

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 20 August 2024

MEMBERS

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WITNESSES

Jerry Ham, Group Manager, Homelessness and Community Support, Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania); and
Warren Elliott, External Communications Manager,
Matthew Daniels, Supervisor, Magpie Nest Cafe, and
Adam Thomson, Head Chef, Magpie Nest Cafe, Salvation Army.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Joining us for this session we have got members from Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania) and also from the Salvation Army. Joining us are Jerry Ham of Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania), Mr Warren Elliott from the Salvation Army and Mr Matthew Daniels and Mr Adam Thomson from the Salvation Army as well. Welcome, gentlemen.

Before continuing I will quickly introduce the committee to you. My name is Trung Luu – I am the Chair; to my left, Mr Michael Galea; and Mr Aiv Puglielli, Dr Renee Heath and Mr Joe McCracken.

Before we continue I will quickly read this information to you. Regarding evidence that you are providing us today, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provision of the Legislative Council's standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will also be made public and posted on the committee website.

Just for the Hansard record, could you please state your name, your title and the organisation you are representing.

Jerry HAM: Jerry Ham. I am Group Manager, Homelessness and Community Support, for Uniting Vic.Tas.

Warren ELLIOTT: Warren Elliott, External Communications Manager for the Salvation Army of Victoria.

Matthew DANIELS: Matthew Daniels. I am the Magpie Nest Cafe Supervisor for the Salvation Army.

Adam THOMSON: Adam Thomson. I am the Head Chef from the Magpie Nest Cafe, Salvation Army.

The CHAIR: Welcome. We might ask you for some menus later on. Thank you once again for coming here, and thank you very much for your time for your submission and actually coming here and giving evidence today. I know we have got your submission already, but I will open it up for you to make an opening statement before the committee asks you questions. So please.

Jerry HAM: Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity to speak on behalf of Uniting Vic.Tas. I would just like to acknowledge the lands of the Wurundjeri people that we are meeting on today and pay respects to elders past and present.

Uniting is the community service organisation of the Uniting Church, so it delivers services and programs across Victoria and Tasmania, and we bring to the committee the experiences and voices of consumers who have faced or are at risk of facing food insecurity. I would like to take the opportunity to thank them for sharing their stories. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on their behalf. We often work alongside individuals and families on low and even, in the case of our asylum seeker program, for example, no income, who have been historically facing financial disadvantage. So this is the lens through which we bring our experience of the drivers and the impacts and the solutions to food insecurity in Victoria.

Not having an income that covers the basics of life forces people to make impossible choices, and that does impact on their security, their health and also their wellbeing. It can be the choice between skipping a meal and experiencing homelessness. It can be the choice between your child's medication and paying the rent. It can be the choice between warmth and having the lights on, and food is often the first thing that a person cuts back on to meet their or their family's basic needs.

Every day at Uniting services we do see that these choices are becoming more common and more difficult for Victorians. In 2023 Uniting released a report for the rental crisis inquiry, and that laid bare the crippling effect the rising cost of living is having on the most vulnerable and low income earners across Victoria and Tasmania. The report found that 92 per cent of respondents were cutting back on food and groceries due to costs; parents, carers and people with a disability were skipping meals, even if they were cooking for others; and around three-quarters of respondents reported that the rising cost of living had had any impact on their financial situation and security – that was 78 per cent – and 70 per cent had an impact on their ability to eat well.

It is hard to talk about these issues as just cost of living, which has become something of a catchphrase recently of course, because it does skate over the impact of the financial stress that many individuals and families that we see at Uniting are facing. It does not convey the depth of what people are dealing with every day to live at all, but especially in Australia in a modern Western society, they should never be needing to make those kinds of choices. This is the cost of surviving.

A mother in Victoria spoke of the cutbacks and difficult decisions she was needing to make on a daily basis, and this is a quote from that mother:

There are some days that I can't go out in the car due to the cost. We can't afford to have the heater on at night. We use blankets and our house has damp. We can't afford to use the electricity at night. We have to use torches at night instead of turning the lights on. The kids can't have baths any more. I've had to limit everyone to having 5-minute showers.

