

Food Security Consultation 2016

Food security happens “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (United Nations).

Food insecurity happens when limited food options mean people go hungry, eat a poor quality diet or have to rely on emergency relief. However, being food secure is about more than relieving hunger; it also is about being able to choose and prepare healthy foods and obtain food in socially and culturally appropriate ways including not relying on food relief programs.

Food insecurity is worsening in Tasmania and is more common in disadvantaged communities. When healthy food is not available and affordable, people have to compromise on food quality and nutrition. This can lead to higher rates of obesity and other chronic conditions.

In Tasmania over the past few years, there has been much progress to implement local solutions to improve food access. This has been largely due to guidance from the Tasmanian Food Security Strategy Food for All Tasmanians (2012) and significant investment, most of which has now ceased.

Purpose

Research was undertaken by Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to find out what is working to improve food security and how to do things better. We talked with community organisations and groups funded to provide food security programs and projects in their region, researchers, project funders, neighbourhood house, local government staff, local market managers, and members of the former Tasmanian Food Security Council.

What was found will inform the future work of DHHS through Public Health Services, and the relevant initiatives within the Healthy Tasmania Five Year Strategic plan.



What works – it is more than nutrition

We found evidence of a range of collaborative and cross-sectoral strategies in place to improve community food security. Food-based programs such as community gardens, food hubs and local markets create places for community conversation around food. This helps people to reconnect with food, find out where it is grown and how to prepare it. This can lead to improved wellbeing by people making healthier food choices.

When people and communities understand the work that local growers and producers do, they often value locally grown products more, which may lead to a change in what and where they buy. This helps the local economy.

The high level of civic engagement in food security solutions in Tasmania reflects the broad community interest in food and food systems. Volunteerism adds significant value and resources to programs by providing physical labour and expert advice, meaning a relatively small investment can go a long way. This goodwill represents high value in dollar terms of time and expertise.



Food security projects and programs had real benefits for social inclusion, workforce participation and for people's physical and mental wellbeing. It can be difficult to measure the value of these outcomes but several community groups undertook qualitative evaluation to record what they have been able to do.

We know there has been a more coordinated approach to improve food security in Tasmania in recent years. New organisations and partners have become involved, bringing with them varied experience and skills.

Ongoing challenges

Some people felt that while they were reaching individuals at risk of food insecurity, they did not feel they were reaching the people 'most' at risk. It can be very difficult to reach the people most in need of support with food security. People may be managing critical personal situations. Therefore, they may be unable to take part in the programs offered. Emergency food relief programs need to continue to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable in our community.

Public Health Services can collaborate with organisations who already work with communities and individuals at risk of food security, to support the inclusion of food access and nutrition education into their service delivery.

Cultural shift

In areas where healthy foods particularly fruit and vegetables are less accessible, it can take time to change food culture (purchasing, cooking and eating behaviours). Public Health Services has a key role in increasing food literacy and building local capacity through workforce training to support healthy communities. It has a responsibility to ensure equitable access to food and nutrition resources.

Public Health Services should continue to fund and collaborate with a mix of program partners in communities across a number of settings, which use a range of strategies to facilitate cultural change towards healthy lifestyle and food choices.

Measuring change

Public Health Services has an ongoing role to ensure any change at a population and community level is measured. The inclusion of food security indicators in the Tasmanian Population Health survey will help measure change over time.

Working collaboratively with UTAS has increased the robustness and extent of the food security data collected within Tasmania. By helping communities build in evaluation and monitoring into service planning, the quantitative and qualitative data collected will tell their story.

Supporting sustainability

A number of organisations reported short term funding as a major barrier to preparing for sustainability. Actions that help the local food security initiatives transition into successful ongoing enterprises include:

- Planning for sustainability from the start, and working towards this during the project.
- Having a project leader or team members with business skills.
- Setting up from beginning as a not for profit business or a social enterprise using a grant, donations or in kind support.

Economic sustainability is just one possible goal and sustainability is measurable in other ways. If a local service provider can improve food security through reorientation and redesign of what they do this is can be a good outcome for that community.

We need to work together

Experts and communities overwhelmingly felt that the issue of food security required a whole-of-government approach, and that the issue sits outside of the boundaries of a single portfolio.

Over recent years, the food security agenda had been progressed largely by the health sector. The three main funding bodies who have offered food security grants since 2010 include the Tasmanian Government, the Heart Foundation and Primary Health Tasmania. These have now concluded.

Conclusion

This evaluation has highlighted the importance of creating local community solutions to improve food security, the role networking and intersectoral collaboration plays, the need for a strong policy environment and the continuing role of research and evaluation.

Public Health Services will continue its partnerships with community sector organisations and UTAS to improve food security in Tasmania. In 2017 our focus will be on providing training, resources and support for communities and to create opportunities for healthy food access to be addressed within the Healthy Tasmania Five Year Strategic plan.

While it was not possible to talk to everyone working to improving access to healthy food in Tasmania, we are grateful to the many participants in this evaluation, who took the time to talk to us and share their knowledge.

We can continue to build on the momentum of recent years - working with communities to ensure that there truly is food for all Tasmanians.

For more information

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