

2024-2025 ACT Budget Submission

Sustainable Funding for the Canberra Food
Relief Sector

April 2024

Supporting Food Relief Agencies

This submission has been submitted by VolunteeringACT as Chair of the following networks, on behalf of the Canberra Food Relief Network and Food and Emergency Relief Advisory Committee. The submission has been developed from ongoing consultations held with the sector and representatives from within both the network and committee and reflects the collective experiences and views of those partners.

This submission is authorised for publication on ACT Government's website.

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to submit recommendations to the ACT Budget 2024-25. This submission represents the collective insights of the 43 pantries and services involved in the Canberra Food Relief Network and outlines a request for \$427,912 (plus indexation each year) in annual funding from the ACT Government until 2030.

The ACT food relief sector is unified and highly innovative in its operations, delivering vital assistance to Canberrans in crisis every day. ACT food relief services are underpinned by a strong foundation created over the past few years with key initiatives from Hands Across Canberra, VolunteeringACT, and Scyne Advisory. Despite this, the food relief sector is collapsing from unprecedented demand due to the cost-of-living crisis and the increasing rates of social disadvantage.

Expanding funding to the Network is a matter of urgency, and this financial investment will ensure the sector can meet increasing operational costs, reach more families and individuals in desperate need, and effectively implement the objectives outlined in the Canberra Food Relief Network Action Plan. With ACT Government support, the outcome will be a more sustainable service offering, enabling us to build a more resilient Canberra community, and directly contribute to the achievement of key health and wellbeing goals within the ACT Government Wellbeing Framework.

Summary of Recommendations

A funding commitment of \$427,912 annually from 1 July 2024 until 30 June 2030 will support the ongoing coordination, facilitation, and engagement of the food relief sector. It will also enable the Canberra Food Relief Network to deliver its Action Plan.

An investment of \$2.5 million over six years will address historical underinvestment and current funding gaps, fostering greater resilience and collaboration within the food relief sector. This investment will be made to VolunteeringACT to manage and deliver for and with the sector.

This long-term investment in the sector will result in the following outcomes:

- Enable the Canberra Food Relief Network to deliver its Action Plan

- Facilitation of the Canberra Food Relief Network beyond June 2025.
- Advocacy and stakeholder engagement.
- Consistent and regular access to fresh and nutritious food for Canberra's most vulnerable communities.
- Higher capacity for wider distribution and improved delivery efficiency.
- Whole-of-sector approach to ongoing data collection and evidencing impact.
- Greater resilience of organisations and a cohesive experience for service providers.
- Strengthened sector collaboration and improved resource coordination and targeting.
- A provider model that is more sustainable and adaptable to quickly changing needs.
- A more reliable and consistent approach to ACT Food Relief Sector funding, underpinned by a robust whole-of-sector funding strategy.
- A significant contribution to achieving core health and wellbeing outcomes outlined in the ACT Wellbeing Framework.

Food Relief Sector Challenges and Opportunities

The Foodbank Hunger Report from October 2023 has served as a wake-up call to the disturbing prevalence of food insecurity in Australia. A staggering **3.7 million households** have experienced food insecurity in the last year. Concerningly, **77% of these households have never experienced food insecurity before.**¹ Food relief providers are at breaking point across the country, including here in the ACT and urgent action is required within this Budget cycle.

Meanwhile, food waste in Australia costs the economy \$36.6 billion annually, with 7.6 million tonnes of food wasted each year.² Food waste contributes to 3% of Australia's emissions,³ yet only 0.2% of excess food is donated.⁴ Food rescue is an effective method for managing the economic and environmental impacts of food waste. FoodBank has found that for every dollar invested in food waste prevention, there is a \$7 economic return.⁵ According to OzHarvest, every \$1 enables the collection and delivery of 2 meals to someone in need.⁶

¹ Foodbank Australia (2023), *Foodbank Hunger Report 2023*, 4, 21.

² FIAL (2021), *The National Food Waste Strategy Feasibility Study*, 18.

³ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (2021), *Reducing Australia's food waste*.

⁴ Foodbank Australia (2022), *National Food Relief Policy Sector Funding Priorities*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

⁶ OzHarvest (2024), *Donor Promise*.

Research from the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) in 2023 found that 10% of Canberrans live in poverty.⁷ This disproportionately impacts women, people with disabilities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁸ In recent years, ACT food pantries have reported an unprecedented demand from new demographics, particularly working people such as double-income families.⁹

In 2022, surveys done by ACTCOSS found that demand for the community sector's services increased by 67% and yet 84% of Canberra organisations reported that their current funding does not meet the community's growing needs.¹⁰ Surveys conducted in 2021 by the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre found that underfunding in ACT community services has left gaps in essential activities and operational mechanisms. Across the 88 community organisations surveyed, 22% reported receiving sufficient funding to cover staffing costs.

