



# More than a band-aid: Emergency Relief in Victoria

May 2021



**This is a joint report prepared by the Victorian Council of Social Service and Community Information & Support Victoria. It is designed to raise awareness of the Victorian emergency relief sector's critical role in supporting people in need, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic.**

## **Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS)**

As the peak body for Victoria's social and community sector, VCOSS works towards the elimination of poverty and disadvantage in all its forms, and the creation of a society where all people are supported to thrive. VCOSS does this through policy development, public and private advocacy and increasing the capabilities of the state's social services.

## **Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic)**

CISVic is the peak body representing local community information and support services in Victoria. CISVic's member services assist people experiencing personal and financial difficulties by providing emergency relief, information, referral and support services, within local communities. CISVic carries out research and advocacy to create positive change.

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CISVic and VCOSS acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and pay respect to Elders past and present. This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.

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**For further information about this report, please contact:**

**CISVic:** [kate@cisvic.org.au](mailto:kate@cisvic.org.au)

**VCOSS:** [bridget.tehan@vcooss.org.au](mailto:bridget.tehan@vcooss.org.au)



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# Executive summary /

The Victorian emergency relief sector provides vital financial and material aid to people in need.

Emergency relief can take many forms, including bill payment, vouchers, clothes, furniture and food. It is often supplemented with broader support and referral to other services.

The coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions in 2020 and 2021 imposed a significant toll on the health and wellbeing of a vast range of Victorians.

As a result, many Victorians sought emergency relief for the first time, leaving emergency relief organisations facing overwhelming demand.

The pandemic has highlighted the critical role the emergency relief sector plays in supporting the health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable Victorians, and the role it plays in supporting a range of Victorians during a disaster or crisis. But it also exposed the sector's fragility.

This report, drawn from existing research and consultation with emergency relief organisations, provides an overview of the emergency relief sector in Victoria.

It examines the impacts of the pandemic on the emergency relief sector, and on demand and provision of food relief – as well as the policy responses we've seen from both the Federal and Victorian Government.

Finally, the report provides a range of recommendations for both the Federal and Victorian Government to help prevent people falling into financial crisis, and to strengthen the emergency relief sector for the benefit of those who do.



The coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions in 2020 and 2021 imposed a significant toll on the health and wellbeing of a vast range of Victorians. As a result, many Victorians sought emergency relief for the first time, leaving emergency relief organisations facing overwhelming demand.





## Emergency relief: A diverse but under-resourced sector

### 6

Emergency relief organisations are usually resourced for the material aid they distribute, but in most cases this funding does not cover operating and staffing costs.<sup>3</sup> As a result, services are overwhelmingly reliant on an unpaid volunteer workforce. While this can make them highly efficient and flexible, it also leaves them under-resourced to meet demand, support volunteers and fulfil the demands of regulatory compliance.

Emergency relief (ER) organisations provide a crucial ‘safety net’ in times of crisis, with basics like food and medication, and other support such as school costs, transport vouchers, assistance with rent/accommodation or essential services payments.<sup>1</sup> Thousands of Victorians rely on emergency relief on a regular basis just to get by.

However, the ER sector in Victoria is poorly understood in terms of its complexity, scale, nature and the services it delivers. The sector includes a diverse range of organisations, including large charities and faith-based organisations, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisations, migrant and/or refugee organisations, community organisations, social enterprises, and state and local government agencies and departments.<sup>2</sup> Its workforce is predominantly volunteer-based.

The diversity of the sector allows for different types of organisations with a variety of service offerings to coexist; for example, organisations that provide just material aid and others that offer more holistic support.<sup>3</sup> This means a range of access points are available for people seeking assistance.

The table in Appendix 1 provides a snapshot of some of the organisations that exist across Victoria’s emergency relief sector.

It is estimated that the Australian ER sector consists of over 3,000 not-for-profit community food programs.<sup>4</sup> Foodbank Victoria provides food and other support to 350 frontline emergency food relief organisations across nearly 500 sites.

**There are eight main types of emergency relief, and organisations vary as to whether they offer one or more types of relief:**



Food parcels or single items (known as ‘food relief’)



Vouchers or gift cards: for example for a local supermarket, often with certain restrictions or exclusions such as cigarettes and alcohol



Material aid: clothes, bedding, household items, whitegoods, furniture



Bill payment (gas, electricity, phone)



Cash: either direct or in the form of a cheque to be cashed at a nearby bank; however, this is becoming a less common form of emergency relief



Transport assistance: public transport vouchers, petrol vouchers



Pharmacy assistance: vouchers to help pay for prescription medications or toiletries, not including methadone, certain sedatives and other addictive drugs



Information, advocacy and referral<sup>2</sup>

Emergency relief organisations are supported by funding and donations from a range of stakeholders. The Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS) provides \$44.5 million to state and territory ER services each year, of which \$10.1 million is allocated to Victoria. This is supplemented with limited funding from the Victorian Government.

