



**Southern Peninsula**

**Community Support & Information Centre Inc.**

ABN 84 221 715 977



## **The SPCSIC Pantry**

In July 2014 the Department of Social service announced Emergency Relief funding was to be subjected to an open tender process. Having been allocated to the same agencies for many years, this new event created much uncertainty in the Emergency Relief sector. Emergency Relief services are most effective in addressing local need when they are place based within their local community delivering a tailored service to meet the local areas specific needs and challenges. This change in funding process meant many small Emergency Relief services were at risk of losing their funding, as the department was looking for more collaborative approaches that would result in fewer contracts to manage.

When the funding tender process was announced, it was clear that it would significantly alter the Emergency Relief landscape. An open tender meant that any agency interested in delivering Emergency Relief could tender for the service. Additionally the amount of money available was significantly less. Victoria was set to have a 20% reduction of funding.

Support and Information Centres (or Citizen Advice Bureaus) have been delivering Emergency Relief to local communities for over 40 years. Locally based they are ideally placed for this service. Emergency Relief funding is generally provided with little or no administration dollars attached. This means that the funding is provided directly to the individuals in need, and not to the service to administer. The only real way to achieve this is via a volunteer delivery service model. For many agencies the lack of administration attached to Emergency Relief funding does not provide for the set up and delivery of such a service. However Support and Information Centres have been providing volunteer led service for decades and have honed systems to get the best outcomes.

Community Support and Information Victoria (CISVic) is the peak body for Community Support and Information Centres. Over the decades it has become harder for individual Support and Information Centres to have a voice in the community sector. Larger 'corporate' style community agencies have the resources to staff PR, marketing, fundraising, or research positions, and sometimes have whole teams of paid staff dedicated to the voice of the organisation. Support and Information Centres have few, if any paid staff, and are focussed entirely on the delivery of services to the local community. With the increase of need within local communities it has become more difficult to take time out of the direct service delivery on the ground, and even more difficult to be heard.

With the announcement of Emergency Relief funding tender process, and the fact that the department would prefer to do less contracts it was obvious to most Support and Information Centres that they needed to apply for the funding collectively. CISVic acted as lead agency and 30 Support and Information Centres made a consortium tender for Emergency Relief funding which was ultimately successful.

The DSS ER funding tender was a long, drawn out process that was incredibly divisive for the community sector. The long period of funding uncertainty, from July 2014 through to February 2015, when the funding outcomes were announced, made planning and service provision difficult. Many agencies did not know if they would be present heading forward, and all agencies were unable to plan for future Emergency Relief services. Southern Peninsula Community Support and Information Centre (SPCSIC) was no exception.



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The Southern Mornington Peninsula area has long been identified as an area of significant disadvantage. While housing and food assistance has always been recognized as areas of significant need, education and transport disadvantage is also high. The lack of any real public housing coupled with the increasing cost of rental properties in the area has created significant financial hardship for residents. The overwhelming majority of clients accessing Emergency Relief services are paying private rent that they cannot afford. Public housing waiting lists are well over 15 years in this area and there are few facilities such as rooming properties for singles. Many residents were once able to live cheaply in caravan parks however these options are no longer available with the sale of many parks. Those that are still around are often not taking permanent residents. Many Southern Peninsula low income renters pay around 75% + of their income on rent. This makes it impossible to afford food as well as utilities, let alone transport costs. Many of the properties available for rent are not of good quality and often have no heating or still use expensive bottle gas, once again increasing living expenses. The lack of affordable, accessible local transport continues to be one of the biggest issues for people in this community. Cost of registration and the increase in the cost of petrol has made it very difficult to afford to run a car for those on a low income. Many local residents need a car to access school and work and often maintain old cars that are not only expensive to run but also require lots of maintenance. As the divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots” gets wider it is increasingly difficult for people with low income or on a pension or benefit to afford the basic necessities. It is also often difficult to access information or support for those on low incomes or for senior members of the Southern Peninsula community who do not have access to computers. Sometimes the problem may not be instantly clear to those who experience it and the need is more often than not for someone to listen and to help clarify the issue and provide direction.

