemic, how the changes in government support has affected clients and if the organisation is supporting more children than before

Data analysis

Data from close-ended questions were analysed using basic descriptive statistics to characterise the sample. Categorical data were reported using frequencies and percentages while continuous data were presented as means, medians, and standard deviations. Data were analysed using Excel. To ensure respondent privacy and confidentiality, a participant identification number is used to differentiate between quotes. Data are presented as statistics supported by direct quotes where appropriate.

Results

General characteristics

Of the 40 emails sent, 12 completed surveys were received, slightly lower than the 15 who completed the first survey; this may be accounted for due to the Christmas and New Year period and the increased demand that come with this time. Similar to findings from the first survey, most respondents were community, religious and/or welfare or non-profit organisations.

The number of meals provided by agencies varied considerably, ranging from 30 meals to 10,391 meals, with the median number of meals closer to 420. Most respondents provide a range of foods from the different food groups. The most common food groups provided by respondents were fresh, tinned and frozen vegetables (n=9, 75%), grains and cereals (n=9, 75%), and protein, including chicken, pulses, beef, beans, eggs and fish (n=8, 66%). Two agencies reported that they do not provide food directly to clients, instead providing vouchers and other support.

Referrals for services beyond food assistance were similar this month to the findings of the previous survey. The predominate referral services included accommodation services, family support/domestic violence services, medical and mental healthcare services, and financial counsellors.

The primary population groups serviced by respondents were also varied, and included families (n=11, 92%) migrants (n=9, 75%), people experiencing homelessness (n=8, 66%), people with drug and/or alcohol dependency (n=8, 66%) and young people/children (n=8, 66%). Most respondents reported providing more services to women (n=7, 58%) than men. This is largely consistent with previous reporting.

See table 1 for an outline of the general characteristics of the emergency food providers who responded to the survey.

Table 1. General characteristics of emergency food aid providers (n=12)

Referrals*	
Accommodation support services	6 (50%)
Family support services	4 (33%)
Family/domestic violence services	4 (33%)
Financial counselling	3 (25%)
Mental health service providers	3 (25%)
Addiction specialists	2 (16%)
Medical/healthcare practitioners	1 (8%)
Training/jobs support organisations	1 (8%)
Other	4 (33%)
Primary population*	
Families	11 (92%)
Migrants (including refugees and asylum seekers)	9 (75%)
People experiencing homelessness	8 (66%)
People with drug and/or alcohol dependency	8 (66%)
Young people/children	8 (66%)
People with a disability	7 (58%)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	6 (50%)
International Students	6 (50%)
People from casual/unstable industries	5 (42%)
Aged People	5 (42%)
Other	3 (25%)

*respondents could chose more than one option

Changes in services and need as a result of Covid-19

Agencies are responding to the shifting needs of the community related to Covid-19 in a variety of ways, see table 2 for an overview of these results. In the past month one quarter each reported providing services to more people this month or extended their hours of operation, two agencies reported reducing their hours of operation. The remainder of respondents (n=4, 33%) reported operating much the same as the previous month.

We have opened on Saturdays for the month of December, we have organised two outdoor gatherings in a park in December.

The majority of respondents reported no new challenges to staffing this past month (n=9, 75%). However, respondents suggest that the initial loss of volunteer or paid staff at the start of the pandemic as reported in previously (see report 1) is still a concern.

Our volunteer workforce is mostly of 70 years of age and/or with underlying health conditions. We have been very cautious because of this. Our stores are mainly staffed by

volunteers. Many of these people are in vulnerable age bracket for Covid. Some have not returned to work. We are hoping the new year brings volunteers back. That we won't be able to increase our hours due to lack of volunteers

Government imposed public health restrictions related to Covid-19 continue to impact the operation of many services (n=8, 66%) with the most common effect being the inability to have face-to-face contact with clients, which impacting community meals and meal deliveries.

We do not enter homes on visits. We are unable to let our clientele inside. We are only doing take away meals. Still doing takeaway only

Capacity limits also continue to impact the operation of services especially for those operating a shop front or host indoor gatherings.

We may have only 10 in our shop at one time. We still need to take customers details for contact tracing. Restrictions on indoor gatherings based on square meters. Guidelines for community service sector.

Most respondents (n=8, 66%) reported that government restrictions had not impacted their clients' ability to access services over the past month, with respondents stating that the changes to delivery, including the introduction of digital vouchers assisting with outreach. However, ongoing restrictions continue to negatively impact clients who may not be able to access services as readily as they previously could.