The Federal Government also provided additional ER funding to contracted agencies across 2020 and 2021, including:

- an additional \$49.5 million to general ER programs, of which \$8.5 million was allocated to Victoria
- an additional \$13 million specifically for people on Temporary Protections Visas.

Funding from federal and state governments is supplemented through:

- industry donations
- retail and corporate donations
- community services, philanthropic organisations, faith and cultural groups
- food and material rescue organisations
- fundraising, opportunity shops or other income generating ventures.

Emergency relief organisations are usually resourced for the material aid they distribute, but in most cases this funding does not cover operating and staffing costs.<sup>3</sup> As a result, services are overwhelmingly reliant on an unpaid volunteer workforce.

While this can make them highly efficient and flexible, it also leaves them under-resourced to meet demand, support volunteers and fulfil the demands of regulatory compliance.

Furthermore, while the DSS requires funded organisations to keep detailed records on allocated funds, many donations of material goods are provided by local businesses and community members, and there are no requirements to keep a record of these additional donations.

Under-resourcing and consequent over-reliance on unregulated donations may compromise the quantity, cultural appropriateness and nutritional quality of the food that ER organisations provide.<sup>5</sup> Foodbank supplies many organisations, but when Foodbank is relying on donated non-perishable foods, which are often ultra-processed and of poor quality, this can contribute to diet-related chronic disease in people on low incomes.<sup>5</sup>

Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic) is the peak body for local community information and support services, which facilitates a network of organisations. CISVic is also the lead agency in a consortium of 29 local centres delivering federally funded emergency relief.

Despite the long and proud history of emergency relief in Victoria, which started with the State Relief Committee in the 1930s, coordination and collaboration across the sector has been lacking for many years. This is due to a variety of reasons, including:

- lack of centralised, national or state-based peak bodies

- emergency relief operating across and within a range of sectors such as the charitable, community, social enterprise, private and government sectors
- multiple funding streams with differing reporting metrics
- informal or semi-formal arrangements for material and food relief where transactions are not documented.

This has led to a lack of data, research and strategies for support and advocacy. It has also contributed to the difficulty of promoting the sector's work across the wider community, and inhibited the insights that the sector can provide on the issues it deals with for government and other stakeholders.



Food insecurity occurs 'whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain'.<sup>6</sup> Food insecurity can be both a precursor to, and a by-product of, chronic disease and poverty, and is associated with the full range of structural and systemic issues of poverty.<sup>7</sup>



## People living in poverty rely on emergency relief

In Victoria, more than 13 per cent of the population, or 774,000 people, live in poverty.<sup>8</sup> It is increasingly recognised that the causes of poverty and disadvantage are structural and systemic, and that ‘the factors that contribute to someone living in poverty and disadvantage are numerous, and changing them is often not within the power of the individual.’<sup>9</sup>

The Federal Government’s decision to temporarily increase the rate of JobSeeker via the Coronavirus Supplement lifted people out of poverty, whereas the proposed permanent rate of JobSeeker will thrust people back below the poverty line. For example, a single person without children will be \$166 per fortnight short of the poverty line.

A survey by ACOSS reported that the Federal Government’s Coronavirus Supplement of \$550 per fortnight meant that:

- 93 per cent of respondents reported they were now able to afford fresh fruit and vegetables
- 83 per cent reported eating healthier and more regularly
- 75 per cent reported they were able to pay their bills
- 69 per cent reported they were now able to pay for essential medical and health treatments
- 65 per cent reported it was easier to pay rent or move to safer accommodation.<sup>11</sup>

