Too critical to fail: The precarity of emergency relief services.

December 2025

SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
CENTRE for SOCIAL IMPACT
Uniting

Acknowledgment of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne is located on in Melbourne's east, and pay our respect to their Elders past and present. We are honoured to recognise our connection to Wurundjeri Country, history, culture, and spirituality through these locations, and strive to ensure that we operate in a manner that respects and honours the Elders and Ancestors of these lands. We also respectfully acknowledge Swinburne's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, alumni, partners and visitors.

We also acknowledge and respect the Traditional Owners of lands across Australia, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures, and heritage, and recognise the continuing sovereignties of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

Address for Correspondence

Erin Wilson, Centre for Social Impact Swinburne
ewilson@swin.edu.au

Citation

Wilson, E., McCrory, E., Churchus, C., Campain, R. & Brown, C. (2025). *Too Critical to Fail. The Precarity of Emergency Relief Services*. Hawthorn: Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology.
https://doi.org/10.25916/sut.31076566

Publisher

Swinburne University of Technology
Hawthorn Victoria 3122 Australia
http://www.swin.edu.au
First published 2025

DOI: **https://doi.org/10.25916/sut.31076566**

Project Team

Uniting Vic.Tas

Ms Chantel Churchus
Ms Mariyam Sama

Centre for Social Impact

Dr Robert Campain
Mr Eugene McCrory
Professor Erin Wilson
Dr Chris Brown

Funding

This project was supported via the Collaborative Research Partnership of Uniting Vic.Tas with the Centre for Social Impact.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Uniting Vic.Tas staff who were generous in giving their time to participate in this research and sharing their expertise. In particular, thank you to the Emergency Relief staff – coordinators, team leaders and volunteers. Thank you also to Uniting staff, Jen Sleep, Madeline Bunter, Belle Poole and Jonathan Storey, who assisted with emergency relief service information and data, while Swinburne University's Professor Christine Jubb and Dr Dina Lahanis assisted with preliminary planning and conception of the financial analysis. Finally, thank you to Laura McGrath and the Design Team at Uniting Vic.Tas and Julie Anderson (Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne) for their designing, proofing and formatting of this report.

Contents

Glossary

Term	Definition
Actual Cost (true cost)	The total cost of delivering ER services, includes both incurred and in-kind costs.
Direct Costs	The costs directly associated with delivering ER services that are purchased, such as material goods and labour. Direct costs exclude overheads and in-kind costs.
Direct Funding	Funding, grants and donations that are provided specifically for use on delivering ER services.
Food Insecurity	A lack of regular access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food
Hidden Costs	Costs that are not immediately apparent. They often manifest in lost opportunities or staff engagement issues. Examples include: the reliance on student labour which increases the burden of training on ER staff; a heavy reliance on individual key staff leading to staff burnout; limited infrastructure leading to low assistance provided. Hidden costs are very difficult to quantify - no value has been assigned to them in this report.
In-Kind Costs	In-kind contributions are those that are non-cash contributions of goods, services, labour or facilities. In-kind costs represent an estimated value for these contributions, with no value recorded in the site's profit and loss statements.
Incurred Costs	Incurred costs represent the cost of goods and services purchased that are recorded in the site profit and loss statements per Uniting's internal financial reporting.
Indirect Costs (Overheads)	Often referred to as overheads, these are costs that cannot be directly attributed to the delivery of ER services. They are often general operating costs of the organisation. Examples include organisation overhead departments such as payroll, human resources or fund-raising.
Referrals	Directing a consumer to another service with varying degrees of facilitation
Triage	Assessing a consumer's needs and the degree of urgency to address them.
Walk-in-Service	A service that does not require consumers to make an appointment beforehand.
Wraparound Services	Wraparound service delivery is defined as 'a client-centred approach, including several interrelated support services'" (Hall & Partners, 2022, p.7). Emergency relief acts as an initial entry point in providing a comprehensive approach to support by coordinating and delivering a range of services tailored to specific needs.

Executive summary

Emergency Relief Services: a critical provider of food relief

Despite being a 'wealthy' nation, many Australians rely on material aid to live. As part of a broad system of income support, services and safety nets, emergency relief services provide food and material aid to people experiencing financial crisis or vulnerability, as well as acting as a front door to additional services.

