

Submission to the Legislative Council
Legal and Social Issues Committee



Inquiry into food security in Victoria

Response from Women's Health Goulburn North East, July 2024

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About Women's Health Goulburn North East

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) is one of the 12 Women's Health Services funded by the Victorian Government to support gender-specific health promotion and the growth of gender equitable policies and practices across the state. WHGNE is a proudly feminist organisation working towards fostering the optimal health and wellbeing of women and their communities across our region (northeast Victoria and the Goulburn Valley). We focus on addressing the social determinants of health impacting women in rural and regional Victoria, including equitable access to resources and services, food security and our changing climate.

WHGNE maintains strong relationships with stakeholders like local government, public health units, community organisations and educational institutions to ensure that our work represents a broad range of place-based needs and is collaborative in driving systemic change. We are committed to building a local evidence-base that is representative of community aspirations and includes lived-experience perspectives and quantitative data, specific to our region. Under our priority area, 'women in a changing society', WHGNE undertakes a range of activities through which we engage with the gendered impacts of disaster and the need for thriving local infrastructures in order to nourish our communities and improve health and wellbeing in a changing climate.

Goulburn (red) North East (blue) by Local Government Area



Introduction

WHGNE welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Our region, like many other rural and regional areas, is becoming increasingly vulnerable to climate-based emergencies. This has been demonstrated over the last several years by significant flooding and bushfire events impacting communities in both northeast Victoria and the Goulburn Valley. These impacts have been compounded by other challenging conditions, including the COVID 19 pandemic and most recently, the ongoing housing and cost of living crises. Reliable access to affordable, nutritious food is threatened by all of these factors, in addition to preexisting socioeconomic, geographic and demographic barriers.

Our submission recognises that achieving food security for all is complex. We need to adopt an integrated food systems approach that takes place-based and state needs into consideration to achieve food security for everyone. WHGNE is a proud and active member of both Sustain Australia's National Food System's Working Group and Victoria's Food Resilience Planning Community of Practice, as led by Victoria University. Through our place in both groups, WHGNE recognises the opportunity for the State Government to review its role as a leader in supporting both a State and localised approach to addressing food security for the population across Victorian regions.

As a social determinant of health, access to nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food informs physical and mental health alongside other intersecting factors. The cost-of-living crisis and growing food insecurity among different cohorts is indicative of the need to address food insecurity and its drivers, like poverty, social inequity and increasing climate-based disasters. As a rural women's health service, we are particularly concerned with the socioeconomic disparities faced by women in rural and regional areas. This submission will demonstrate the need to apply a gender and rural lens over food security as it relates to women's health. In offering recommendations to strengthen food security in Victoria, WHGNE's submission will address the following areas:

- 1. Leadership in rural and regional food systems and addressing place-based needs (p. 5-8).**
- 2. Considering the social determinants of health in food security and public health policy through an intersectional gender lens (p. 9-12).**

Recommendations

<p>1. State and local government should increase community capacity to drive and maintain sustainable local food systems by providing coordination and governance, as well as expanding available resources</p>	<p>Alignment to TOR 2</p>
<p>1.1 Commit to the development, implementation and evaluation of a Victorian Food Systems Strategy, accompanied by an investment plan to support implementation across the State.</p>	
<p>1.2 Develop a committee to oversee the Victorian Food Systems Strategy from development, implementation and through to its evaluation.</p>	
<p>1.3 Develop a statewide policy audit to identify where food systems work currently is recognised, prioritised and funded across different sectors, departments and geographies. Create a data set that is updated over time to accompany this policy that is publicly available.</p>	
<p>1.4 Commit long term funding for localised approaches for food relief programs to include support for disaster response and recovery. This needs to include food that provides a nutritious diet and that is culturally appropriate and inclusive of the populations of its geography.</p>	
<p>2 Take action to increase access to social supports for underserved communities to address the drivers of poverty, and support 'food with dignity' approaches to address food insecurity beyond traditional food relief frameworks.</p>	<p>Alignment to TOR 1</p>
<p>2.1 Embed policies to ensure the equitable distribution of food system resources and increased support for underserved communities through opportunities to participate in decision making and place-based initiatives.</p>	
<p>2.2 Establish and fund a universal school lunch program and supporting infrastructure for all Victorian school children (moving beyond school food insecurity focused current initiatives in place).</p>	
<p>2.3 Using the mechanisms within the Gender Equality Act, embed a gender lens over food systems and settings, including the development of a gender audit tool specific to the food system.</p>	
<p>2.4 Ensure the design of the Victorian Food Systems Strategy includes representation of a diverse range of stakeholders, population groups, geographies, and crucially, those with lived and living experience of food insecurity and producers.</p>	

Leadership in rural and regional food systems and addressing place-based needs

Recommendation 1: State and local government should increase community capacity to drive and maintain sustainable local food systems by providing coordination and governance, as well as expanding available resources.