## Of the people living in poverty in Victoria:<sup>8</sup>



**54 per cent** are women



**34 per cent** have a disability



**51 per cent** live in owner-occupied homes

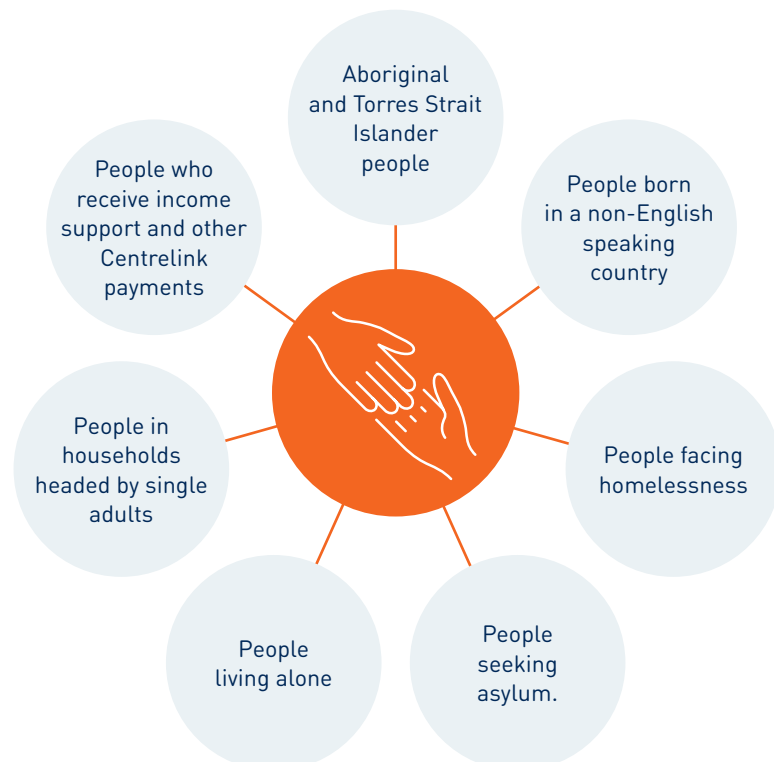


**18 per cent** are children



**28 per cent** have a job

## Some Victorians are more likely to need emergency relief than others. For example:<sup>2,10</sup>





## CASE STUDY /

### “We are both happier and feel freer”

Eva-Jean and her 11-year-old daughter were forced to flee their home to escape from family violence. Moving to a new suburb meant that her daughter’s school was far away, and when her car broke down and her registration was due, Eva-Jean knew she didn’t have the means to pay.

Having been through so much already, Eva-Jean wanted to make sure her daughter could stay at her school and maintain her friendships, so they spent four hours every day on public transport traveling to and from school.

This eventually impacted Eva-Jean’s ability to continue working. With little to no income, having a daughter to look after and dealing with stress, isolation and trauma, Eva-Jean knew she couldn’t do it alone. Catholic Care’s Emergency Relief program gave immediate assistance to get her car back on the road and gave her financial support for other living expenses. She also started receiving counselling to address her emotional worries, and to regain the confidence she needed to move forward with her life.

‘It has impacted my daughter enormously as she can go to friends and I can take and pick her up. We don’t have such long days getting to and from school. We are both happier and we are making a new home for ourselves with the assistance we have been given. We are both happier and feel freer.’  
(Source: *Catholic Care Annual Report 2019*<sup>12</sup>)

Many people seeking emergency relief are experiencing a range of complex and interrelated issues that impact their health and wellbeing. They require the support of skilled staff who have the time and expertise to meet their needs.<sup>3,4</sup>

## Emergency relief services want to address the causes of poverty and food insecurity

Living in poverty means not being able to afford basic necessities including food, shelter, clothing or healthcare. It also contributes to exclusion from social activities and severe stress from chronic financial insecurity. People experiencing poverty often have to prioritise how they spend their money, which can lead to food insecurity.

For many years emergency relief was viewed as a band-aid. But modern ER organisations have evolved, and proactively commit to delivering high quality services, recognising clients' rights and dignity, connecting clients to specialist services to address underlying issues, and advocating on behalf of their clients locally and nationally.

Many organisations also recognise the need to address the underlying causes of poverty and disadvantage and align service delivery with the principles of social inclusion, self-determination and dignity. By providing government, other organisations and policy makers with information and insights about the broader issues involved, they aim 'to give voice to the voiceless' (Source: an Emergency Relief worker).

As well as providing material aid, many organisations provide individual case management, including advocacy, mediation and referrals to specialist supports. This can include:

- financial support and information including financial literacy, budgeting, tax help, financial counselling and No Interest Loans Schemes
- individual and family counselling
- legal information and referral
- housing and accommodation support, information and referral
- health information and referral
- education and literacy information, support and referral
- crisis support
- sexual assault information and referral.

Many ER organisations also offer community meals, meeting places and a range of personal and community development programs.

This complex support is dependent on the capacity and skill of trained volunteers (or employees) for delivery. Unfortunately, this capacity and skill is rarely funded.

To help address food insecurity so that all Victorians have access to affordable and nutritious food, there is also a need to develop a long-term approach to food relief and improved food security – one that recognises and values dignity, access to nutritious food and the pathways out of food insecurity.

Food is a human right; there must be continued commitment to the full realisation of the right to adequate food. This means that all Victorians, at all times, regardless of their economic circumstances, should enjoy dignified access to healthy and culturally appropriate food. In order to achieve this end, a holistic approach addressing the causes of food insecurity is needed.



Emergency Relief encompasses both the poverty and the exclusion experience. It is often the last port of call in the journey of hunger, homelessness, disability, joblessness, mental and physical health issues, grief, despair, addiction and violence." Social Exclusion: The Sydney Experience, Anglicare<sup>13</sup>



## The effect of COVID-19 on demand for emergency relief



It's been very, very hard times... I was doing my Masters in Information Technology and I'm spending almost \$70,000 on university for two years. I graduated in July 2020 and haven't been able to find employment since then... and I don't know who to ask or who to approach, because I'm not eligible for any kind of funding from the government... this was the first time I've had to worry about food." International student, recently graduated, Victoria.