Being employed no longer protects households from food insecurity and financial hardship, and more and more we are working with individuals and families who are accessing our emergency relief services where they are working families or individuals and their income is now insufficient to keep up with the soaring costs of food, housing and other essentials. So when people approach our emergency relief services, their needs often extend beyond food. You often find that the needs they may have overlap with their food insecurity and also put extra stress on other aspects of their need. But we are increasingly referring people to support services for mental health, domestic violence and alcohol and other drug issues that they face. So our emergency relief services are not a solution to food insecurity on their own, but they do play an important role in supporting people at a time of crisis, providing a safety net as they work themselves back into a situation of more self-independence. So we are often acting as a softer entry point through our emergency relief services, connecting people with the support that they need to live a life of wellness. Again another quote:

The government needs to know how it makes a person feel – it dehumanises you. It's like you are blamed, like you can't manage your money. Some services want you to go to a budget course if you turn up too many times ... It's dehumanising. It dehumanises you when you can't afford food and have to go to organisations for food and food vouchers.

Finally, we cannot address food insecurity without also addressing other sources of financial stress in Victoria, particularly including the shortage of affordable housing. At the same time, raising income supports to a livable rate would be the single most effective measure to fund food security and address those needs. The complex interplay of these factors means that food insecurity is not an issue that can be solved, we believe, by the Victorian government alone. Rather, it needs a coordinated and consistent effort from all levels of government. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Ham. Warren, would you like to give an opening statement?

Warren ELLIOTT: I would like to say thank you for this opportunity to appear before the committee today. I would also like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, the Wurundjeri people, and by paying our respect to elders past and present. I would also like to point out, which is in our submission, that at the Salvation Army we have an inclusion statement that is really important for us, and I think it sort of deals with some of the aspects of people that we are serving, particularly in this issue – that is, that we value and serve and include people of all cultures, languages, abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and intersex status. We are committed to providing services and programs that are fully inclusive, and we are committed to the safety and wellbeing of people of all ages,

particularly children. The chief values of the Salvation Army are integrity, compassion, respect, diversity and collaboration, and I think all of those really play an important part of what we are talking about today.

Food insecurity is a major part of the work of the Salvation Army, but it is part of a mosaic of disadvantage which is pushing people into financial hardship. One of the largest tiles of this mosaic is unaffordable housing. Our core services across Victoria help people every day who need help, providing hampers, community meals, food pantries and emergency relief. We also see how food stress has negative impacts on the health of community members. Not knowing where your next meal is going to be coming from or how to provide for your family can become all consuming for people. The reality that many of our community members choose between heating and eating every day is crushing not only to their physical but also to their mental health. Providing food relief can have such an instantly restorative impact, but it can also just be an entry point for our services to provide wraparound and holistic support for those who may present with food insecurity but who have much deeper underlying issues. Food use, access and availability are important, but the long-term goal of food security requires us to address underlying disadvantages. So we are really grateful to the Legislative Council and this committee for drawing attention to this issue of food insecurity throughout the state, and we look forward to being of assistance both today and in the overall process. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Warren. Matthew or Adam, would you like to make any statements at all?

Matthew DANIELS: I just want to say really quickly: thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to speak today. We see lots of different people coming through the Salvation Army cafe. A lot of them are people in need, and to be able to have this platform for them to have a voice is really, really important, so thank you. That is all I wanted to say.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks for coming in. I will quickly open up before we go to the rest of the committee. From your submission, basically I know that the cost of living draws on various aspects and people have to make choices. I think, as you mentioned, housing affordability is a big factor. People have to make a choice on whether they choose to omit the food or heating to subsidise the rent. From your experience or interactions with clients, looking at the lower- and no-income cohorts, what are the main drivers besides the costs? I know the cost you have emphasised is housing affordability, which we have had an inquiry into. Besides housing itself, is there anything else that would actually drive people to make choices on food and other essential things they need?