We don't have a drop-in service available

Half of respondents reported that regular clients were using the services at about the same rate as the previous month. However, of particular concern were the one third of respondents who had noticed an increase in clients seeking emergency relief for children, related to a combination of Christmas expenses and the end of the school year.

Yes- particular lead up to xmas and since school finished.

Respondents reported changes in the number of people accessing their services this month, with half (n=6) reporting an increase in client numbers. Some respondents (n=5, 42%) reported an increase in people who were casually employed pre-Covid-19 accessing services, with hospitality and manufacturing listed as common industries effected.

For the most part, food supply remained unchanged for respondents this month, with donation partners maintaining their supply. However, some respondents (n=5, 42%) reported challenges in getting enough quality food, food for specific cultural groups, and foods for those with dietary requirements, a problem that was also expressed in the previous report. Respondents continued to be concerned about future donation quantities and the return of panic buying if the Covid-19 pandemic leads to an additional lockdown.

As long as there is no rush on the supermarkets no [*we have no concerns*], although we are finding it more difficult to source specific items for our emergency food cupboard.

Most respondents reported no change to their funding this month (n=9, 75%); two respondents reporting receiving additional funding.

We always tend to receive additional public donations in December. People have also contributed their government assistance payment for seniors.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, temporary government supports have been available to a number of respondents' clients, through either JobKeeper or JobSeeker which included a Coronavirus supplement. However, the Coronavirus supplement has already started to gradually reduce and is expected to discontinue at the end of March along with the JobKeeper payments. This was of great concern to almost all respondents (n=10, 83%), who predict a greater need for food aid services in 2021.

We are expecting a high increase [of clients] in the new year. We expect to see more clients in early 2021. We see things are getting tougher with less supports in place.

As indicated in the December report, respondents stated the lead up to the Christmas and New Year break as one of the busiest times of year for emergency and community food relief sector. This month many respondents commented on the financial stress added during the Christmas period for a lot of clients and the implications this has for emergency and community food assistance.

Just due to high demand and leading up to Christmas, people are stressed. [They] can't afford food and xmas presents for children.

As Victoria settles into a situation referred to as 'Covid-Normal', some respondents have started to resume pre-Covid-19 service capacity, with others already adapting to the new restrictions and requirements. However, there remains concern from some agencies that they will never get back to their full capacity.

We were forced to shift premises at the beginning of COVID and now have a much better centre with much greater accessibility. In the new year, we will revert to our clients doing a "shop" rather than us packing food parcels. Hopefully we may soon be able to enter homes on visits- [being] inside the home can help assess assistance required.

Table 2. Changes in services and need as a result of Covid-19 this month (n=12)

Impact on operation as a result of Covid-19 Pandemic*	
No change	4 (33%)
Providing services to more people	3 (25%)
Extended hours of operation	3 (25%)
Reduced hours of operation	2 (16%)
Impact of government restrictions on agency	
Impacted by government restrictions	8 (66%)
No Impact	4 (33%)
Impact on funding amount since Covid-19 Pandemic	
No Impact	9 (75%)
Increase in funding	2 (16%)
Reduction in funding	1 (8%)
Experienced challenges getting ^{^*}	
Enough quality food	6 (100%)
Food for those with dietary requirements	4 (75%)
Culturally appropriate foods	3 (50%)
Changes in number of clients accessing services	
No change	4 (33%)
Numbers have increased	6 (50%)
Numbers have decreased	2 (16%)
Frequency of use by regular clients	
No change	6 (50%)
Increased	4 (33%)

Decreased	2 (16%)
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*respondents could chose more than one option

^not answered by all respondents

Implications for food security

While Victoria moves into a more stable 'Covid Normal', with restrictions easing and some emergency food aid services coming back online, the initial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to linger. Volunteer staff, who are often over the age of 70 and are at risk of Covid-19, may remain out of the emergency and community food workforce. This increases pressure on emergency and community food aid, especially during the busiest month of the year, as services experience increased demand. Demand on services is expected to increase yet again in the coming months as JobKeeper and JobSeeker are reduced, and clients experience unprecedented financial stress.

Overall, the past month has been challenging for many services, singling the end of a very challenging year. A concern for many agencies is whether this level of service can be maintained for all who will need it into 2021.

Our motto is to respond to crisis- not in crisis, it has been a very long 12 months for our community, our staff and volunteers. I am hoping our endurance and stamina can be maintained. Our community, staff and volunteers have demonstrated an incredible amount of tenacity, resilience and compassion.

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