During the coronavirus pandemic, organisations reported an increase in the number of first-time users of emergency relief, many of whom had no knowledge of the ER sector.

The sector provided a safety net for many Victorians who had no income during the pandemic and were not eligible for income support. The phrase ‘no income and no income support’ was used by many organisations when characterising first time users.

One organisation reported an increase in women and children fleeing family violence, following the closure of a nearby motel that had provided crisis housing.

In general, organisations reported that the following groups were particularly vulnerable during the pandemic:

- international visa holders and international students
- asylum seekers and refugees
- aged pensioners
- working people who were now unemployed
- sole parents
- parents who needed help with children’s school costs
- people who are homeless or facing homelessness.

### CASE STUDY / “Not eligible for income support”

A family of four from Iran first came to the agency in June. The parents were self-employed but had lost their income due to COVID-19. They were unable to pay for food, bills, car registration, rent and fuel. The Housing Establishment Fund was unable to help them because their rent was more than 30 per cent of their income. They had no income at this point and were on a bridging visa so were not eligible for income support. The agency assisted them by providing food, paying for their car registration, fuel and rent at the end of June and July. The agency also linked the family in with other services. (CISVic)

### CASE STUDY / “I’ve never asked for help before”

A client called the agency and began by saying, “I’ve never asked for help before.” (They) had suffered a workplace injury pre-pandemic that was still being investigated by WorkCover and were not eligible for Centrelink at the time because their partner’s income was just above the income limits. Due to COVID-19, their partner’s hours had been cut and the partner was not eligible for JobKeeper because they had not been employed at their current work long enough to qualify. The couple applied for Centrelink but were told it might not be approved until August. The client was “quite emotional” and said that their partner would be “mortified” if they knew that they were asking for help... (CISVic)

### Many more people struggled to afford healthy, nutritious food

Food insecurity is when the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.<sup>14</sup> In response, food relief is the provision of food to people in need and is a key part of Emergency Relief.<sup>15</sup>

It had been estimated that, prior to the coronavirus pandemic, approximately 4 per cent of people in Victoria were living with food insecurity. Rates of food insecurity were much higher in at-risk population groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (19 per cent), lone-parent households (13 per cent), people who are unemployed (12 per cent) and households with an income of less than \$40,000 (10 per cent). A larger proportion of people in these population groups reported skipping meals or eating low-cost, unhealthy foods to avoid running out of food.<sup>15</sup>

During coronavirus these numbers substantially increased. VicHealth's survey of 2,000 Victorians found that, during the initial restrictions from March to May 2020, one in four respondents (24 per cent) reported experiencing some form of hardship, with 23 per cent of respondents having to rely on a restricted range of low-cost, unhealthy food due to running out of money.<sup>16</sup> In the second wave of restrictions in Victoria during September 2020, a follow-up survey found that 18 per cent of respondents had to rely on a restricted range of low-cost, unhealthy food due to running out of money.<sup>16</sup>

Rising food insecurity during the coronavirus pandemic created new demand for emergency relief organisations across Victoria, highlighting the fragility of our support systems, and deepening the structural drivers of disadvantage and poverty.<sup>17</sup>

According to the 2020 Foodbank Hunger Report, the coronavirus pandemic led to a doubling in emergency food relief demand, needed by around 15 per cent of Australians in 2019 and increasing to 31 per cent in 2020.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, concerningly, nearly 40 per cent of Australians facing food insecurity did not access food relief during the pandemic, for reasons including thinking there might be other people more in need (33 per cent), embarrassment (33 per cent) and shame (30 per cent).

Deakin University researchers surveyed 101 Victorian emergency food relief organisations during May and June 2020.<sup>19</sup> They found that more than 40 per cent of organisations experienced an increase in the number of people seeking food, including more international students and people ineligible for government support and/or on temporary visas, as well as parents requesting food for children while schools were closed.



We started to see another layer on top of our regular clients, of people who hadn't accessed food relief before and were doing okay before the pandemic. Some had two working people in their families and then they no longer had jobs... Because they were thrown into that situation, the levels of anxiety and fear rose, people were very worried..."<sup>18</sup>

## The emergency relief sector moved quickly to address growing need

The emergency relief sector was required to adapt quickly and dramatically to existing and changing community needs. This included a quick transformation of face-to-face service delivery to remote service delivery – supplying food parcels to homes and agency doorsteps, using e-vouchers and electronic transfer of funds.