Foodbank's Hunger Report for 2024 confirmed that, despite some recent improvement, in the previous 12 months, close to 2 million Australian households (19 per cent) continued to experience severe food insecurity. As a result, they were often skipping meals, reducing portion sizes or even going entire days without eating. This has led to charities experiencing a surge in demand for food relief with more people accessing food relief and accessing it more often.

While food has been identified as the most common type of support sought, other forms of support are routinely available from emergency relief services such as clothes, support with utility bills and transport costs (Hall & Partners, 2023).

Emergency relief providers are also often an entry point for clients to receive other assistance, and play a crucial role in the assessment, triage and referral of clients onto other support services (Hall & Partners, 2023; Sharma & Middlebrook, 2023).

In this sense, food relief and emergency relief services serve a dual purpose through providing immediate aid as well as encouraging clients to pursue support and address the underlying issues that have led to their food insecurity and current circumstances (Belton et al., 2020).

Despite being a critical service that provides immediate food relief and other essential items to those in acute need, emergency relief services are themselves experiencing precarity. While a necessary infrastructure or safety net, in Australia they are neither well-funded nor secure in their capacity to provide food, let alone meet the extent of need for food and emergency relief.

Uniting Vic.Tas: a case study of emergency relief services

Uniting Vic.Tas (Uniting) is a community service organisation which provides emergency relief services throughout Victoria and Tasmania. Each year, Uniting delivers emergency relief support to more than 10,000 people from more than 20 locations across Victoria and Tasmania, with service providers reporting a significant increase and unmet demand for emergency relief services. But the continued provision of these critical services is precarious due to a range of challenges.

To better understand the precarity of emergency relief and the factors underpinning it, Uniting partnered with the Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University. Research was conducted through a study into eight Uniting emergency relief services (both metro and regional). There were two focuses to the research, each with their own methods:

Focus 1: Uniting emergency relief financial and operating model.

This focus builds a picture of emergency relief operations through interviews with Uniting staff and analysis of financial and operational data to understand the 'true cost' of emergency relief – revealing hidden and in-kind costs upon which services rely.

Focus 2: the experience of service precarity in Uniting's emergency relief services.

This focus draws on interviews with staff focusing on the experiences of precarity in the service (including the challenges and barriers to service delivery).

Findings

Financial precarity: the reliance on in-kind contributions

Financial analysis across sites showed that the median incurred cost of delivering emergency relief services across the eight sites is estimated to be $106.00 per consumer visit while the 'true cost' is estimated to be $274, with $168, or 61 per cent, related to in-kind costs.

Heavy reliance on in-kind costs occurred both to cover service delivery costs as well as material aid costs: 56 per cent of the median cost for service delivery being in-kind and 68 per cent of material aid costs being in-kind. This exposes critical dependencies in emergency relief services.

Staffing of services is also heavily reliant on unpaid labour. In this model, unpaid volunteer and student labour hours are a significant component of the in-kind contributions, accounting for 60 per cent (median) of labour costs, or 39 per cent of all in-kind costs per consumer session.

Infrastructure influences the level of material aid and drives greater impact. The amount and nature of material aid provided through emergency relief services is influenced by a range of factors. Sites with access to large storage space and equipped with advanced storage facilities, such as a walk-in coolroom and freezers, can provide higher levels of material assistance to consumers, due to their ability to receive and stockpile larger quantities of goods. Lack of interview space also contributes to consumer assessment bottlenecks and lower consumer throughput.

Higher ratios of paid versus volunteer staff support a more efficient service model, linked to higher consumer throughput per full-time employee (FTE) and lower labour cost per consumer visit.

Co-location also provided some sites with access to 'backup' support of skilled staff either permanently shared with, or sporadically accessed from, other Uniting programs who could assist with complex emergency relief consumers or instances of key emergency relief staff absence. Relying heavily on only one paid staff member at most sites risks limiting service reach, disrupting service continuity, and negatively affects staff wellbeing.

Overall, financial analysis shows that the current levels of Commonwealth government funding contribute to only a small portion of the total cost of delivering emergency relief services. This structural reliance on in-kind goods and labour, and limited government contribution towards the total emergency relief costs, exposes the system to risks such as volunteer shortages and supply disruptions which can impact service provision to the point of closure.