Jerry HAM: I will jump in. Thanks, Trung, for the question. I think we cannot underestimate the housing affordability aspect. I think it is probably a quite well-known and publicly known formula that it is ideal if someone spends, say, about a third of their income on their housing so that then two-thirds is available for other costs. But in many cases we are finding that either people do not have housing at all available to them or those costs have risen to maybe two-thirds of their income or even more. So it means that the disposable amount of money that they then have for consumables and other purchases is just really, really minimal.

I would point to the levels of income support for those people who need to receive it. Uniting is a member of the Raise the Rate campaign. So we definitely support increasing the rates of JobSeeker, youth allowance, Austudy, Abstudy, special benefit and parenting payments, and we would like to call for those payments to increase to at least \$80 a day. I think the issues underpinning food insecurity are structurally driven, but it comes down to cause and effect. The effect is people do not have enough money in their pocket. If you are vulnerable and you are on an income support payment, then that is not enough to sustain you – you know, purchasing food, paying your rent and all the costs of utilities and bills – so it forces people to make those difficult choices we have both spoken about.

Warren ELLIOTT: I would back up all of those things that Jerry has said. We also really support increasing the basic payments – JobSeeker and those kinds of things – recognising that those are federal government things in their area, but we have asked in our recommendations that the Victorian government work with the Commonwealth government to meaningfully increase those payments.

I guess another thing that we see is people in debt. So another one of our recommendations is for regulations around the buy now, pay later loans and similar sources of consumer credit to prevent people from being forced into unmanageable debt, which can spiral out of hand very quickly.

Those are just some of the things that we are seeing, and housing affordability, the cost of rent and all those kinds of things are key drivers, as you have heard a number of people say now. So we would just back up those statistics.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will go to buy now, pay later in a minute. The reason I want to ask how many of your clientele are in social housing and how many are in private rentals is because at the moment the government are trying to address this social housing aspect. That is why I want to ask: besides housing, is there something to address separately? I just want to see how many of your clientele actually do access social housing and what percentage roughly are private renters.

Warren ELLIOTT: I would have to take that on notice and get those figures. I do not have those in front of me at the moment, but certainly we could attempt to provide those figures for you.

Jerry HAM: Yes, and I would do likewise.

The CHAIR: We are looking at a low- and no-income cohort, the clientele you represent. I am hoping they have good access. It will be a higher percentage of those who have access to social housing. That is why I was looking at that particular cohort.

Jerry HAM: Uniting, across the state, as a housing provider runs about 700 social housing tenancies, so we certainly recognise that cohort. Many of the people who come in to us are experiencing homelessness, and they are also in social housing with other providers. It will make up a large percentage of the clients that we see. But, like Warren, I would take it on notice, to come back to you with the exact figures.

The CHAIR: If they are not, then hopefully the approach in relation to our social housing from the government will assist in that aspect as well moving forward.

Warren ELLIOTT: If I can just point out too the whole idea around homelessness, just again be aware of the fact that only about 11 per cent of homeless people are actually sleeping rough on the streets. These guys would have firsthand knowledge of their experiences and would see them every day. But there is also a high percentage of people that are couch surfing or living in insecure rentals or other places – in cars and those sorts of things. So the percentage of people actually living on the streets is not high – you would know this. But people are struggling and moving around through homelessness, and there are the impacts that that has on them – mental health and all those other things. One of our peak recommendations is about looking to housing availability, the recommendation of providing more homes.

Matthew DANIELS: Just to that point, just recently we had a family come in with a five-month-old baby who could not find any accommodation, so they came to the Salvos to look for that kind of accommodation. Unfortunately, that story is not one that is unique or different. It is something that we see often, maybe not with a little baby, but definitely families coming in who have, for whatever reason, found themselves in a place where they are unable to find accommodation. We do get lots of people coming to us as well who are unable to find accommodation because of their mental health or their drug and alcohol addiction. But most of the time lately it is because they cannot find anywhere available to them.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Time is running short, so I will quickly go to this: one of your recommendations is on the buy now, pay later scheme. I know a lot of people do access that, especially those who have low incomes or no income. It is easy access to quick money. I am wondering what sorts of recommendations you recommend, also education and information to your clientele, in relation to that buy now, pay later scheme.