The local food context in Goulburn North East

The North East Local Food Strategy has been in existence since 2018 and is currently being renewed. The renewed strategy will act as a roadmap for a more equitable, abundant and sustainable future for people living in northeast Victoria. WHGNE is leading the development of this vision because we believe that in order to achieve optimal health and wellbeing for rural and regional Victorians, we must ensure that gender and climate responsive planning are central to informing resilient local food systems and their vital role in determining health and wellbeing outcomes, across the supply chain and those settings in which food is accessed.

WHGNE is also working with community, business and government organisations to support the development of the first Goulburn Valley Food System Strategy. Like the North East Local Food Strategy, the Goulburn Valley Food System Strategy aims to improve access to healthy, affordable, sustainable and local food within the region. The wider Goulburn area has a strong identity as the 'Food Bowl', a reputation which can be maintained with a sustainability focus and a holistic approach to addressing community food needs and mitigating the impacts of economic insecurity and climate change on local food production and consumption.

A case for coordination, governance and increased structural support

Across both regions this work is kept alive through the commitment of individual organisations and local people, who find ways to give food systems work focus and time. Through experience in both leading and supporting the development of the local food systems strategies taking shape in our region, we have encountered the challenging question of 'whose job is it to drive this work', let alone coordinate the collection of data, secure funding and collaborative resourcing opportunities. Consideration for how food systems work can engage culturally diverse communities and incorporate a local First Nations perspective through collaborative and culturally safe codesign processes is an underdeveloped area that must be incorporated beyond a 'tick box' approach. These factors have spurred consideration of how our local governance structure can most effectively drive collaboration, resource and information collection, in addition to coordinating action.

Through this experience in leading, developing and supporting local food system strategies WHGNE has identified a need for strengthening coordination and structural support to ensure food security is enjoyed equitably by diverse communities in our region and across the state. New research from Melbourne University ([Carey, Murphy and Behen, 2024](#)) has found that food resilience planning requires strong overarching governance and coordination, including:

- A whole of government approach to food systems work.
- The establishment of effective governance across food systems, both state-wide and regionally.
- Capacity building to increase stakeholder understanding of food systems work and coordination of the development of local food systems and food resilience planning.
- Tools and guidance at a regional level through effective policy and frameworks.

The development of an overarching Victorian Food Systems Strategy would be beneficial in providing a blueprint and a mechanism for coordinating local, place-based food systems driven by community, with policy and structural support from state and local governments. The creation and implementation of food resilience planning tools and state and local government support to address research gaps by LGA would be beneficial in ensuring the work is relevant, effective and tailored to the communities it is designed to serve. This could be inaugurated through implementing a statewide policy audit to better understand where planning and action are taking place across LGAs.

Climate responsive planning and the 'infrastructure of care'

Disasters have a significant impact on mental health and wellbeing, with social isolation – often compounded for women through the gendered expectation of providing nutritious, affordable food alongside performing additional emotional labour – deepening poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes ([Parkinson et al., 2022](#)). WHGNE has been building the evidence base to better understand the impacts of disaster on women's health for over a decade. In our rapidly changing climate, rural communities must engage the topic of food security through a range of perspectives, from community development and emergency management to health and gender equity.

In collaboration with national research organisation Australia reMADE, WHGNE recently engaged with people across our region to understand what is required for communities to care and be cared for before, during and after disaster. The findings revealed that people broadly needed three things – to be seen, safe and supported ([Rooney, Hay and Spencer, 2023](#)). These findings indicate that disaster preparedness planning must encompass more than the traditional elements like fire and flood proofing, food relief and temporary shelter. Communities need to know how and where they can access resources and services and where they can go to seek support. WHGNE contends that food resilience planning is a central component of disaster preparedness – in 2022,

nineteen per cent of food insecurity experienced in Australia was caused by natural disasters like bushfires, floods and drought ([Foodbank, 2023](#)). Despite 2023 figures dropping to eight per cent, the increasing frequency of climate-based disasters in regional and rural areas requires comprehensive planning for future events.

Within food resilience planning, prevention and mitigation strategies must be holistic in scope, engage community and be in place prior to disaster, particularly in the context of rural and regional Victoria. Small scale food producers, market gardeners, local suppliers and community food-share cooperatives play a key role in sustaining local food systems and fostering community connection, vital elements to an 'infrastructure of care' in rural and regional areas. Ensuring community food initiatives and the dedicated people who drive them are provided with capacity building, resources and tools to enact climate responsive planning and mitigation strategies will contribute not only to the long-term food security across Victoria, but to addressing mental health and wellbeing through social connection in disaster prone areas.