Organisations reported needing to be “proactive rather than reactive”. Some described their capacity to quickly respond to the demands of the pandemic as having the infrastructure or staff “ready to go [with] an easy mechanism for the government to channel [emergency relief] dollars through”. One organisation reported being able to quickly transform its in-person fresh food program, where people could come and select their own produce, to a home delivery service that provided food and goods to around 140 households each week and, courtesy of donations, 200 hot meals to families per week.

## CASE STUDY / Challenges faced by Foodbank during COVID 19

In Victoria alone, Foodbank provides food relief to 350 frontline food relief organisations across nearly 500 sites. In the initial coronavirus lockdown in April 2020, Foodbank Victoria experienced a drop in the amount of food being donated due to consumer demand and associated pressures on the food supply chain. During subsequent restrictions throughout 2020, the volume of donated foods remained more stable, although lower in comparison to pre-pandemic levels. Social distancing requirements and a lack of volunteers forced some community food organisations providing food relief to close their doors.

Foodbank Victoria purchased significant quantities of key staple products to ensure a continued supply, which was critical given the increased demand. In July 2020 alone, Foodbank distributed over 230,000 meals and almost 128,000 kilograms in food to Victorians in need; demand that was equivalent to a four-month period in 2019.

Despite being able to adapt quickly, organisations reported that working remotely was a challenge. It was difficult to support some clients, including those without a phone or who were struggling with loneliness. In some organisations, spaces were reconfigured to allow some COVID-safe onsite support.

Organisations reported their commitment to “meet the need the best we can with the limited resources we have – pre-COVID, post-COVID, it won’t change”.

A common worry from organisations is the prediction that the demand for emergency relief will increase as society deals with the long-tailed implications of the pandemic, citing the “calm before the storm”.

## New collaborations emerged

New partnerships and collaborations developed during the pandemic, with many organisations able to respond to rapidly changing circumstances and localised community needs.

### ■ Central West Gippsland Primary Care Partnership

The Central West Gippsland Primary Care Partnership supports food security work across the Baw Baw and Latrobe local government area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it assisted communities to access nutritious foods, increased its media and online presence to disseminate information, supported greater communication between food relief providers, increased awareness of available food relief and identified and helped address barriers to accessing culturally appropriate emergency food relief for CALD communities.

### ■ City of Casey Emergency Relief

In April 2020, the City of Casey established a COVID-19 Relief and Recovery Network, working in partnership with network organisations, State Government, Casey's Aboriginal Gathering Place, social enterprises, local cafes and private donors, to deliver meals to vulnerable residents. The Network shared service and sector information and pooled resources so local needs could be met. Services included emergency relief, information and referral, legal support, housing and homelessness, family violence, youth counselling, mental health and drug and alcohol services, employment services and refugee and asylum-seeker support.

The Network secured practical items – for example, sanitiser, funding for mobile devices, webcams and mobile phones – to allow services to continue to operate safely and, where possible, remotely.

Food relief providers were also supported with personal protective equipment (PPE), COVID-19 information and advice, grant information and advice from Council's Environmental Health team around safe practices, and infection control.

### ■ Mount Alexander Community Pantry

The Mount Alexander Community Pantry was set up by local organisations and community groups, established by the Central Victorian Primary Care Partnership (PCP). It offered prepared frozen meals and food packages for all Mount Alexander residents on request, without eligibility criteria or cost.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community was particularly felt by those in hospitality, tourism, artistic communities, and those already experiencing disadvantage. People were suddenly unemployed and food security became an issue for the first time. Local First Nations service, Nalderun, began to see a surge in requests for food relief as the initial impact of COVID-19 was felt. The pantry was set up quickly and successfully due to the level of pre-existing relationships and trust between a number of the key organisations involved.

VicHealth established the Food Systems and Food Security COVID-19 Working Group to better understand and coordinate collective efforts to improve access to healthy food for all Victorians. The Working Group involved a diverse group of stakeholders from a range of sectors, including state and local government, community health, food relief, social enterprise, research and academia, and other food organisations and networks.



## CASE STUDY /

### Moving Feast – food relief ‘from farm to table’

Moving Feast emerged in response to the coronavirus pandemic and the immediate need to provide food to Victorian communities. Moving Feast is a collaboration of over 20 social enterprises that work across the food system, from growing to cooking to education, aiming to strengthen food security – from farm to table – and work towards social justice, sustainability and resilience.

Moving Feast has a three-stage pandemic plan that centres on relief, recovery and rejuvenation. To date, the collective has delivered more than 130,000 culturally appropriate meals and around 50,000 seasonal produce boxes, and is now working towards deeper systemic food system change. This will include establishing more food infrastructure across Melbourne, including food hubs, community gardens, farm gates and farmers markets, along with creating a host of training and employment pathways for marginalised groups into this local food system.

#### Vital volunteering capacity dried up

The emergency relief sector largely ‘runs on the smell of an oily rag’. This was particularly evident during the pandemic as many organisations saw a dramatic reduction of the volunteer workforce, placing a strain on services and remaining personnel.