Warren ELLIOTT: We have Moneycare financial counsellors that work with people on that. They are just helping people to work through those debts at this point in time. I think something in our recommendations goes to that. I cannot speak to that personally myself; it is not my area of expertise. But certainly something around government regulation around protecting people from those things, because as you have said, it spirals out of hand very quickly for people, and then they are just chasing their tail trying to pay off debts and then cannot afford food, and it flows on from there.

Jerry HAM: Uniting is part of a sector of providers of financial counselling services that are funded through Consumer Affairs Victoria. We see in the services that we provide that the buy now, pay later schemes are very prevalent amongst the clients that we see and the spiralling debt that people get into to. So obviously through

those financial counselling services we look to try to assist and stop the spiral to help people consolidate those debts and move into a situation where they can have a manageable and sustainable unit repayment plan. It definitely has a very big impact. When people are needing to make immediate and difficult choices, those schemes obviously can be very accessible as well these days, very electronically easy to access. That is a very strong driver to people's use of them. I think as well that we are seeing through our other services, our homelessness entry points and our emergency relief services, that the debt aspect is a large part of the other needs that we recognise people have. So while we have those financial counselling programs, there are other providers that provide in other parts of the state than us, we see it as an increasing area where we need more services and more financial counsellors – or particularly even financial capability workers, people who can work with people on budgeting and debt relief before it needs to get through to the very pointy end, as well would be of very great assistance.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Michael.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for joining us today, all. Just to start with something that both submissions have touched upon, and I might start with you, Mr Ham: you spoke in your submission about the metro and regional divide, and we have also heard evidence today that food insecurity is often more pronounced in those regional and rural areas. I am curious firstly to know if there is any great disparity you have noticed within metropolitan Melbourne and within regional Victoria. Obviously, Traralgon is a different situation from Orbost, for example, but also Pakenham is a very different situation from Prahran. I am wondering if there are any trends or evidence, whether data based or anecdotal, that you can tell us about.

Jerry HAM: Again that is something I would probably need to come back to you with the detail on. We run a number of sites across metropolitan, regional and rural, and I know that there are differences and disparities, as you say, on the metropolitan basis alone. For example, we have services that are in Prahran versus Footscray or Broadmeadows, so I would be able to come back with some data that shows that. But as you pick up as well, we definitely identify that the regional and the rural areas are more greatly impacted, and one of our recommendations is that we do introduce policies that reflect those higher costs in those regional and rural areas, and that is to increase the distribution of food relief in those locations.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Mr Elliott, your submission spoke about as well as food deserts, food swamps, which I thought was an interesting term for where we have perhaps a large amount of very unhealthy foods, and especially you identified the outer suburban areas. As an outer suburban MP I can definitely see some truth in that. Can you talk to me a little bit more about that and where the Salvos see this issue and what the best way to address it is?

Warren ELLIOTT: I think it just comes down to an availability thing, so that people can get to places where there is healthy food available that is just as easy and as accessible as some of those healthier options. We recognise that that is working with local councils as much as it is a state issue and making sure that people have access to appropriate food for their cultural groups as well. That is one of the things that we see across the state, that different areas have different cultural groups that are accessing services in bigger or smaller numbers and just having appropriate food available for them – not just healthy food but culturally appropriate food for them.

Michael GALEA: Absolutely, and those local community-based groups, be they culturally based or around sport or anything else, they will play a big role, I am guessing, in bridging that gap. As far as you would see, would that be fair?

Warren ELLIOTT: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

Warren ELLIOTT: And also I am not sure if this speaks to your question, but one of our recommendations is around just the readiness of communities, particularly those in remote areas that are disaster prone, so that there is a readiness for when those things strike again. I was on the ground in Shepparton for the flood in 2022 and we were having to airlift food in when it got shut down for that week, so just making sure that there are places that are available for when disaster strikes as well, and the readiness plans are there in place.

