

Food security in 2020 and beyond – the Tasmanian Experience

Research Summary

Public Health Services, Tasmanian Department of Health, collected stories about food insecurity in 2020-2021 to understand what was happening across the state during the COVID-19 pandemic. The valuable feedback we have gathered will guide our future work.

We connected with the diverse range of organisations in the community food provision and emergency food relief sectors. We collected stories through interviews, online survey, and via email. Fifty-eight people shared their thoughts with us from at least 30 organisations and neighbourhood houses across the state. Thank you to everyone who took the time to talk to us.

Here's what we heard:

Need

Organisations experienced a rise in demand for their services. The flow on from the increase in government income support payments and Safe spaces program for Tasmanians experiencing homelessness saw some initial decrease in usual demand. As the pandemic progressed and with stay-at-home orders in place, the need for food relief grew, including by people who had never accessed it before. Young people, people on temporary visas and families who lost incomes were most in need of emergency food relief.

Funding

The Tasmanian Government as part of COVID support packages funded some organisations. These organisations reported feeling valued and proud to have been asked to help. While some smaller organisations didn't receive direct funding either through state or federal governments most did benefit. They had increased access to food supplies via the funded organisations.

Food Access and Nutrition

The initial widespread disruption to the nation's food supply did impact service delivery. Government funding and in some cases donations from community members and local food businesses allowed organisations to increase their service capacity.

While organisations providing community food programs were satisfied by the quantity and variety of foods available through funded organisations some were concerned there was not always enough regular healthy foods delivered. Many chose to buy additional foods from the local supermarket, and this took money away from other programs. Services and their clients wanted more locally grown and produced food. This observation was a wider community trend as well.

Moving Towards Community Food Resilience

Many organisations want to run community food programs to help people eat well so they don't need to rely on food relief as much. For some organisations the challenges of the pandemic was an opportunity to rethink models of service, to look at new ways to reach those in need and create more partnerships. The opportunity to access more food locally was an example of change many wanted to keep to supporting local businesses and growers.

Children and Young People

School closures during 2020 meant that children who access school lunch and breakfast programs had less support. Organisations and schools did recognise this early. They made efforts to stay connected with at-risk families. This shows the important role schools play in supporting families with food needs.

Food and Social Connection

Organisations often provide food as one way to get clients to engage with their wider services. The initial decrease in demand and the ongoing social distancing requirements prompted innovation to continue social connections and supports. This included 'phone trees' to call and check on older people and welfare phone calls. Home delivery of food supplies provided an opportunity to check in on community members.

Rise of Volunteerism in Some Community Groups

Staff and volunteers of organisations spoke of feeling a sense of meaning and purpose in coming together to contribute to the greater community need during 2020. The dedication to service was deeply valued by these organisations.

Our Work from Here

Public Health Services is committed to the health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians, through supporting a safe, nutritious, accessible, and affordable food supply for all. We recognise and value the broader social and emotional roles of community food programs, in addition to the essential role they play in providing food access and nutrition.

We will provide resources and support communities to develop skills and solutions to local food security issues.

We look forward to sharing outcomes from stage two of the project, where we have collected stories from people who have experienced food insecurity in 2020-2021.