Emergency relief organisations speak of volunteers being “warm and welcoming” and their breadth of knowledge and experience as “fantastic”. But it can be difficult for organisations to recruit, adequately train and support, and retain volunteers. A volunteer workforce also makes succession planning difficult, causing a lack of service continuity.

One report found that volunteer numbers dropped by almost 70 per cent, which impacted on the sector’s capacity to meet emerging demand.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, organisations reported losing “half” their volunteers, and that their “volunteer workforce disappeared overnight”.

Three in four organisations reported a loss of volunteer staff, despite increased demand that saw some organisations extend their service offerings (41 per cent) or hours of operation (16 per cent).<sup>20</sup> Others reported being forced to reduce their hours of operation (38 per cent) or even to temporarily close or suspend their services (31 per cent).

Many volunteers in the older age cohort were unable to continue providing support as they were considered high risk for coronavirus. Social distancing requirements also meant that fewer volunteers could be on site at any one time.

The long-term nature of the pandemic and restrictions also took a toll on paid workers and remaining volunteers. This pressure on the remaining workforce was compounded by the need to fulfil additional data collection requirements (for various funding bodies), despite lacking the resources to do so, not always being told the purpose of the data collection, not having training and not being given feedback on the data they provided.

Organisations also reported that it was difficult to build capacity of new volunteers to provide specialist services, including offering more intensive support to clients who had complex underlying issues.

### Food supply was patchy and not always appropriate

Australia's food relief system relies largely on the charitable sector and donations of surplus food to food banks.<sup>4</sup> During the periods throughout 2020 when restrictions were imposed on the Victorian community, supermarkets and other food retailers experienced an increase in consumer demand. This had direct implications for food relief organisations across the state who, until then, mainly relied on donations of surplus food from food retailers.

To meet the growing demand for food relief, we witnessed civil society mobilise and rally together to organise donation drives to food relief organisations.<sup>21</sup>

While heartening and welcome, this sometimes meant too much food going to locations where there wasn't a need, and not enough to others. And while there was a need for food, the donations weren't always practical for organisations to store, process or distribute – such as pallets of mineral water or vegemite – and the quality of fresh produce was often poor.

In addition to the issues pertaining to the quantity and quality of food, the types of food provided were often not culturally appropriate.

### CASE STUDY / Culturally appropriate food relief – the Flemington and North Melbourne towers experience

On July 4 2020, approximately 3,000 residents across nine housing commission towers in Flemington and North Melbourne were put into 'hard lockdown' for five days and were not able to leave their home. The residents, many from refugee and migrant backgrounds, were given only hours notice, which meant many were unable to organise food for their household.

The Victorian Government provided residents with 'essential items' but there were reports that the foods were not culturally appropriate or sufficient in quantity.

In response, community organisations rallied to quickly deliver culturally appropriate food supplies and hot meals that met the needs of the residents directly to the towers. The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre Chief Executive Officer Kon Karapanagiotidis stated:

"We are making sure families are getting culturally-appropriate, culturally-inclusive food. If you don't have food that's culturally appropriate, you don't have food security."<sup>21</sup>

An investigation by the Victorian Ombudsman into the tower lockdown found that, while a temporary lockdown was warranted to control the coronavirus outbreak, the immediacy of the lockdown violated human rights and was not based on public health advice.<sup>22</sup>

Organisations expressed concern about duplication of existing services as governments and policy-makers often lacked understanding about the emergency relief system, which sometimes led to the establishment of new channels of assistance that duplicated existing emergency relief services.

Organisations reported that there was a need to strengthen the coordination of emergency food relief across Victoria, particularly in regional areas and areas with culturally and linguistically diverse communities.



### The Victorian Government provided welcome food relief, but more needs to be done

To meet the growing demand for emergency food relief across Victoria in response to the coronavirus pandemic, the Victorian Government injected \$25 million to support food relief and regional food hubs and bolster Foodbank Victoria's vital work.<sup>23</sup>

The Victorian Government's investment includes:

- Community Food Relief Grants, supporting 93 local community organisations to provide food to Victorians in need.
- Regional food hubs to increase the coordination of food relief across regional Victoria, with a focus on storage and distribution, to enable a coordinated food relief response across the state.

- In partnership with Foodbank Victoria, the Victorian Government has selected Albury-Wodonga Regional Foodshare, Bendigo Foodshare, Geelong Relief Centre, Mildura Foodshare and Warrnambool and District Foodshare to provide the new hub services.
- In addition, two new food relief distribution centres will be built in Ballarat and Morwell.

To support this 'on the ground' effort, the Victorian Government has also established a Food Relief Taskforce, which brings together representatives from across government and key industry leaders, to coordinate food supply and distribution so that it targets Victorian communities most in need.<sup>24</sup>

The Taskforce will provide opportunities to strengthen the sector and address many of its underlying challenges. But there remains work to be done to ensure that food relief is nutritious and culturally appropriate.