Michael GALEA: Just on that, can you share some of your experiences with how that all worked in Shepparton in 2022 and any lessons for government or for the Parliament to learn from that in terms of – God forbid – a future event, but how we can best manage that and best support services like yours, like Uniting and like Sikh Volunteers Australia to deliver that food in the most efficient way so that you are not having to jump through too many hurdles? How do we do that?

Warren ELLIOTT: I think it actually worked quite well at that time.

Michael GALEA: Good to hear.

Warren ELLIOTT: Without doing a formal submission on that, but we were able to access a helicopter fleet. We were cooking meals in Bendigo, flying them up to Shepparton and dispersing them at the local emergency evacuation centre, so that worked well. But there were obviously issues around that. There were some airlift issues and some safety issues and all those kinds of things. In Shepparton there were definitely cultural issues around that as well with culturally appropriate food, and the Sikhs and the Salvation Army and other groups were able to work together. So I think it is having that pre-plan. I know every municipality has a disaster relief plan in place, but making sure that those are all worked and workable moving into that. We worked in collaboration with a number of other groups at that time, and it seemed to work really well at the time.

Michael GALEA: That is very good to hear. Thank you for your answers. Thank you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Good afternoon. Thank you for coming in and for the work that you do right across the community. I begin with the Salvation Army representatives we have here today. I understand in your submission, recommendation 4 you have that the Victorian government work with the Commonwealth to enhance supermarket competition. I find this a really interesting recommendation. You have been really explicit in it, which I think is excellent. For example, should the Victorian government be subsidising or supporting perhaps new co-ops to run in local communities – perhaps in regional or rural areas? What do you think about that? Tell me more about this recommendation and where it has come from.

Warren ELLIOTT: Let me just go to my book. So the recommendation is on page iv, but what we are saying there is transport of fresh produce is often an issue. We talked about that before around the costs of those kinds of things. Sorry, now that I have found my page, remind me of your question again.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So the first offer that I made is perhaps subsidising or supporting new co-ops to run in local communities across the state as an example of the Victorian government working to enhance supermarket competition across the community. That key phrase you have got there: ‘Victorian government working with the Commonwealth’. Rather than delegating it purely to the feds to deal with this issue, there are levers, there are tools that the Victorian government has that they could be implementing. Transport is another that you mentioned.

Warren ELLIOTT: I think it is that influence that, in speaking with the state government and with Commonwealth government in those areas, and the influence that you bring to bear on those kinds of things. There are also local community groups that work, and Salvation Army has a number of those places where we have community gardens, and not co-ops, but we provide food distribution. We have a material aid centre that is based here in Brunswick and that gets in about 20 pallets of food and goods each week and then we disperse that throughout the state to Salvation Army centres where people can then access it. So there are things in place where people can come and get those things. But yes, having affordable co-ops where people can come and, as we have heard, buy with dignity out of their own funds rather than being given things all the time would be really helpful.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Awesome. I just wanted to pick up something you have said earlier, Jerry, as well, around the idea of cause and effect. Coles, for one of the more recent financial years, posted – what is it – a net profit increase of 4.8 per cent to \$1.1 billion. Meanwhile, your research has – what was it – 92 per cent of respondents reporting food and groceries as their biggest pressure point. Should the state government be doing something about that? Is that acceptable?

Jerry HAM: I do not think that is acceptable. The figures that you have just read and the contrast there speaks for itself.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you think that the higher check-out prices people are paying are a key driving factor of food insecurity in the state?

Jerry HAM: I think it is the evidence that we bring of people's experience that it is, absolutely. And we also concur with the Salvation Army's submission and definitely recommend – and we have looked at those – looking at supermarket price competition in line with the Commonwealth government and looking at regulations, because those check-out prices are definitely a big factor in the cost pressures that people are seeing.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. And with my remaining time, given the work you do and the communities that you are dealing with, would you say that the provision of food in the state of Victoria is an essential service?

Jerry HAM: Absolutely.

Warren ELLIOTT: Absolutely, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And therefore, should the state government be regulating that, as such, as an essential service under the Essential Services Commission? That is one pathway, but just recognising that it is essential, should we be regulating it as such? Is that fair?