Median cost ($) per consumer visit split by incurred and in-kind costs

	Incurred ($)	In-kind ($)	Total ($)
SERVICE DELIVERY COSTS			
Labour costs	43	65	108
Infrastructure and other costs	10	8	18
Overheads	14	12	26
Subtotal service delivery	**67**	**85**	**152**
MATERIAL GOODS COSTS			
Material goods	31	71	102
Overheads	8	12	20
Subtotal material goods	**39**	**83**	**122**
Total true cost per consumer visit	**106**	**168**	**274**
Percentage of total cost	39%	61%	100%

Service precarity on the ground

In considering the challenges that emergency relief services faced, interviewees identified six key themes that highlighted the ongoing precarity of the emergency relief service:

- Determining crisis and the level of need
- Workforce pressures and the reliance on volunteers and students
- Food reliability and supply
- Physical infrastructure
- Funding uncertainty
- Gaps in service provision.

Determining crisis and the level of need

All emergency relief services incorporate intake and assessment processes to help determine the urgency and type of support needed.

While staff were clear that the role of emergency relief is first and foremost to provide immediate access to food and material aid within the context of an 'acute' episode or crisis, a majority of people are presenting with complex situations that are compounded by a financial emergency and/or ongoing financial hardship. This requires staff to make difficult judgements, in an environment of rationed resources, about people's situations and the level of support required.

> *'We call it a crisis service - in crisis 'at the moment'. … Because as much as we're supposed to be nonjudgmental, we have to make a judgment on what they're saying to us as to whether they get a voucher or not - because we don't have enough to give everyone.' (Regional 2)*

A common theme across all sites was the increase in consumer numbers. More new people are coming to emergency relief services alongside the high number of people returning on a regular basis. This stretches the capacity of service provision, risking diminishing service quality and having to turn people away.

Along with the increase in numbers is the increase in complexity of the consumers and the need to address difficult issues that extend beyond emergency relief.

> *'We have a lot of unemployed people, a lot of single parents. We have a lot of mental health issues, drug issues. We are finding a lot more domestic violence situations coming in with both females and males.' (Metro 3)*

Workforce pressures and the reliance on volunteers and students

The majority of sites rely on a higher FTE level of volunteers than they do paid staff, with most sites (five of the eight studied) utilising one on-site paid staff member with support from an on or off-site manager/team leader.

Without exception, all interviewees highlighted the role of volunteers and students as a key strength of the emergency relief service and the reliance on dedicated volunteers over time to deliver a valuable service to those in need.

> *'We rely very heavily on our volunteers. And I think if they were to all leave, there would be huge gaps and be very hard to fill.' (Metro 1)*

However, the high reliance on unpaid labour creates an ongoing and additional workload through recruiting and onboarding volunteers, and providing induction, training and supervision.

The workload is heightened when relying on a revolving workforce of short-term student volunteers. Respondents noted that it is becoming more difficult to employ volunteers and to retain them.

The demands of the job are evident for paid staff and volunteers who are subject to the strains of dealing daily with people in crisis and limited resources to address their complex needs. In some instances, there may be safety concerns with the potential for serious incidents, while the mental and emotional challenges can be demanding.

The lack of paid staff, or the reliance on a single paid staff member, meant a high workload for that individual and the inability to take time off.

> *'I'm alone on this site. I'm the only paid staff member. It's just me and then everybody else is a volunteer. And that is one of the pressures that I find – I just don't feel I can take time off … I feel I can't take a sick day or take a holiday.' (Regional 2)*

With services reliant on unpaid volunteers and one paid staff member within the service, it is inevitable that there are times when the service delivery cannot occur.

> *'There's been a couple of times that we've had to decide to close because we just do not have the workforce.' (Metro/Regional)*

Food reliability and supply

A significant amount of time and energy is spent in sourcing food for emergency relief services. The flow of food into emergency relief was often unreliable, making planning difficult. Staff spoke of the considerable time they invested in building and maintaining relationships, including with mainstream food relief suppliers.

This highlights the skills, knowledge and resourcefulness of staff, and also the precarity of the system given that it is highly reliant on these personal relationships and networks that have been built over a considerable period of time.

The unreliability of food provision often necessitates having to buy food from local supermarkets at higher cost.

> *'The challenge initially was having enough food on hand – the food demand was the hardest thing to start with because when these numbers started coming up, we were running out of food maybe on the second day of service with another day and a half to go.*
>
> *And that's when we would have to do some shopping against the small amount of funds that we do have. So, then we're paying supermarket prices for these products which is not great by any means.' (Metro 3)*

Overall, the food supply chain was difficult to predict and required continual effort to maintain steady supply.