This longstanding issue within the industry has resulted in a low capacity for government engagement and consultation.¹¹ Organisations also often lack the resources to apply for grants and uphold reporting requirements.

Food relief agencies regularly collaborate with other stakeholders, by connecting vulnerable community members to a wide range of community services. The sector provides important place-based support through grassroots initiatives such as food pantries. Canberra's food relief network is dynamic and adaptable to emerging challenges, providing cost-effective outcomes for the ACT Government.

The food relief sector contributes to all 12 of the ACT Government's Wellbeing Framework indicators, which are health, economy, access and connectivity, governance and institutions, identity and belonging, time, education and life-long learning, social connection, environment and climate, housing and home, living standards, and safety.¹²

Many organisations in Canberra use a food rescue model, such as OzHarvest and Canberra CityCare, by redirecting surplus food from the ACT landfill. This has immense environmental

⁷ ABC (2023), *More Canberrans facing financial hardship, making tough choices as prices for essentials rise*.

⁸ ACTCOSS (2020), *Poverty and Covid-19 in the ACT*, 1.

⁹ Community Services Directorate (2023), *Community Food Pantries Listening Summary*, 5.

¹⁰ ACTCOSS (2023), *ACT Community Sector Demand Snapshot*, 2.

¹¹ Cortis, N., Blaxland, M. and Adamson, E. (2021), *Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre, 1-3.

¹² ACT Government (2020), *ACT Wellbeing Framework*, 4.

and climate benefits, saving primary resources such as water and reducing supply chain emissions. In 2023, the small team at OzHarvest ACT led the redistribution of food from over 100 providers to 69 local charities, resulting in over 1 million free meals.¹³

An ACT NoWaste-funded food donation pilot led by the Canberra Region Joint Organisation in 2021-2022 found that 16 out of the targeted 38 food relief providers required additional food.¹⁴ Despite this need, SecondBite data from 2021 identified that the average collection of food from a single ACT Coles store was 66.6 kg.¹⁵ While organisations need larger quantities of food to run their services, they often do not have the storage, equipment, volunteer and employee capacity to meet these demands. With increased ACT Government support, the food relief sector would have the capability to divert the supermarket industry's excess food from the ACT landfill and into the local community.

Many ACT Food Relief organisations fund their services through fundraising, community donations, or personal investment. This is especially common for faith-based organisations and they are also often heavily or 100% reliant on volunteers to operate. Volunteers make up an essential layer of the ACT's food relief workforce and are instrumental in the delivery of highly localised and responsive services, including many service offerings that operate 'out of hours'. However, volunteers are not 'free', and there are costs associated with recruiting, inducting, training, and supervising volunteers in line with ethical and safe practices outlined within the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement. The *Counting the Costs Service Costing Survey* from 2022 also found that only 25% of responding organisations reported they were adequately funded to manage volunteers.¹⁶

Investment in volunteer-led programs has not kept pace with the changing volunteering landscape, including the continued impacts of COVID-19 that are still being felt regarding volunteer recruitment and retention. This is having a particular impact on the food relief sector as many services have historically involved high numbers of older volunteers to operate, presenting new risks to manage regarding volunteer exposure to COVID outbreaks and the potentially heightened health and wellbeing impacts we are seeing COVID-19 having on this cohort.

¹³ Everyday Climate Choices (2024), *New forklift helps OzHarvest rise to the challenge of food insecurity*.

¹⁴ Canberra Region Joint Organisation (2022), *ACT Food Donation Network Pilot*, 1.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Cortis, et al. (2021), *Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector*.

Some organisations prefer to purchase food to ensure fresh and culturally safe food for their recipients. For example, Helping ACT supports Canberra's most vulnerable communities with a team of 50 volunteers. In 2023, HelpingACT spent \$80,000 on purchasing food and distributed \$4,000 worth of food from individual donors. The agency spent \$5,000 on fuel and insurance, and recently spent \$15,000 upgrading their van donated by Ginninderry. Other organisations use a cost-recovery method to fund their services with a membership model. This is usually done by larger organisations with paid staff, such as Communities at Work.

“ Since mid-year in 2022, there has been a large increase in demand for food and support in the Canberra region. In May 2022, there were 300 shops per week and currently, there are 500 to 600 shops a week. We are now seeing double-income families and past clients access our pantries to put food on the table. The challenge now is the increasing costs and having enough food available each week.” Trevor Gilbertson, Manager of Community Centres and Donations, Communities At Work

Since 2023, representatives from the food relief sector have met monthly to collaborate and network through the Canberra Food Relief Network, led by VolunteeringACT. This group provides a platform for organisations to advocate to the Community Services Directorate. Additionally, Canberra Region Joint Organisation, Helping ACT and OzHarvest held 2 sector forums in 2022. These combined efforts have strengthened networks and streamlined frontline food relief delivery.