## Recommendations



The funding provided by the Victorian Government for the emergency food relief sector helped ER organisations meet increasing demand. This funding can be built on by investing in long-term solutions to address food insecurity, and improving access to nutritious, affordable food.



**The effective doubling of JobSeeker for a period of time transformed the lives of those struggling to meet the daily cost of living.**

To permanently alleviate poverty, ensure everyone can afford the basics of life and reduce demand for emergency relief, the Commonwealth Government can:

- Permanently increase the rate of JobSeeker to at least \$65 per day and commit to ongoing indexation of payments in line with wage movements at least twice per year.
- Provide urgent financial support to refugees and asylum seekers, international students and other groups that have received no support throughout the COVID-19 crisis.



**Additional funding to the emergency relief sector was critical to ensure the sector could maintain service delivery in a complex environment.**

To build a comprehensive and sustainable ER sector to help people in crisis, the Commonwealth Government can:

- Permanently increase funding to enable the ER sector to recruit and retain a skilled workforce and reduce reliance on volunteers.
- Remove red tape and reduce the administrative burden on ER organisations, to maximise resources available for direct support of Victorians in need.
- Provide dedicated professional development funding to ensure the ER workforce is adequately trained and supported to offer holistic support to people with complex needs.
- Establish a Victorian emergency relief peak body to coordinate action, collect data and information about the sector's operations, promote the sector, identify emerging issues and needs, facilitate communication and coordination between services, and provide a collective voice for the sector.



**The funding provided by the Victorian Government for the emergency food relief sector helped ER organisations meet increasing demand.**

This funding can be built on by investing in long-term solutions to address food insecurity, and improving access to nutritious, affordable food.

- Develop and fund a state-wide food relief framework to address the delivery of emergency food relief across Victoria, modelled on the Food Relief Framework developed by Western Australian Council of Social Service.
- Develop and implement nutritional guidelines to ensure that food donors and food relief organisations provide fresh and healthy food for community members.
- Facilitate connections between food relief organisations and hubs and the local community sector to ensure that there is a focus on providing access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food.
- Develop a long-term approach to food relief and improved food security – one that recognises and values dignity, access to nutritious food and the pathways out of food insecurity.



## Conclusion



Despite adversity and the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, emergency relief organisations across Victoria pivoted and demonstrated their flexibility to respond quickly, particularly to the needs of local communities.

The emergency relief sector plays a critical role in supporting people who are experiencing financial hardship due to various circumstances.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the ER sector was brought into sharp focus as Victoria faced the twin health and economic crises.

Many Victorians who had never accessed emergency relief had to learn how to navigate the ER system for the first time.

Rising food insecurity highlighted the weaknesses in Australia's food supply chains and the existing system of food relief. A reliance on volunteers and a donation-based food relief system exposed vulnerability in the system.

Food relief organisations were experiencing an increase in demand for food relief just as they faced a major food supply and workforce reduction.

This placed immense pressure on organisations, which had to pivot to respond to increased demands at the same time as adapting their processes to be 'COVID-safe'. Many organisations that offer personal support and referral services were not able to keep operating at the same level due to restrictions.

Despite adversity and the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, emergency relief organisations across Victoria pivoted and demonstrated their flexibility to respond quickly, particularly to the needs of local communities.

While the pandemic response from both the Federal and Victorian Government has been a welcome relief, there were many gaps that meant not all Victorians were able to find help when they needed it most.

There remains more to be done to ensure that Victoria's most vulnerable people are supported in a way that values their human rights. This includes not only a focus on emergency relief, but also looking 'beyond the band-aid' and addressing the structural issues of poverty including unemployment, insecure employment, low income and unaffordable housing.

Coronavirus has shone a light on the emergency relief sector as a critical support for many Victorians. The system has been challenged, and will likely continue to be challenged, by increased demand, social distancing restrictions and a reduction in the volunteer workforce.

It is more important than ever that the emergency relief sector is well understood, and its specific funding needs are provided for, to enable the sector to support Victorians doing it tough.

Even more importantly, the structural drivers of poverty and disadvantage must be addressed.

Until then, emergency relief will remain under pressure as a primary support system for many people's health and wellbeing, and must be recognised as such by government funding in the pandemic recovery.

# Appendix 1

## A snapshot of emergency relief organisations in Victoria

The table below provides a small example of the broad range of emergency relief organisations in Victoria.

