

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

Report 3

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Executive Summary

This is the third 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 8 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 12 January 2021 to 26 January 2021.

While the amount of meals provided by respondents this month was a lower than last month, likely due to a lower response rate and the inclusion of Christmas meals in last month, there was a marked increase in the elderly and people from casual and unstable industries seeking food aid services. In addition to this a higher concern was expressed by some respondents in relation to food supply consistency and quality.

These additional burdens on the emergency and community food aid sector are expected to be compounded by the additional demand for services when government supports such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper are discontinued in the coming months. A concern deeply expressed by most agencies.

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 3 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 2 weeks. Ethics approval was granted by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee [HAEG-H 219_2020].

Data Collection

The survey was open from 12 January 2021 to 26 January 2021. It consisted of 35 closed and open-ended questions with no forced responses. This survey is the third of six and aims to gather continuous data which can be assessed against previous surveys 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, 8 completed surveys were received, slightly lower than the 12 who completed the second survey. Most respondents had completed the first or second survey, except for one. Like findings from earlier surveys, most respondents were community, religious and/or welfare or non-profit organisations.

Of the 5 agencies that provided meals as part of their food relief services this month, the number of meals provided by these agencies varied considerably, ranging from 100 meals to 2270 meals, with an average number of meals closer to 1160. This is a lower number of meals provided compared with the previous month. This is possibly due to the lower response rate and the inclusion of Christmas meals in the previous survey. Agencies also reported providing groceries and vouchers, food parcels and Christmas hampers. 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 fruit (n=8, 100%) and grains and cereals (n=8, 100%), the rest of the food groups including meat and protein, vegetables, dairy and alternatives and fats and oils were provided by 88% (n=7) of respondents. When

asked if they had sufficient supply of these food groups to meet demand, most respondents had no supply issues, except for one respondent who reporting insufficient meat and protein foods and fruit.

When asked about referring clients to other services, only 4 respondents answered this question and of those 4 only 2 referred clients on to other services. This is fewer than the previous month when 46% (n=5) of respondents referred clients to other services. This month 50% (n=2) of respondents referred clients to family/domestic violence services, family support services and mental health service providers. Other referrals included accommodation services, addiction specialists, educational support services and financial counsellors.

The distribution of primary population groups serviced by respondents was similar to previous months. The most serviced group were families (n=8, 100%), however, unlike the previous month aged people (n=7, 88%) and people from casual/unstable industries were the next most serviced group. This month all respondents reported servicing men and women with an average distribution of 46% women to 54% men, with one respondent also reporting servicing non-binary clients.

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=8)

Referrals*^	
Family support services	2 (50%)
Family/domestic violence services	2 (50%)
Mental health service providers	2 (50%)
Accommodation support services	1 (25%)
Addiction specialists	1 (25%)
Financial counselling	1 (25%)
Education Support Services	1 (25%)
Primary population*	
Families	8 (100%)
Aged People	7 (88%)
People from casual/unstable industries	6 (75%)
Migrants (including refugees and asylum seekers)	5 (63%)
People with drug and/or alcohol dependency	5 (63%)
People with a disability	5 (63%)
People experiencing homelessness	4 (50%)
Young people/children	3 (38%)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	3 (38%)
International Students	3 (38%)
Other	1 (12%)

*respondents could chose more than one option, ^not answered by all respondents

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 most respondents reported that they were operating much the same as the previous month however one respondent reported providing more services to clients and one respondent reported a reduction in their hours of operations.

The majority of respondents reported no new challenges to staffing this past month (n=6, 75%). However, one respondent reported a loss of paid staff while another reported a loss of a volunteer staff member. The initial loss of volunteer or paid staff at the start of the pandemic as reported previously (see report 1) is still a concern and appears to be continually impacting agencies

If Covid-19 Flares up again our aged volunteers will cease work in stores. Yes [we are concerned], we think that we might lose some of our volunteers as they may not come back once we reopen. [We are concerned] that we won't be able to increase our hours when our clientele need us too, due to not having enough volunteers.

Government imposed public health restrictions related to Covid-19 continue to impact the operation of many services (n=6, 75%) with the most common effect being the inability to have face-to-face contact with clients and capacity limits for indoor gatherings, which impacts community meals and home visits. However, the gradual easing of restrictions as Covid-19 case numbers continue to remain low appears to be easing the impact on some respondents.

