

Public Hearing: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Foodbank Australia Opening Statement, Brianna Casey, Chief Executive Officer

~ CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ~

Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence at today's hearing. I am here representing Foodbank Australia. In the absence of a formal submission, I would like to provide a brief overview of Foodbank's role as an enabler to emergency relief providers, and to make some observations about what we have seen – and expect to see – in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity in Australia.

Can I firstly acknowledge the outstanding work being undertaken by my colleagues on this panel. As Senators may be aware, we all sit on the National Coordination Group established by the Department of Social Services earlier this year, and I can only commend the analysis, discussion and advice being undertaken by this group.

I would also like to acknowledge the great work done by the Trusted Information Sharing Network Food and Grocery Sector Group and Department of Home Affairs Food Supply Working Group, who, in conjunction with the National Coordination Group, provided us with real-time data, coordination and support in the face of volunteering and workforce challenges, agency closures and significant supply chain interruption.

Foodbank exists to fight hunger in Australia, year-round, not just during disasters. We were already assisting 815,000 people a month before the devastating summer bushfires, and before the impacts of COVID-19 took hold. In recent months, we have seen a 78% increase in demand for food relief, and we have a very real concern that we're not yet at the peak of food relief demand, especially in areas still recovering from natural disaster. We are nervous about the proposed timing of the removal of JobKeeper, JobSeeker and Coronavirus supplements, particularly given the strong correlation between poverty, unemployment, underemployment and food insecurity.

We have seen significant changes in the profile of food insecure Australians, with the newly unemployed, temporary visa holders, students, seniors and single parents now a constant in terms of food relief recipients. We are doing our best to keep up with demand, but the sheer number of new recipients is making this difficult, and we will need to sustain at least current levels of food sourcing if we are to continue to respond to current demand levels, let alone a further increase.

The panic-buying we saw in the early days of the pandemic seriously affected our traditional sources of food and grocery supplies at Foodbank. We were extremely grateful for the COVID funding provided by the Federal Government to allow us to procure key staple products so crucial to the 2,400 agencies we provide food relief to, including Commonwealth-funded emergency relief providers.

Our state/territory Foodbanks have done an extraordinary job of responding to challenges we've never faced before. To cite but one example, when agencies started closing and clients couldn't get to Foodbank hubs due to social distancing, Foodbank SA introduced a home delivery service in a matter of days, and they now have 70 agencies signed up to the program, and are currently delivering to households on a daily basis. This is on top of their ongoing bushfire recovery efforts (eg in Lobethal where families are still accessing mobile food hub services today).

We are by no means through this crisis, but I commend the committee for its consideration of this important issue and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.