

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

Report 6

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Prepared by Dr Fiona McKay, Deakin University

For more information, please contact:
Dr Fiona McKay
School of Health & Social Development, Faculty of Health
Deakin University
Locked Bag 20000, Geelong, VIC 3220
+61 3 92517183
fiona.mckay@deakin.edu.au



Executive Summary

This is the final 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 11 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 15 April 2021 to 30 April 2021.

Consistent with the previous month, respondents reported a stabilisation of need and supply this month. Respondent were able to source and supply foods to those in need. As the Covid-19 situation stabilises, concerns are now turning to chronic problems within our society, including how to support people experience domestic violence and homelessness.

Once again, we thank all agencies who took time to complete this and any of the previous surveys.

Introduction

Victoria was once again largely Covid-19 free in April, and with vaccines becoming more and more available, things are starting to feel like they are getting back to normal. This tentative normality remains precarious, with small outbreaks in Sydney and the emerging catastrophic Covid-19 situation in India ensuring that Covid-19 is not far from our minds. With JobKeeper ending and the housing market continuing to skyrocket, there are concerns for those who are precarious financial situations, however, despite border closers the economy appears to be in recovery.

This is the final report 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. Ethics approval was granted by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee [HAEG-H 219_2020].

Data Collection

The survey was open from 15 April 2021 to 30 April 2021. It consisted of 35 closed and open-ended questions with no forced responses. This survey is the fifth 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, eleven completed surveys were received, this is a similar response rate to previous months, with most respondents also having completed at least one previous survey.

Of the seven agencies that provided meals as part of their food relief services this month, the number of meals averaged 775, this is higher than previous months, with some agencies also reporting that they are now providing food in other ways, for example in the form of vouchers.

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 and vegetables and breads, grains and cereals, milks and other dairy products (n=9, 82%); this is similar to previous reporting periods – reflecting some stabilisation in supply. When asked if they had sufficient supply of these food groups to meet demand, most respondents had no supply issues. Similar to other reporting periods, respondents reported that the main challenge was with supplying protein, including chicken, pulses, beef, beans, eggs, and fish.

Respondents reported referring clients to a range of services, most notably to accommodation services (n=7, 64%). Like previous months, there continues to be concern that people experiencing

homelessness and who are sleeping rough will increase, unlike other reporting periods, there was also a noticeable increase in the number of agencies who were concerned about domestic violence and that people experiencing violence not receiving the assistance they need.

The distribution of primary population groups serviced by respondents was similar to previous months. The most serviced group were families people experiencing homelessness, and people with a disability (n=10, 90%). Like the previous month, the gender split for recipients of the services was largely even this month.

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=11)

Referrals*^	
Accommodation support services	7 (63%)
Family/domestic violence services	5 (45%)
Mental health service providers	5 (45%)
Financial counselling	3 (27%)
Family support services	2 (18%)
Primary population*^	
Families	10 (90%)
People experiencing homelessness	10 (90%)
People with a disability	10 (90%)
People with drug and/or alcohol dependency	9 (82%)
People from casual/unstable industries	8 (72%)
International Students	7 (63%)
Aged People	7 (63%)
Young people/children	6 (55%)
Migrants (including refugees and asylum seekers)	6 (55%)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	4 (36%)

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

Changes in services and need because of Covid-19

In this reporting month, like last month, Victoria was Covid-19 free all month. This stabilization in the local Covid-19 situation has allowed further certainty for many people.

While Covid-19 related restrictions have been progressively relaxed across the state, eight respondents reporting that they were still adhering to restrictions. Despite these restrictions, seven respondents were operating the same as they had in the previous month, and four were providing services to more people. This is a positive move over the previous month where some respondents were temporary closed or providing a reduced service. This suggests a return to normality.

On a positive note, most respondents reported that their staffing was stable this month. This is an improvement on previous months where respondents had reported that they had lost staff, especially volunteer staff, leading many agencies to worry about how they would fulfil their future needs.

Most respondents reported that the number of people accessing their services this month were roughly the same or had increased compared to the past month (n=9, 82%), this is consistent with the previous reporting period.

Respondents reported consistent supply of food from providers, with most food coming from Foodbank. Like last month, respondents were not overly concerned about supply, there was a slight increase in the number of agencies who were purchasing more goods than were donated.

At the present time we are managing to obtain sufficient supplies of all we need.

All respondents this month reported that there were no changes to their funding this month.

Table 2. Changes in services and need as a result of Covid-19 this month (n=11)

Impact on operation as a result of Covid-19 Pandemic	
No change	7 (64%)
Providing services to more people	4 (36%)
Impact of government restrictions on agency	
Impacted by government restrictions	8 (72%)
No Impact	3 (28%)
Impact on funding amount since Covid-19 Pandemic	
No Impact	11 (100%)
Frequency of use by regular clients	
No change	6 (54%)
Increased	3 (28%)
Decreased	2 (18%)

^not answered by all respondents

Implications for food security

The past two reporting periods have been free of lockdowns and have seen a reduction in Covid-19 related restrictions. The main theme of this reporting period is that of stability. Agencies reported that funding and supply were largely stable and that staffing and funding were similar to previous months. While it is likely that Covid-19 will continue to disrupt out lives for some time still to come, this month allowed for some settling in of this new-normal. Hopefully this means that we have moved away from the acute crisis. Our attentions now turn to how we deal with chronic food insecurity and hunger among the community.