Since 1980 SPCSIC has been committed to meeting the needs of the local community and seeking to contribute to people’s awareness of their rights and responsibilities, with a particular emphasis on encouragement and the independence of those who are marginalised. Providing a range of service that include Advocacy and Negotiation, Assessment and Referral, Community Information, Crisis Support, Emergency Relief, Access to Legal Aid and Advice, Low Income Support Service, Needle Exchange Program, No Interest Loan Scheme, Personal Counselling, Southern Peninsula Fresh Food Program, Tax Help, Employment Engagement Project, SPCSIC has been at the forefront of addressing disadvantage on the Southern Mornington Peninsula.

When the Department of Social Service funding results were finally announced Federal government funding for the SPCSIC Emergency Relief program had reduced, along with the removal of additional funding to deliver the intensive case management program (Low Income Support Service). In addition to these reductions RE Ross Trust, a philanthropic supporter of the ER program had also reduced funding. As a result the funding available for the delivery of Emergency relief program had reduced from \$193,000 in 2013-2014 from these 2 bodies to \$69,000 for 2015-2016.

SPCSIC is a resilient and innovative organisation. Even so this was a remarkably large reduction that was obviously going to affect the delivery of the Emergency Relief service.

SPCSIC had previously been able to provide financial Emergency Relief support to people in crisis up to 5 times per year. This support took the form of food vouchers, pharmacy or medical cost, education assistance, MYKI tickets, op shop vouchers or Telstra vouchers or phone cards. The amount of assistance at each visit was not huge, with people on average getting under \$35 worth of food vouchers, and possibly another \$10 worth of additional



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assistance. Around \$50 when you are in crisis is not a large amount of resources, and SPCSIC maximised the benefit of the visit with very strong connections and referrals to other services that would result in more sustainable outcomes for the person in crisis. SPCSIC had always viewed the assistance given as the smaller piece in this transaction, and the connection to pathways for sustainable outcomes was the key to long term positive results for the service user.

However with this reduction in available funds there was little choice. Crunching all the numbers of past visits SPCSIC was going to have to drop the level of food voucher assistance to under \$20 per visit and the number of visits where this could be provided to 2 times per year. This was going to have a huge impact on the local community, not only service users and people in need, but other services providers. It was time to get innovative.

SPCSIC quickly identified that the provision of food via a pantry might be a good option as an alternative service. To assess the viability of this Jackie Currie (the Manager) and Robyn Coughlin (Volunteer Support Coordinator) went on a pantry road trip. Visiting many pantries over a number of days it was wonderful to see the diversity and innovation other agencies were using to meet their community's needs. The agencies SPCSIC visited were welcoming and generous with their time and knowledge, as well as completely willing to share resources. SPCSIC came away with some clear ideas of what would and would not work for SPCSIC. SPCSIC also came away with the understanding that pantries do not come cheap. In fact pantries are complex to manage, labour intensive and cost a lot of money. Particularly if (like SPCSIC) you are too geographically removed from valuable resources such as Food Bank.

Food For all is a local fully volunteer organisation that collects food and food donations for the Southern Peninsula. They use these resources to provide food parcels for local St Vincent de Paul chapters, and provide over 400 Christmas food hampers and children's toys for local agencies (including SPCSIC) to nominate for distribution to locals in need. SPCSIC has long worked collaboratively with Food for All to assist in donations and resourcing. Armed with the knowledge of how we needed to run our pantry SPCSIC approached Food For All to find out how we could stock it. Expecting to use the knowledge of Food for All to assist in our purchasing SPCSIC was overwhelmed when Food for All offered to provide standard food items for the SPCSIC pantry.

The SPCSIC Food Pantry commenced May 2015. Utilising the knowledge we gathered from other agencies, and stocked with Food items from Food For All SPCSIC is heading into a new era of service provision. Despite such a significant reduction in funding, SPCSIC is in fact offering more services than ever. Clients are now able to access SPCSIC up to 6 times per year (2 Voucher visits & 4 food visits). SPCSIC is now looking for partners to help with the stocking of toiletries and pet food items, which are higher cost items the community struggles to afford.

At a time of great uncertainty and challenge, SPCSIC has found the strength and capacity to create an innovative solution to a seemingly insurmountable problem. Through the partnerships and collaborations SPCSIC has fostered for many years, and thanks to the generosity of the agencies and community around us we have created a new means to assist those in our community who are struggling.



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