Warren ELLIOTT: It depends on the level of regulation.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. And as we have heard earlier today, at what point in the supply chain, or is it all points of the supply chain does that occur? But we have got to do something about this. Those profits and the numbers we are seeing in the research – that cannot continue. The state government specifically has to act, not just the feds. It is a collective responsibility.

Warren ELLIOTT: Yes, whoever can do anything to help, I think, in terms of that would help. In terms of the regulations, we have good relationships with all of the major suppliers. They give us stuff through SecondBite, through OzHarvest and all of those kinds of things, and we access that secondarily or primarily, so we are not going to get into a stoush with them and say that they need to be regulated more or whatever because we appreciate the support that they give us.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Although I believe they earlier actually supported the same policy, so it is interesting there are these different voices in this conversation. But, yes, thank you for coming forward today.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much for coming in for your presentation. I mean this with a whole lot of love, but I think that often when the government gets more involved the worse the problem gets. I wonder if you have got any examples of programs that have lifted people out of this dependence and what we can do there.

Jerry HAM: I think that Uniting has a myriad of examples where people at a local level and through community and the supports that they receive lift themselves out of the challenge of disadvantage. It is not easy. We can look at some examples to bring back to you as case studies. It would be hard to highlight maybe one example of one program that has addressed this particular issue, but I think you are right in saying – and I think this is supported by our recommendations – that it is really about a holistic approach. It is about government leaning into local government and local government leaning into communities and communities leaning into community organisations to deliver the goal of ensuring that people have the basic needs that we are talking about: essential services, food security, housing, shelter and safety. Those are the basics. We have many examples, and I know that the Salvation Army have as well, where our organisation is working with people at those local levels and working in with the community. There are a number of innovations around the state that we would draw on that help to assist people out of a situation of dependence, supported by a supporting government framework where that is possible. I think there could be some changes to ensure that that framework is as supportive as possible, but absolutely it is not all about and just dependent on government or government regulation.

Warren ELLIOTT: I think for us some of it is about getting upstream – we have heard that phrase used before. It is not just about what we can do once people are already in those positions but how we can help them stop getting into those positions. We certainly have myriad stories of people that have come to us for help and have been lifted up out of those circumstances. In fact a number of our workforce are people that have come through our programs and have turned their lives around and are now working for the Salvation Army helping other people that are in similar circumstances, whether that has been domestic violence, drug and alcohol or whatever else across our range of services. So for us it is really about getting upstream of those things, and we are talking about that in terms of housing affordability, raising the pension –

Renee HEATH: So, essentially, the tax regulations – we are obviously taxed through the nose here in Victoria – would be adding to it, because they are increasing the cost of housing and reducing the amount of rentals.

Warren ELLIOTT: It is not my field of expertise – but whatever those pressures are that are pushing those housing prices up. It is not just affordability of housing, though; it is availability too. There is a real shortage of housing at the moment. We are asking for 60,000 new houses.

Renee HEATH: Yes, I know – unbelievable.

Jerry HAM: I would just come back to that, Dr Heath, as well, to say, whilst obviously my answer was around communities and people working together, there is only so much people can do. I come back to that point that at some point it is a structural issue of inequality, and housing affordability and availability is definitely a key driver. It is outside of people's immediate control to build a house on their own grounds or set the level of rent that is expected or the access to that housing, so I would need to highlight those structural issues as being really prominent.

Renee HEATH: We spoke briefly before – I cannot remember who it was – about buy now, pay later; that to me would seem like a bad idea in the sense that we do not want people getting into debt over food. What are your thoughts? Is that something that would lead to more poverty or would it be something that would break the cycle of poverty?

Jerry HAM: To access buy now and pay later? No, I think it adds to the cycle of poverty.

Renee HEATH: Yes, okay. I think that too. How long do people often access emergency food for?

Jerry HAM: It can vary. In our experience it depends, and again we have talked about different locations and people's different needs. So we have a system whereby we try to ensure that we spread that fairly across the need, so if people access our services they have a basic assessment, and they need to show that they are in financial hardship; so there is a basic filter to access the services initially. It might be then on a six- or an eight-week cycle before they can come back again. We do have a number of people who do need to return over a period of time, but we do have a number of one-time users of our services as well, and that is great for us obviously in seeing them maybe one or two times, but then they have been able to find more means, and they have not needed to come back to those services again after that.

