



Online Survey of Emergency Relief Agencies

Melbourne
2008

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Objective of research

To substantiate anecdotal evidence by obtaining quantitative feedback on emergency relief agencies needs in the following specific areas:

- Changes in demand for food relief, in terms of the number of people, amount of food and visit frequency
- Changes in demographics of people seeking emergency food relief
- Changes in dietary needs and priorities of their clients
- Changes to the form in which agencies would like to receive food

This research was carried out by FareShare to plan the quantity, form and variety of meals produced in its kitchen.

It is also intended to increase community awareness and understanding of emergency food relief in Melbourne.

Summary of Results

- **Changes in the demand for food relief**

The majority of agencies agreed the number of clients wanting food relief has increased in last 12 months, but the frequency of visits has not increased. The majority of agencies agreed if there was more food available, there would be a demand from their clients for it.

- **Demographics**

Little change in the demographic profile of clients was registered. On the other hand, a range of marginalized groups are experiencing increasing difficulties. These include mental and other health issues, isolated elderly people, groups of children, migrant families, working poor and homeless people.

- **Nutritional needs and priorities**

Most agencies reported no change in clients' dietary needs over the last year.

All respondents were well aware of, and most commented on, the need for balanced nutritional food, although this was offset by the view that they were "grateful for anything they get", and there are "no priorities".

In response to prompted nutrition, protein and fibre were the highest priorities, with carbohydrates a medium priority. Agencies also specified low fat product.



Special food needs did not appear to be a high priority, and it was suggested that: “a range of foods is always useful. Whilst the majority of clients will eat anything, there are clients which need vegetarian and Halal food. And it could be useful to have a few items for diabetics and those people with a wheat allergy.”

- **FareShare**

The majority of respondents reported no change to the way their agency provided food relief in the past 12 months. There was overwhelmingly approval for the reliability, quality and responsiveness of FareShare’s service. This positive view also extended to the quality and size of the meals it provides.

Results

1. Changes in the Demand for Food Relief:

Fifteen out of 23 respondents claimed the number of clients wanting emergency food relief from their agency had increased in the last 12 months, with eight indicating the demand had not changed.

The reasons given for this growth were mainly related to financial hardship due to increased cost of living. Fuel, interest rates and housing cost increases were also said to have contributed to increases in demand for food relief.

“More families (are) experiencing hardship. Some have part-time jobs however, they are not earning enough to meet their cost of living. Where we can provide food it allows them to pay rent, gas and electricity, etc.”

This reinforces other reports of an increase in the numbers of “working poor” in Melbourne. These people are not homeless and they do have jobs, though some only part time, and some may even have a mortgage, but they are unable to meet rising living costs. There were two comments related to Centrelink changes - one agency commenting that more people were being “kicked off benefits”. A shortage of affordable housing was noted, as was an increase in homelessness.

Other shifting demographic patterns mentioned included the “ageing population, whose partners have died or entered an aged care facility”, an increase in new immigrants from Africa, and children at risk due to family circumstances.

The frequency of clients’ need for food relief did not appear to have changed over the last 12 months, although this might be related more to the fact that agencies tend to have their own schedules for making food available, and these have not changed.



However, the majority of respondents said that if more food was available to their agency there would be a demand for it from their clients. "A lot of our clients would come in weekly if we had the stock to give them."

They said:

- *"There is never enough staple food."*
- *"The more food we have, the more food we can dispense."*
- *"The demand on our services is insatiable."*

Agencies tend to have a regular distribution schedule and limit food per family and per visit. They monitor frequency of visits so that they "distribute according to the amount available."

Additional comments were that there is a high demand for hot food in colder months. One agency explained its "policy is to provide a choice of food for the client. This allows the client to feel empowered and part of the decision making process."

In relation to how food is used in agencies:

- *"The kind of food we get from you is invaluable as it can be part of a main meal."*
- *"We run a weekly soup kitchen but the food obtained via FareShare is used for fortnightly distribution."*
- *"If more food was available we could add this into our Kids Club program and send kids home every week with a pack of food that they may not get at home."*

2. Demographics

Seven of the 23 respondents reported no change in their clients' demographic profile.

The demographic profile tends to vary according to the location/segment being served by the particular agency. Many agencies seem to specialize in particular types of clients, eg. Sudanese immigrants, single mothers, children, asylum seekers, etc. There is no "average" profile, and hence no "average change" to report.

A range of marginalized groups were mentioned as experiencing increasing difficulties: People suffering mental and other health issues, isolated elderly people, children in some socio-economic classes, migrant families, the "working poor", homeless people, and even some middle class people.



A few respondents mentioned an increase in people suffering from:

- *“Some form of illness - for some it is physical but for many people have a form of mental illness.”*
- *“More younger people with mental health problems.”*
- *Also “many more older people seem to be needing food more often. Many of these people are now living on their own with no family and with ageing medical conditions. They don’t necessarily look after themselves properly.”*
- *“Children are always looking for juices, fruit and cereal. The primary schools are soooo grateful for what FareShare provides to them.”*
- *“Increase in drug use by parents ... kids are missing out on healthy food ... many families have no money toward the end of their pay week to buy food.”*
- *“More large migrant families.”*
- *“More people from the middle class accessing the service.”*
- *“More “working poor” with financial difficulties.”*
- *“More homeless.”*

Overall there was no significant shift in the age group breakdown of clients in 2008 compared to 2007 amongst the agencies that responded. The ratio of male to female clients also remained unchanged.