The ACT Government provided funding for the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, with close to \$1 million via the distribution of food hampers to the Canberra community.¹⁷ The ACT Government also supports 16 food relief organisations with a freight subsidy through the Food Assistance Program.¹⁸ A joint budget submission in May 2021 from the Food and Emergency Relief Advisory Committee was successful and enabled priority projects to be delivered by VolunteeringACT.

These projects included the establishment of the food relief network in 2023 that had met monthly, giving the food relief sector a platform to strategise, share best practice and collaborate regularly. Another funded project was the development of a territory-wide Communications Strategy that launched a campaign to increase public support and awareness

¹⁷ ABC (2021), *When COVID-19 struck, the ACT government made sure there was food for the city's most vulnerable. Now that relief has dried up.*

¹⁸ Community Services Directorate (2023), *Community Food Pantries Listening Summary*, 2.

of local food pantries. A food database has also been developed and was launched in March 2023 for organisations to track the use of food relief services which will be used to facilitate ongoing decision-making relating to food relief. This submission commends the ACT Government's response to the COVID-19 emergency, noting the above projects/funding are ending soon and year-round funding is urgently needed to address the persistent issue of food insecurity in Canberra.

In late 2023, representatives of the Canberra Food Relief Network were involved in a two-day workshop with Scyne Advisory, with the support of Hands Across Canberra. Scyne Advisory consulted with a cross-section of stakeholders, which have various food relief models. This in-depth consultation led to an Action Plan to address the sector's challenges and opportunities. This has provided a clear vision of the actions required to optimise the sector, with achievable objectives and expected timeframes.

By delivering the objectives in the Action Plan, the Canberra Food Relief Network will give the ACT Government an insight into emerging food security trends and will provide tools to monitor and measure the effectiveness of the ACT public health response. If implemented, the Action Plan will lift the standard of food rescue, food relief, and community sector collaboration.

"The number of visits to Canberra City Care's Food Pantry in West Belconnen has increased from an average of 400 per week mid-last year to over 500 per week from the beginning of 2024. We are receiving a constant flow of new members and expect to have nearly 1000 customers on our books by the middle of this year. Both of these measures reflect a 25% increase in 6 months highlighting the "Cost of Living Challenges" for many households. Canberra City Care supports 12 other food pantries across Canberra, and they are all reporting substantial increases in demand. This places stress on our access to affordable food, especially our food rescue program and the volunteers who ensure the centre functions."

Randolph Albrecht, Manager of Canberra City Care

2024-2025 ACT Budget Recommendations

The following proposes an annual funding arrangement of \$427,912 until 2030 for the food relief sector to enable delivery of the Canberra Food Relief Network Action Plan:

Proposed annual budget:

Program staff including Program Coordinator (part time)	
Training Coordinator (part time)	\$227,912
Policy Officer (part time)	
Program Manager (part time)	
Design of resources and collateral	\$20,000
Database and data warehouse licensing and services	\$55,000
Communications and fundraising campaign development	\$45,000
Develop and host online training modules	\$80,000
Total	\$427,912

This annual funding will support implementation of the Action Plan including continuation of frontline Food Relief services delivery, and ongoing coordination, facilitation, and engagement of the food relief sector, and will result in the following outcomes:

1. Project and Policy Implementation

- A coordinated approach to project implementation aligned with Action Plan key deliverables, milestones and tracking progress against timeframes.
- Establishing consistent core policies and strategic frameworks to support and improve operational practice, safety of operations, resource allocation and funding utilisation,

2. Capacity Building and Resource Sharing

- Increased organisational and individual staff capability in resource allocation/distribution, data collection and maximising access to fresh and nutritious food.
- Creation and sharing of good-practice resources including toolkits, guides, enhancing sector knowledge and operational efficiency.

3. Communication and Collaboration Strengthening

- A high quality and well-maintained central food relief service provider directory to support information sharing across the food relief network and with wider stakeholders.
- A streamlined and coordinated approach to sector engagement and communications across the network, with regular opportunities for participating organisations to provide input into quarterly communications campaigns.
- Continuous improvement processes underpinned by activities including regular reviews, working groups, communities of practice, and strategic planning sessions.

4. Advocacy and Strategic Engagement

- A coordinated approach to and maximised impact of food relief advocacy to stakeholders such as food suppliers and government bodies.
- Development and implementation of an advocacy campaign to enable big business food suppliers in the Canberra Region to better understand the needs of the sector and facilitate effective food rescue.
- Increased equity of food rescue resource distribution, and consistent application of food quality standards across the ACT.
- Cohesive ACT fundraising strategies and networking efforts to secure funding, support, and awareness for sector needs.