From WHGNE and Australia reMADE's collaborative research, we have produced a second report, Care through Disaster in Practice: A Toolkit for Leaders, from the Citizen to the State ([Spencer, Hay and Rooney, 2024](#)). While this resource is not specific to food systems or food security, it provides a roadmap for incorporating community needs into disaster preparedness and a suite of recommendations to embed a holistic infrastructure of care for community and government leaders and decision makers to enact. WHGNE believes that this tool will provide a useful guide for government to inform the development of an overarching food systems strategy for the state of Victoria and for the development of place-based strategies across LGAs.

How the Victorian Government can empower community driven food security initiatives

- 1. Policy Development and Coordination:** Establishing policies informed by community needs that prioritise local food infrastructure, equitable access to nutritious foods, and access to resources and guidance in the development of local food systems, from planning to implementation.
- 2. Investment and Funding:** Allocating funding and grants to support sustainable, local food initiatives that work towards a 'circular economy' in local areas to reduce waste and decrease costs, such as sustainable food businesses and local food shares, particularly in underserved regions.
- 3. Education and Capacity Building:** Providing training programs and resources for small scale producers, suppliers and community leaders in local food initiatives around topics like climate mitigation and disaster preparedness and sustainable agriculture.

4. Partnerships and Collaboration: Facilitating partnerships between government agencies, local councils, community organisations, Aboriginal corporations and First Nations leaders and communities to address food security issues collectively.

5. Research and Evaluation: Leading the collection of data around food systems work across regional Victoria by LGA and ensuring that information around demographic data and food security is culturally relevant and tailored to place and population.

By prioritising these strategies, the Victorian state government can lead efforts to strengthen local food systems, promote health equity, and address the broader social determinants of health across the region.

Sub-recommendations

1.1 Commit to the development, implementation and evaluation of a Victorian Food Systems Strategy, accompanied by an investment plan to support implementation across the State.
1.2 Develop a committee to oversee the Victorian Food Systems Strategy from development, implementation and through to its evaluation.
1.3 Develop a statewide policy audit to identify where food systems work currently is recognised, prioritised and funded across different sectors, departments and geographies. Create a data set that is updated over time to accompany this policy that is publicly available.
1.4 Commit long term funding for localised approaches for food relief programs to include support for disaster response and recovery. This needs to include food that provides a nutritious diet and that is culturally appropriate and inclusive of the populations of its geography.

Considering the social determinants of health in food security and public health policy through an intersectional gender lens

Recommendation 2: Take action to increase access to social supports for underserved communities to address the drivers of poverty, and support ‘food with dignity’ approaches to address food insecurity beyond traditional food relief frameworks.

Food with dignity

WHGNE, in parallel with our regional North East Local Food Strategy identifies food security existing when ‘all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2009).’ A strong and sustainable regional food system has the potential to have a positive influence across a number of the social determinants of health (North East Local Food Strategy 2018-2022).

Access to fresh, nutritious food is a basic human right, yet many in our communities lack the agency to choose due to socioeconomic disparity. WHGNE supports a ‘food with dignity’ approach in addressing food security at a whole of population level, at all times. The efficacy of this approach is supported by research into food resilience and informed by a commitment to upholding and enabling equitable access to economic, social and cultural rights ([Carey, Murphy and Behen, 2024](#); [United Nations OHCHR, 1966](#)).

The choices we make as individuals are limited by factors like income, education, location, access to housing, transport and other vital services. Therefore, although we are presented with choices of how and what we eat in theory, in practice we are subject to inequitable access to food choices. The latest statistics from the Foodbank Hunger Report reveal that in 2023, 36 per cent of Australian households experienced moderate to severe food insecurity. Of this figure, 77 per cent experienced food insecurity for the first time ([Foodbank, 2023](#)). These figures are indicative of how limited agency influences access to food – factors beyond our control, like the cost-of-living crisis facing Australians, heavily inform how we are able to access food.

Reducing stigma and increasing agency

WHGNE recommends that to ensure that all Victorians are afforded food with dignity, a rights-based approach is embedded across the systems and structures shaping food security initiatives, including health promotion activities to reduce social stigma around

food insecurity and poverty. Education around healthy food choices in schools for example, must be accompanied by action to address hunger, deprivation and lack of access to healthy choices. An initiative to empower children and their families through a universal school lunch program available to all school children would reduce the stigma experienced by children impacted by food insecurity and provide nutritious meals.