3. Nutritional Needs

Changes

The majority of respondents reported there was no change in the last 12 months in the dietary needs of people seeking emergency food relief. It seems agencies are catering for “a range of identified dietary needs, from vegetarian to meat-eater to Halal”. One agency noted that they had offered “a greater variety of tinned foods such as chick peas, borlotti beans and lentils, as well as rice and noodles, and these are very well received by some clients.

There were three comments on diabetics, referring more to older clients, and one on coeliac.

Specific items mentioned as being requested were more bread, milk, cereal and fruit juices for children.

There were a couple of mentions of the increase in the migrant population, with African families specifically noted.



Current dietary priorities

All respondents were well aware, and most commented on, the need for balanced nutritional food. Although this was offset by the view that they were “grateful for anything they get”, and there are “no priorities”.

In response to prompted food groups, protein and fibre were the highest priorities, with carbohydrates a medium priority. Agencies also specified low fat product.

When asked for other needs, there were four mentions of the need for fresh fruit and vegetables. One requested uncooked meat.

As expected this focus on nutrition comes from the agency, not the client. A client group with issues such as drug use and mental health, for example “would not necessarily prioritise or be aware of nutritional needs. Having good food available is a great start”.

Special food needs

The categories prompted - vegetarian, diabetic, gluten free, and Halal - were mostly low need. While the majority of clients will eat anything, there are clients which need vegetarian and Halal food. And it could be useful to have a few items for diabetics and those people with a wheat allergy.”

When prompted about vegetarian and diabetic foods agencies edged towards classifying them as “medium need”. As one respondent noted: “a range of foods is always useful.

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4. FareShare

The majority of respondents reported no change to the way their agency provided food relief in the past 12 months. However, those agencies that reported changes cited extended opening times for food, dispensing more food, providing more fresh produce, and holding community meals so people can come together and make friendships.

Importance of FareShare’s input to the agencies’ food relief services

The majority of agencies reported that ready made self-contained food portions that can be handed out, eg. pasties, quiches, sausage rolls (the FareShare model) were very important to them. Prepared meals for people to take home were equally important. As expected, raw product that can be cooked by an agency or given to families were not considered as important as the above. However at least half of the respondents considered it important or very important.

There was unanimous agreement that the importance of FareShare’s input to their agencies has not changed in the last 12 months.



FareShare Food portion size

There was general endorsement of the portion size of FareShare's products as "just right" with only one respondent replying that the portions were a little too small. Comments included:

- *"We find with the size portions you have we can offer them to singles with no waste and then give families more as needed."*
- *"Excellent meals to have in our freezer for students who do not have access to nutritious food for breakfast and lunch."*
- *"The meals are great for our clients."*

One agency requested more "sandwiches, rolls, muffins ... if these are available".

One respondent offered to pay a small delivery fee, as they do not have a refrigerated van and find it difficult to pick up and transport the food themselves.

There was only one negative comment on the quality of the food, that being, "even though most foods received are tasty, sometimes the sausage rolls are too ""bready"" not enough meat".

Discussion of Results

Unfortunately, a significant number of agencies receiving FareShare food did not complete the survey. The survey contained many open-ended questions as agencies resisted putting numbers and percentages on their clients' demographic breakdown.

This research underlines the fact that these agencies deal with a range of clients from very diverse backgrounds, and very often specialize in helping particular marginalized groups. The demographic profile tends to vary according to the geographic location/segment being served by the particular agency, eg. Sudanese immigrants, single mothers, children's breakfast and lunch programs, asylum seekers, etc. There is no "average" profile.

Furthermore, the food FareShare provides to agencies varies. Some agencies operate a supermarket style food bank and some run soup kitchens. Some provide emergency food parcels made up to go and some organize school breakfast and lunch programs. Their responses would therefore relate to their particular clientele and their needs. It is therefore not possible to generalize about the clients of FareShare's recipient agencies, given the low numbers in the sample.



However, the results are useful as they reinforce information that has to date been anecdotal. The open-ended responses provide the most interesting and useful information.

Dietary priorities and special food needs do not appear to be a crucial issue. There is a general awareness of the need for and a preference for, nutritional balanced meals, but the “we take what we can get” attitude prevails. FareShare’s meals already focus on the need for fibre and protein, and low sugar for diabetics. All that is really required is an awareness of including variety to ensure vegetarian (and Halal) clients are catered for.

The importance of fresh fruit and vegetables was a recurring theme, and there is an opportunity to include this as part of the meal ‘package’ where this is not already being done. There is also the opportunity to make meals with pulses such as lentils, chickpeas and beans to cater for particular client groups such as asylum seekers and Sudanese immigrants.

Methodology

A pilot interview was conducted by telephone with two agencies. Feedback from these resulted in modifications to the questionnaire to incorporate less quantitative statistics and more open ended questions.

A total of 32 of the emergency relief agencies currently supported by FareShare were contacted by telephone to obtain their agreement to complete an online survey using a link to be emailed to them. They were given a week to complete the survey, which used web tool Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). A reminder email was then sent. A total of 23 agencies responded.