Renee HEATH: Thank you.

Matthew DANIELS: We probably see – speaking from only the cafe point of view – people who have accessed the service. So I have been there for about 12 years, and for about 12 years we have probably seen some of the same faces, but then again you probably would see somebody once and never see them again.

Renee HEATH: Some of that would be connection, though, do you think? Like, that is an important need too.

Matthew DANIELS: A lot of it is community, absolutely. So we provide the breakfast, lunch and dinner service, and for a lot of people it is that sense of belonging, absolutely, but for a lot of people it is just because they do not have anywhere else to go in terms of finding food.

Renee HEATH: Awesome. My time is up, but thank you for the extraordinary work you all do.

The CHAIR: Joe, do you have a question to ask?

Joe McCracken: Yes, I have got a few questions. There is just so much to talk about in 5 minutes. You guys are great, because you are at one end of the spectrum where you are dealing with the problems of all the downstream stuff, and that is hard yakka. I bet, as you have said, it has increased over the last period of time. I want to talk about the upstream stuff, which seems to be the new buzzword of today. I know you guys said a large part of that was the cost of housing and the fact that people are making decisions about housing which is forcing them to make decisions about food. Would it be fair to say that the high and excessive cost of housing has a direct impact on the ability to purchase food that is nutritious and meets the needs of that person?

Warren Elliott: Absolutely. Yes. So we would see that housing in terms of being in the house but it is also that – you might have heard me use – cost of being in the house. ‘Heat or eat’ is a thing that we have come across recently: people making decisions around whether they will eat or if they can only afford for their kids to eat. Pets are another thing – that people will pay for their pets to be well fed before themselves sometimes. So there are a whole range of decisions that people have to make that they should not have to make and that are then impacting on their mental health. There is this kind of snowballing impact of money being hard or scarce, and food is just one of those things that then falls into that.

Joe McCracken: I think one of the other interesting things too, and it sort of ties into two different parts of this, is the excessive cost of energy. Australia used to be one of the cheapest producers of energy – now we are one of the most expensive in the world. When that ties into cost of production – for example, primary producers – that is then passed down the chain. Then you have also got people making decisions about their house: do they heat or do they eat? So do you think work on the high costs of energy in this state, with the flow-on effects, and looking into that would have some benefit into food security down the track?

Jerry Ham: Yes, I would absolutely, Joe, definitely agree with that. I think our recommendations would be – I mean, if you like, there is a triumvirate of issues that we could address at this level. Housing affordability is one, the levels of income support people receive is second, but then relief from cost-of-living pressures is then a third, and energy falls into that.

Joe McCracken: Yes. Because I am trying to think of what the drivers and the causes of these burdens are, and what do we limit or change to put downward pressure on those burdens so that they do not flow through the system, so everyone benefits from that? Energy seems to be the one that keeps coming up time and time again. The ban on gas is particularly hurtful as well I think, particularly for a number of cultural groups that rely on gas to make, let us just say, wok meals for example, which is pretty significant.

Jerry Ham: Yes.

Joe McCracken: The other one that I was interested in too is enhancing competition at the supermarket level. People talk about the – I will call it duopoly, but it is more like three supermarkets now: Aldi, Coles and Woolies. Do you think we should try and have some sort of way of breaking up that – I will not call it a duopoly – oligopoly or whatever you want to call it?

Jerry Ham: Looking at increasing greater competition I believe is a well-known key market force to drive prices down. Whilst there is – how did you describe it – an oligopoly of supermarket providers, then I think we will have sustained high prices. So providing an increase in competition into that space definitely is going to be important.

Joe McCracken: Okay. I know there was discussion about the disparity between country areas – and I represent a country area – versus metro areas. Even simple things like the cost of transport between destinations are a lot more significant. That is not taken into consideration when people are necessarily talking about food security, when it really should be. Do you have any thoughts around how that might be able to be overcome?