Physical infrastructure

As highlighted in the financial analysis, physical infrastructure, including both office space for consumer interviews as well as storage space and equipment, drastically affects the capacity of the emergency relief service to meet demand and do so efficiently.

The majority of venues did not have adequate storage space which affected how much food could be kept on hand, the types of food on offer, and the ability to take on additional food and material goods when they became available.

> *'We couldn't take 30 crates of fruit and veg because we don't have the space. We've got one fruit and veg fridge – so that always impacts our ability to say yes to [donated] things.' (Metro 3)*

Capacity to interview and engage with consumers in a dignified and private manner was seen as central to providing a person-centred response.

Smaller venues or venue layout sometimes lacked 'private' spaces constraining the ability to hold confidential discussions, limiting the number of consumers that could be assisted at any one time.

> *'We don't actually have an office that we can use within our building to do intake assessments.*
>
> *We can only have one person down at a time because we want to create that safe space for them – that private space where they can come along. We do sometimes have complex consumers so it's really important.' (Metro 3)*

Funding uncertainty

Staff identified the precarity of insufficient funding, as well as the related issue of uncertainty, where sites are unsure of whether they will receive funding and what the amount will be. This applies to government funding, as well as grants and donations from other sources.

> *'It's a challenge because overall there isn't enough money to meet the need.' (Metro 2)*

Funding uncertainty impacts planning and often leads to programs being in deficit as they continue to expend funds while waiting for outcomes of funding applications or coping with higher-than-expected costs and volume.

The constant need to apply for funding to maintain the service means that staff need to spend significant time applying for funding, adding to administrative burden.

Gaps in service provision

An emergency relief service's ability to efficiently link a consumer to longer-term support and services was variable and referrals were frequently met with complex intake processes and lengthy wait times at the next service point.

Uniting emergency relief services were left 'filling service gaps' by providing brief interventions or short-to-medium term support that was technically beyond the scope of the emergency relief service.

Sector-wide difficulties often mean that services referred to are not readily accessible or may in themselves be under-resourced and unable to provide the immediate support needed. Consequences for consumers include compounding of trauma, a sense of hopelessness, shame, and loss of faith in the service system.

> *'If we're out here on the frontline we need to feel confident that when we do a referral it's as good as the service we've provided here. I don't want to be referring out to people who let them down. They're already disadvantaged, they're already suffering, they're already going through trauma.*
>
> *You should try ringing these places – you can see why people give up … there's a gap between emergency relief and the services that are out there.' (Regional 2)*

Discussion: Stabilising and scaling emergency relief

To increase the stability, reach and efficiency of emergency relief services, there is a need for a change in investment design. Similar calls for changes in investment design of social services have resulted from economic analysis by other researchers (Gilchrist & Perks, 2025).

While appreciating that emergency relief services are reliant on – and benefit from – in-kind resources, there is a need for a new investment model based on a modest increase in additional funding that would increase the stability, efficiency and reach of services.

Two key investment changes would address key elements of emergency relief precarity:

1. Shift to higher ratios of paid to unpaid staff – this would stabilise service delivery and reduce occupational risk. In addition, in the context of filling the short term 'gap' between crisis emergency relief and access to specialist services, higher ratios of paid staff are able to provide limited term intensive support.
2. Targeted, one-off capital investment in appropriate infrastructure including:
   - » Food and goods storage facilities
   - » Service delivery space (including space to manage multiple clients simultaneously)
   - » Food preservation facilities such as kitchen space to cook and repackage food.

Ensuring this investment is built into each emergency relief service would increase the impact of services, resulting in an increase to client throughput and the per client value of material aid.

The following expands on these recommendations.

Financial capital

With the 'true cost' of emergency relief services being constructed of 61 per cent in-kind contribution in the form of labour and material goods, the financial underpinning of emergency relief services is highly precarious. In-kind resources are unstable.

Simply put, if in-kind resources are not provided, emergency relief services cease to operate.

The evidence suggests that emergency relief services have been as effective as possible in accessing in-kind resources (human and material), and that this cannot be further expanded without an increased level of cash investment.

Increased direct cash investment in paid staffing and infrastructure will in turn unlock service reach and impact.

Human capital

Despite the importance of human capital, overwhelmingly, emergency relief services are highly reliant on unpaid staff with more than 60 per cent of staff costs being provided in-kind.