It is vital for decision-makers, educational and health institutions, business and service providers to recognise that promoting healthy eating through an 'individual choice' approach is ineffective and even harmful in fostering positive health outcomes due to a lack of acknowledgement of structural and systemic barriers to food choices inherent in centring individual responsibility. Empowering people to source and eat local produce, start a vegetable garden, reduce waste and food miles, or to buy food with less packaging must be approached through a strengths-based lens without expecting individuals to overcome challenging barriers to achieving these goals, like poverty, low educational attainment, social or geographical isolation, housing insecurity, time scarcity, disability and experiences of gender-based violence.

Diverse activities that include communities and underserved populations in decision making using the principals of codesign would support increased access to food with dignity and expand local food systems beyond food relief. The application of a rights-based approach to food security should be embedded across community settings, including the expansion of school-based programs.

A gender lens on food security

It is crucial to recognise that individual access to resources is influenced by the social determinants of health, most of which are outside of individual control. An important factor in addressing food insecurity, and one which sits within WHGNE's remit, is increasing gender equality. Women face a range of socioeconomic disparities, which compound experiences of food insecurity and impact negatively on women's health and wellbeing.

- **Rising rates of food insecurity:** Women accessing food relief rose from 34% to 49% between 2022-2023 ([Foodbank, 2023](#)).
- **Single parent households:** In 2023 being a single parent household was the highest indicator of experiencing severe food insecurity, at 46% of the data set ([Foodbank, 2023](#)). The Australian Bureau of statistics reported in 2023 that 81.2% of single parent households are headed by women ([ABS, 2023](#)).
- **Gender-based violence:** 5% of people facing food insecurity in 2023 cited domestic or family violence causing changes to their living situation as a contributing factor to food insecurity ([Foodbank, 2023](#)). We must consider that

many women stay in violent living situations in order to ensure their children do not experience food insecurity.

- **Gender pay and super gap:** Women are paid 11.6% less than men on average hourly rates and will accrue 23.1% less superannuation by the time they stop work ([Australian Government, 2023](#)).

These factors demonstrate the need to address the socioeconomic factors that deepen and inform experiences of food insecurity through a gender lens. Increasing support and tailoring policies to empower women economically, through the mechanisms in place via the Gender Equality Act will contribute to food security and improve health and wellbeing outcomes. WHGNE asserts that the above statistics show the need for a gender lens over policy development and the implementation of food security initiatives. Urgent action to address food insecurity experienced by single parent households must include extending social support and advocating for increases to financial benefits to the Federal Government.

In addition to single parents, it is vital to consider these measures to support intersectional access to food security among other cohorts disproportionately impacted by economic insecurity and access to resources, like migrant and refugee populations, First Nations communities, people experiencing homelessness and people with disability. Measures taken to increase social supports through the COVID 19 pandemic and associated lockdowns produced results that provide evidence for the efficacy of increasing social supports to reduce poverty, and in turn food insecurity.

The Australian Council of Social Services reports that as a direct result of increased income support during the pandemic, groups including migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, under and unemployed people, people on social support payments and renters all experienced a significant reduction of poverty ([Davidson, Bradbury and Wong, 2023](#)). Reducing poverty and food insecurity will have positive health benefits for underserved communities and ultimately benefit the economy through a reduction in healthcare costs.

Incorporating lived and living experience of food insecurity to policy and action

The negative mental and physical health impacts of food insecurity on individuals and communities has been well documented. For example, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that ‘food insecurity increases psychological distress and compromises physiological wellbeing ([AIHW, 2022](#)).’

The health impacts of food insecurity only serve to increase the already-disproportionate rates of mental and physical ill-health experienced by people who face intersecting forms of marginalisation.

WHGNE believes that policy development, projects and initiatives to address food security must be informed by lived and living experience to truly represent the diversity of needs across the state. To close our submission to the Inquiry into Food Security, WHGNE urges the Victorian Government to ensure that communities are provided meaningful opportunities to engage with decision-making and policy development in the equitable access to food. From WHGNE's submission to the CSIRO Transforming Australian Food Systems consultation:

'Equitable policy depends upon policymakers "listening to all the voices in our community, particularly those from underrepresented groups who are often unheard and have in the past been labelled as 'hard to reach'." If we are unable to listen to people who are often situated at the systemic margins, policy, action, collaborations and trust between government, industry and community will always fall short.'

Sub-recommendations

2.1 Embed policies to ensure the equitable distribution of food system resources and increased support for underserved communities through opportunities to participate in decision making and place-based initiatives.
2.2 Establish and fund a universal school lunch program and supporting infrastructure for all Victorian school children (moving beyond school food insecurity focused current initiatives in place).
2.3 Using the mechanisms within the Gender Equality Act, embed a gender lens over food systems and settings, including the development of a gender audit tool specific to the food system.
2.4 Ensure the design of the Victorian Food Systems Strategy includes representation of a diverse range of stakeholders, population groups, geographies, and crucially, those with lived and living experience of food insecurity and producers.

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