Jerry Ham: Well, I think we first need to recognise that it is a true factor, and then, as you say, look beyond the immediate issue of food insecurity – because it is about travel costs and it is about the distance that people need to go and the factor that that has on their lives as well. I think we need to look at all of those elements, so look at recognising them. We definitely have a recommendation around needing to look at that regional and rural divide and making more subsidies for people, especially if they have disadvantage or a disability for example and they find travel or transport either harder to access or at a higher cost. That is another area that we need to put a lever into.

Joe McCracken: One of the interesting things about the state's 2050 plan for population is that the majority of the population growth is set to be in Melbourne compared to regional areas. Because regional areas obviously, proportionally, are declining in population, there is a lack of critical mass to justify services like public transport and those other things which might potentially help with the cost of living. I guess it is very much a broader picture, but do you support the regionalisation of the state so that there is critical mass? And then, apart from cost of living, it is also the quality of lifestyle that comes with it as well. Is that something that you have turned your mind to it all?

Jerry Ham: As a personal opinion I think that I would like to see the diversification of living options broadened to more regional and then to more rural areas, because I think –

Joe McCracken: It would help with housing too, hopefully.

Jerry Ham: Yes, it would help with housing. Joe, I think you represent Ballarat and the surrounding communities, but our services extend even further: to Horsham, Wodonga and Albury and more regional areas as well – rural areas. I think that we see a lack of services, we see a lack of transport and we see a lack of housing options, so that limits the available options that people have. They are forced to make choices that are going to cost them more. So spreading that out further, more equally across the state – yes, absolutely. I think that is a good thing.

Joe McCracken: The different choices that those people have to make as opposed to the ones that live in metro Melbourne.

Jerry Ham: Yes. And if you are in one of those areas at the moment, if it is a healthcare matter, for example, you might have to travel into Melbourne to really get access to your health services, so that adds then to the cost factors that people are needing to bear on a weekly or on a monthly basis.

Joe McCracken: So it is either health or food.

Jerry Ham: Yes. Health or food.

Joe McCracken: Or transport versus food.

Jerry Ham: Transport or food, yes.

Joe McCracken: That is what I am trying to draw out: the significant costs that rural people have to incur just to live their lives.

Jerry Ham: Absolutely.

Matthew Daniels: I mentioned earlier the young family with their baby. They came from Moe, and they came all the way to Melbourne because there were no services out there to help them, to provide for them. There was a lack of work as well. So they figured they would come to Melbourne because Melbourne has everything, and then they found out it is a lot harder because there are so many other people coming to Melbourne, because Melbourne has everything.

Adam Thomson: I think this talks to the food swamps we were talking about earlier as well. The biggest issue with food insecurity obviously is nutrition insecurity, so it is not just about being able to eat something, it is about getting something nutritious.

Joe McCracken: Yes. I think my time is over too, but I could talk for hours on this. Thanks so much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you for your time. It looks like we have run out of time today. Again, thank you so much for your submission and your evidence given today. Just before we wrap it up, you mentioned culturally diverse food. I know you mentioned the Sikh community. Has the Salvation Army been in touch with various communities? I know they do charity drives and non-profit organisation drives with their own type of food for various communities – the Vietnamese community have one in Footscray, the Sikhs and the Hindus in the west and stuff. I was just wondering: has the Salvation Army been in touch with them to utilise their various types of –

Warren ELLIOTT: It is very much a regional and local thing. We do not push that at the state base at this stage, but we certainly encourage that at local levels – so in your local community who has got what and how can you collaborate to provide the best outcomes. I know in Sunshine we have got a strong Vietnamese connection there; up in Mildura we have got a Filipino connection with the Filipino community. It just depends on the various communities and the connections that we form.

The CHAIR: I know there is a lot of mention of culturally diverse food, because we are a very diverse community in Victoria and there are non-profit organisations, charities from different community groups, that do these sorts of activities and assist the wider community as well.

I am pushing the time. Thank you so much for your attendance and your submissions. They will definitely form part of our considerations down the track for our recommendations to the government. Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Witnesses withdrew.