5. Educational Support and Standards Advocacy

- Upskilling of core food relief staff via development and delivery of targeted training and educational resources aimed at improving operational skills and safe practices.
- Enhanced sector strategic planning, capability and standards amongst new and ongoing providers.

We recommend that this funding request of \$427,912 be allocated annually from 1 July 2024 until 30 June 2030. The total amount of \$2.5 million over 6 years will give the food relief sector consistent and reliable funding, aligned with community needs. Importantly, this long-term investment will safeguard the sector's resilience and responsiveness for future emergencies such as environmental disasters, pandemics, and supply chain disruptions.

Conclusion

This submission emphasises the urgent need for comprehensive investment to prevent the escalating food insecurity crisis. By highlighting the valuable contributions made by food relief agencies, this submission seeks to ensure that the ACT Government allocates sufficient resources to sustain the food relief sector.

Overall, this submission requests an annual investment of \$427,912 until 2030 to assist with the operational and coordination costs of food relief providers. This funding will result in the continuation of the Canberra Food Relief Network, the delivery of the activities in the Action Plan, and a newfound ability for the sector to advocate, strategise and maximise their reach. These outcomes will bring immense environmental, social, and economic returns for the ACT community.

Acknowledgements

This submission has been written by Jessica Fordyce through a grant from Hands Across Canberra and the Canberra Foundations Collaborative. Thank you to Peter Gordon at Hands Across Canberra, Mohammed Ali at Helping ACT, and Becc Spradau, Jean Giese, and Cath Cook at VolunteeringACT for shaping this submission's development and strategy. For further information regarding this submission, please contact Jean Giese, Chair of the Emergency Relief Advisory Committee at ceo@volunteeringact.org.au.



Members of the Canberra Food Relief Network at the 2023 Scyne Advisory Workshop

References

ACT Government (2020). ACT Wellbeing Framework. Accessed at:

<https://www.act.gov.au/wellbeing/wellbeing-framework>

ABC (2023). More Canberrans facing financial hardship, making tough choices as prices for essentials rise. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-23/actcoss-report-shows-canberrans-paying-for-cost-of-living/102513340>

ABC (2021). When COVID-19 struck, the ACT government made sure there was food for the city's most vulnerable. Now that relief has dried up. Accessed at:

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-28/act-covid-19-canberra-relief-network-food-boxes-suddenly-end/100326564>

ACTCOSS (2023). Cost of Living Report. Accessed at: <https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-ACT-Cost-of-Living-Report.pdf>

ACTCOSS (2023). Community Sector Snapshot. Accessed at: <https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023-ACT-Community-Sector-Demand-Snapshot.pdf>

ACTCOSS (2019). Food security, food assistance and the affordability of healthy food in Canberra. Accessed at: <https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2019-report-food-security-assistance-and-affordability-of-healthy-food-canberra.pdf>

Canberra Community Service Organisations and Partners (2021). 2021-22 ACT Pre-budget Submission: Ensuring food security for all Canberrans. Accessed at:

https://www.budgetconsultation.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1764574/062.-Canberra-Relief-Advisory-Committee.pdf

Canberra Region Joint Organisation (2022). 'ACT Food Donation Network Pilot'.

Cortis N, Blaxland M, Adamson E (2021). Counting the Costs: Sustainable Funding for the ACT community services sector. Accessed at: https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2022-02/apo-nid316449_0.pdf

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (2021). Reducing Australia's food waste. Accessed at:

<https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/protection/waste/food-waste>

Everyday Climate Choices (2024). 'New forklift helps OzHarvest rise to the challenge of food insecurity'. Accessed at <https://www.climatechoices.act.gov.au/case-studies/case-studies/new-forklift-helps-ozharvest-rise-to-the-challenge-of-food-insecurity>

FIAL (2021). The National Food Waste Strategy Feasibility Study. Accessed at: https://www.enviromatica.net/Resources/FIAL%20NFWS%20Feasibility%20Study%20Report_FINAL.pdf

Foodbank Australia (2022). National Food Relief Policy Sector Funding Priorities. Accessed at: <https://www.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/national-food-relief-sector-funding-1.pdf>

Foodbank Australia (2023). Foodbank Hunger Report 2023. Accessed at: https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023_Foodbank_Hunger_Report_Summary.pdf

OzHarvest, SecondBite, Foodbank (2024). 2024-24 Pre-Budget Submission: National Food Relief Sector. Accessed at: <https://www.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/national-food-relief-sector-funding-1.pdf?state=au>

OzHarvest (2024). 'Donor Promise'. Accessed at: <https://www.ozharvest.org/donor-promise/>

Ravi A, Siddiqi T, Sridhar K (2014). Social impact of Foodbank Australia's services. Accessed at: <https://staging.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Foodbank-SROI-June-2014.pdf>

Standing Committee on Agriculture (2023). Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond. Accessed at: <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-12/apo-nid325229.pdf>