They [impact of government restrictions] are minimal, our community meal is held outdoors, we are adhering to various Covid safe regulations and are able to run our service effectively

Most respondents (n=7, 88%) reported that government restrictions had not impacted their clients' ability to access services over the past month, and most respondents reported regular clients were using their services at the same frequency as last month (n=7, 88%), with one reporting less frequency of regular clients (12%). This is like last month, as is the concerning increase in people seeking emergency relief for children (n=3, 38%).

Around half of respondents reported that the number of people accessing their services this month were roughly the same, however 38% (n=3) reported an increase, ranging from 75-370 more people, and 12% (n=1) reported a decrease of 97 people. 25% (n=2) of respondents reported an increase in people who were previously casually employed accessing their services, and like last month they predominantly came from the hospitality and manufacturing industries.

Unlike last month some respondents reported a change in the supply of food from delivery partners; 50% of respondents (n=4) reported a decrease in supply from organisations such as FoodBank and SecondBite as well as community donations. A lack of consistence in food supply was a common concern voiced by respondents.

Our rescue pick-ups have decreased as supermarkets are watching the [wastage]. The variation in supply is concerning, and can be very difficult to navigate. We generally get through, but it does cause extra strain on our staff and volunteers. Unreliability of adequate supply is a problem that means many last-minute preparations are made.

In addition, 25% (n=1) of respondents reported issues getting certain types of foods, with 50% (n=2) not getting enough quality food, one was not able to acquire culturally appropriate foods or foods for those with dietary requirements, specifically gluten free foods. These particular supply issues are consistent with last month.

Most respondents reported no change to their funding this month (n=6, 75%); however, one (12%) respondent reported less funding this month and one (12%) respondent reported receiving more funding this month.

January is usually a time of less donations.

We have received an additional grant from the Anthony Costa Foundation for our Community Meal Program.

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. The Coronavirus supplement has already started to gradually reduce and is expected to discontinue at the end of March along with the JobKeeper payments. Just like last month this continues to be of great concern to many respondents (n=6, 75%), who predict a greater need for food aid services in 2021.

[We are] very concerned. We're expecting greater numbers to come in over the next few months.

The concern over changes to JobKeeper and JobSeeker was further highlighted by a focus on this issue when asked about any general concerns the respondents had in meeting the needs of their clients.

We are concerned the needs of our community will increase when JobKeeper and JobSeeker ends and our community will need more food, and we expect new faces, or those who haven't been around in a while.

Yes, when JobKeeper/Seeker are reduced we expect many new clients.

In addition, respondents also expressed concern for the poor financial situation of their clients. They also expressed concern relating to organisational issues such as poor food supply or lack of resources that would enable them to provide more food aid services, such as a food delivery van.

Table 2. Changes in services and need as a result of Covid-19 this month (n=8)

Impact on operation as a result of Covid-19 Pandemic*	
No change	6 (75%)
Providing services to more people	1 (12%)
Reduced hours of operation	1 (12%)
Impact of government restrictions on agency	
Impacted by government restrictions	6 (75%)
No Impact	2 (25%)
Impact on funding amount since Covid-19 Pandemic	
No Impact	6 (75%)
Increase in funding	1 (12%)
Reduction in funding	1 (12%)
Experienced challenges getting ^{^*}	
Enough quality food	2 (50%)
Food for those with dietary requirements	1 (25%)
Culturally appropriate foods	1 (25%)
Changes in number of clients accessing services	
No change	4 (50%)
Numbers have increased	3 (38%)
Numbers have decreased	1 (12%)
Frequency of use by regular clients	
No change	7 (88%)
Decreased	1 (12%)

*respondents could chose more than one option ^not answered by all respondents

Implications for food security

The month of January has not been without its Covid-19 struggles with new outbreaks interstate affecting movement across state borders and providing a catalyst for intermittent changes in government-imposed restrictions. The continuation of government restrictions has a great impact on how agencies operate; while some are seeing the return of services, many report the impact of capacity restrictions has been difficult as has the continued reduction in face-to-face services. Emergency and community food aid services are experiencing increased demand from elderly people and people from casual or unstable industries. Many agencies continue to express concern for the future of their clients and their organisation's ability to service them as cuts to government payments such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker are expected to discontinue in coming months. Despite the challenges already experienced and the inevitable challenges ahead agencies have continued to adapt and provide compassionate and much needed care for the community.

We've changed our ways and thinking for the better good of our clients.

At our service, community connection, personal interactions and relationships are vital in our food access programs. Asking for food can be incredible difficult, having the support you need and friendly faces can assist in the process.

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