



Response to Questions on Notice

Portfolio Committee No.1 – Premier and Finance on Fresh Food Pricing in New South Wales

QUESTION

Starting date for the Society's food truck

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: When did you start the food truck? I am happy for you to take any of my questions on notice if you need to.

Ms YATES: I do not know when that started. It has been a longstanding service delivery, but I will get back to you on the time that it started, and if we have got trend data I will attempt to provide that to you too.

RESPONSE

The Society's food truck or Vinnies Van service in Sydney CBD commenced in the early 1960s by a two students from the University of Sydney. Their idea was to visit and support people in the inner city of Sydney who were experiencing homelessness. They provided time, friendship, compassion and food. Initially this was provided using their own vehicle but after a number of years they sought the assistance of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

In 2000, the Vinnies Van service acquired a second vehicle in order to provide more opportunities and time for conversations between volunteers and the people we assist over hot drinks and food. The focus remains one of accompaniment through conversation and relationship building, and high quality food.

Today the service consists of two vans, operating seven nights per week, every night of the year, excluding New Year's Eve. The services includes the provision of a light meal, blankets, toiletries, snacks, hot beverages and most importantly, companionship to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness within the inner city of Sydney. Last year 84,000 light meals were prepared and distributed by our teams.

QUESTION

Mapping availability of food, especially food deserts

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Regarding mapping the availability of food, one of the Committee's specific terms of reference is around food deserts and the provision of food across New South Wales, fresh food in particular. Does your organisation have any thoughts on that? I am happy for you to take that question on notice.

Ms YATES: Partly we do, and we operate across the State. The anecdotal evidence collected for the work we did for this submission would indicate that the further you get away from a regional centre, particularly from a large city, the higher the cost and the more difficult the access is to fresh and nutritious food on a regular and affordable basis. We did not put in specific recommendations about how that would be addressed but the most obvious one would be the cost of transport and the impact that that has on the direct increase in food. We have got a couple of lovely pieces where one of our conference members went to different supermarkets in different towns and wrote down the increase in very, very regular and stable foodstuffs, the differentiation between a loaf of bread and milk prices. She costed apples per kilo, oranges per kilo and mince per kilo. From a town 50 kilometres out of a



regional centre, that increase was almost double for some of those food items. I think we have got some really serious issues to be addressed in that context.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I am happy for you to provide those figures to the Committee, even on a confidential basis.

Ms YATES: Very happy to.

RESPONSE

The case study provided by the Society is in relation to a small town located 50 kilometres from a town in the Central West region of New South Wales (NSW). Our conference member recorded the following prices which indicate a significant increase in comparison to food priced in the town centre:

“For the last twelve months we have been providing assistance to the people in [small town] which is 50km from [town]. I visited the town yesterday to check on prices. The groceries have a mark-up of between \$1 and \$5 on each item compared to the large supermarkets in [town]. There was very little fresh and vegetables. Tomatoes were \$6 kilo, apples \$8 kilo, potatoes \$4 kilo, bananas \$5 kilo. Price of mince at the butcher was \$15 kilo and thin sausages \$15 kilo.”

Another case study provided by a conference member details the price mark ups and difficulties present with accessing fresh food in small towns. This case study refers to a town in the Northern Rivers region of NSW:

“The other conference is in [town] where there is only one supermarket which is a Spar, often the prices are higher and the range is not as extensive [as larger town]. The [town] conference issues a voucher which the client can use to purchase goods but the people at Spar know that the person using the voucher is experiencing financial difficulty, and so there is some embarrassment expressed by some clients that people who live in the same town as them are receiving assistance from a charity to feed themselves.”

QUESTION

Average length of time clients receive support and changes to client base over time

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: In terms of that cohort, I think 61,000 is about the client base, which you said is steady, but the value has increased. In terms of that 61,000, are you seeing that 61,000 being a fairly similar cohort or are people moving out of needing your services and you are getting a new cohort in? Are there any figures in terms of how long you are servicing clients for, for instance?

Ms YATES: I would have to take that on notice and figure that out. We do not necessarily capture data on an individual basis like that. In some instances we do. Some of that is just kept at conference level. I will have to get back to you on the details of that particular figure. One would imagine that there are transitional figures in it, but I will take that on notice and come back to you.

RESPONSE

Data collected from our client base over the previous twelve month period indicates that approximately 30 per cent of clients presented to our services for the first time (although this data is



for the total client base and does not specifically address emergency or ongoing food provision). Clients who presented five or more times in the previous twelve month period accounted for 12 to 15 per cent of the total number of people supported by the Society.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the provision of food support is provided to people in need for short term emergency food relief. Members generally refer people in need of ongoing assistance (defined as people asking for food assistance more than three times in a month) to other services including financial counselling and rental assistance for those who experience difficulty in meeting their household expenses over a longer term.

QUESTION

Reasons for single households receiving the majority of food assistance

Mr JUSTIN FIELD: Figure 2 on page 6 of your submission looks at food assistance by household type. I was interested to see that single households make up the majority of the food assistance in dollar terms. Can you pull those figures apart a little bit? I would have assumed it would have been more families, to be honest. What do you think the reason for that is?

Ms YATES: There are a couple of reasons for that. Single households generally have income stretch. If a family is able to support itself with two incomes as is often the case and often the requirement then their ability to purchase the goods and services they need to run there is increased. The other part about that is that while a number of the people that we serve are employed, single family households tend to be headed by women and their wages and the industries in which they work are not remunerated as strongly as other parts of industry and other sectors, so there is probably a bit of a double bind about that. But I can drill down into that data and come back to you if you are interested in further exploration of that.

Mr JUSTIN FIELD: Yes. That would be interesting. I assume that most of those in single households are probably on some form of government assistance. Would that be fair to assume?

Ms YATES: Benefits—possibly.

RESPONSE

In the year to date, the primary income for our client base is recorded as 31 per cent on a Newstart payment, 28 per cent on a Disability Support Pension, 18% on the Parenting Benefit and 23 per cent reporting other income sources.

QUESTION

Vouchers for major supermarkets

Mr JUSTIN FIELD: You mentioned earlier that where you offer vouchers that largely they are for the supermarkets. The Committee received some other evidence this morning that your local greengrocer—where they still exist, and I know there are parts of the State where they do not exist—is often cheaper. So I wondered why your vouchers tended towards the supermarkets.

Ms YATES: I suppose it is an accessibility issue. I can get some variables and extra information together for you from across the State. That would be just because that is the easier thing for our conference members to give out. There are also the complications of working as a charity and working at grassroots level. We are trying to pull away from voucher systems and from cash systems



for a lot of good risk and compliance reasons. That becomes the next practical thing: being able to give somebody a voucher for redemption and cash to go and spend in places other than the supermarket chains. But I can find out some additional detail about that if you are interested.

RESPONSE

The Society provides clients in need of food assistance with vouchers, food parcels or as part of a food bank service. The vouchers are redeemable via Coles or Woolworths supermarkets and related other stores, and are not necessarily food purchase specific. Given the supermarket reach and accessibility, and the choice that a voucher provides (as opposed to a food hamper which might not cater for individual need) vouchers are the simplest means for assisting clients.