Organisation	Description of services provided
Anglicare Victoria	Anglicare is Victoria's largest provider of out-of-home care for children and young people and provides a range of other services including: community services, education, family services, family violence, housing, disability services, homelessness services and mental health services. In any given year, Anglicare financial counsellors help improve the financial situation and education of more than 6,000 Victorians.
Bendigo Foodshare	Bendigo Foodshare is a charitable collaboration that rescues donated and surplus food to feed people across central Victoria via food distributions to local charities, community groups and schools. It helps to provide food to almost 13,000 people each week, mostly families, farming communities and students.
Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House Food Relief	Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House provides support to the community via many services and programs including emergency food relief, community meals, and support for families and individuals. It provided drought support to local communities over the past four years and a huge food relief response to the 2019-20 bushfires, as well as meeting need as a result of COVID-19.
Bridge Darebin Food Relief	Bridge Darebin (Preston Neighbourhood House Inc.) is a not-for-profit based in Preston and Thornbury. Through a partnership with Preston Rotary, Reservoir Neighbourhood House and FareShare, it is a distribution point for organisations that require food to provide to their cohorts.
Catholic Care Victoria	Catholic Care is a 'wrap around' service that provides emergency relief, advocacy, information and referrals, family and relationship services, relationship courses, pastoral services, refugee and asylum seeker support, school and education support, and provides referrals for mental health, physical health and drug and alcohol. Its emergency relief services include food vouchers, food credits to use at local food relief centres, part payment contributions to outstanding bills, and utility and car bills. Catholic Care links into services such as St. Kilda Mums or Geelong Mums for donations to be able to provide items like baby clothes or cots.
CISVic	CISVic represents 55 local community information and support services across 64 sites in Victoria and is the lead agency in a consortium of 29 local centres delivering federally funded emergency relief. Services provided by member organisations include material aid, food, information, advocacy, referral, case management, budgeting assistance, financial counselling, legal services, no interest loans, tax help, youth services, personal counselling, and settlement support. Annually, CISVic organisations reach approximately 500,000 Victorians.



Organisation	Description of services provided
The Community Grocer	The Community Grocer runs five fruit and vegetable markets in public housing estates and community centres across Melbourne. It is a social enterprise model that addresses the physical, economic, and social barriers to fresh food access by ensuring affordability, with prices typically 60 per cent cheaper than other fresh food outlets, and creating weekly gathering spaces to celebrate diversity and encourage community connectedness. The Community Grocer offers an alternative to the traditional emergency food relief model by offering high quality, nutritious and culturally appropriate produce. The social enterprise allows people to side-step the stigma often associated with asking for help or attending food relief organisations.
FareShare	FareShare is a charity that works with businesses to cook surplus food into free meals for hundreds of community food programs in Victoria and Queensland.
Foodbank	Foodbank is Australia's largest food relief organisation, providing food to frontline organisations that, in turn, provide food to vulnerable Australians.  In Victoria alone, Foodbank provides food to 352 organisations, across 490 sites.
OzHarvest	OzHarvest operates a food rescue for its emergency food relief program. In addition, it delivers food and sustainability education and engagement activities.
St. Vincent De Paul Victoria	St. Vincent De Paul Victoria focuses on four core areas to address disadvantage: cost of living, education, food insecurity and homelessness. It provides a range of assistance through home visits, Vinnies Shops, youth programs, soup vans, education and tutoring, VincentCare homelessness services and also support for migrants and refugees.
The Salvation Army Australia	The Salvation Army provides services ranging from emergency relief, to disaster recovery, to programs that offer more holistic support. It also offers services for aged care, family violence, alcohol and drugs, homelessness, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, youth networks and programs for mums and babies.  The Salvation Army offers an employment program to place people in jobs and provide people with the education and skills needed to get a job, manages properties in order to provide housing to people in need, and supports community initiatives such as social enterprises.
Uniting Vic.Tas	Uniting provides support and counselling for people in crisis, with programs such as homelessness services, youth and children's services, accommodation, disability services and emergency relief. It also offers aged and carer services, alcohol and other drugs services, early learning and employment services and mental health support. Its emergency relief services include a mixture of vouchers, food parcels, energy relief, chemist bills, school uniforms, some meals, petrol vouchers and travel vouchers.
Whitehorse Churches Care (WCC)	Whitehorse Churches Care seeks to strengthen the bonds between churches, connecting people across denominations, encouraging and providing opportunities for collaboration, training, prayer and mutual support.  When COVID-19 hit, WCC created a food response for people who were isolating due to risk, as well as people who did not necessarily qualify for other support. Supply came in part through purchases from Foodbank and the rest via donations, predominantly from congregational members. Distribution was via a number of local routes including police, Council, housing and other local services and organisations.

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## **Victorian Council of Social Service**

Level 8, 128 Exhibition Street,  
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

**e** [vcoss@vcoss.org.au](mailto:vcoss@vcoss.org.au)

**t** 03 9235 1000

**www.vcoss.org.au**



## **Community Information & Support Victoria**

Suite 907, Level 9, 343 Little Collins Street,  
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

**t** 03 9672 2000

**f** 03 9672 2099

**www.cisvic.org.au**