Not only is this in-kind resource input inherently insecure, leading to ad hoc service closure in extreme cases, but there are also key risks of current volunteer personnel withdrawing their labour due to high levels of stress and emotional trauma.

The study highlights that somewhat higher ratios of paid to volunteer staffing was associated with increased client throughput, lower labour costs per client visit, and increased value of material aid provided.

A range of paid staffing models might be utilised through increased investment in staffing:

- Increased paid staffing on-site in each emergency relief service
- Paid locum staff to replace paid staff on leave or absent for training etc.
- Increased paid staffing support off-site or in 'backbone' functions directly supporting the emergency relief service
- Paid staffing for 'gap' roles to provide intensive and gap support until clients can access the next service point.

It is important to note that this is not advocating the 'full' funding of staffing for emergency relief services, but a slight increase in paid to volunteer staffing ratios.

Physical infrastructure

Sites with access to large storage space and equipped with adequate storage facilities, such as a walk-in coolroom and freezers, can take delivery of and store large amounts of material goods, enabling the stockpiling of food and other goods.

The capacity to both stockpile food and undertake meal provision reduces the need to supplement food supplies with commercially purchased items, and means the service is more likely to have sufficient food to distribute.

Space to interview and support clients impacts the level of client throughput and influences the cost-of-service delivery per client visit.

Increasing the capacity to interview or provide aid to more than one client at a time lowers client costs which, coupled with increased storage space, results in lower costs of assistance. Investment in infrastructure is therefore investment in efficiency and scale.

Activating an enhanced investment design

An increase in the proportion of cash investment is clearly necessary in order to create a stable 'essential' service offering that can adequately meet community need.

This will require investment from multiple sources including targeted, strategic and coordinated attention from governments (at all levels) and philanthropy. This requires a centralised role to design and drive coordinated and adequate investment to Australia's emergency relief system within a new logic of investment design.

Importantly, attending to improved investment design has benefits, both for target beneficiaries but also for Australian governments, as it prevents costs being transferred to more expensive parts of the service delivery system (Gilchrist & Perks, 2025). Overall, this logic of change echoes and adds detail to the vision for substantial reform to funding articulated in the *Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint* (Blueprint Expert Reference Group, 2024).

Introduction

Despite being a 'wealthy' nation, many Australians rely on material aid to live. As part of a broad system of income support, services and safety nets, emergency relief services provide food and material aid to people experiencing financial crisis or vulnerability. As one element of 'Financial Wellbeing and Capability' programs, the Commonwealth government has provided funding to emergency relief services since the 1970s. In 2023, it provided around $50 million per annum to 193 emergency relief providers of 1,407 services around Australia, delivering emergency relief to 468,446 clients[1] (Department of Social Services, 2023).

Emergency relief in Australia is varied and multifaceted, offering various forms of assistance including food and food parcels.

> *'Emergency and food relief services support people experiencing financial distress or hardship who, at that time, have limited resources to alleviate their financial crisis. Emergency and food relief comprises one part of a broad safety net in Australia, offering support services such as financial and material aid, food parcels and referrals for people who find themselves in financial crisis.' (Hall & Partners, 2023, p. 8)*

Emergency relief services are targeted primarily to those in need of immediate and short-term assistance. Access to services relies on self-referral, drop-ins or clients referred by other service providers (Sharma & Middlebrook, 2023). Despite being intended as support at 'acute' moments of need in people's lives, the evidence highlights that people using these services may have multiple and repeated moments of acute need in a single time period, such as a year (Hall & Partners, 2023; McKenna, 2025).

This points to the growing experience of financial hardship in Australia and the high demand for services to support its citizens in meeting the life needs of themselves and their families. Food and reduced access to food, or food insecurity, is a common experience of people in financial hardship and is the dominant form of aid sought from emergency relief services. Due to the high level of reliance on food relief, Williams et al. (2024) argue that food relief provision is now a normalised and accepted infrastructure in Australia, i.e. an assumed part of food provision to the Australian populace.

Despite being a critical service that provides immediate food relief and other essential items to those in acute need, emergency relief services are themselves experiencing precarity. While a necessary infrastructure or safety net, in Australia they are neither well-funded nor secure in their capacity to provide food, let alone meet the extent of need for food and emergency relief.

Evidence to date highlights that direct funding is insufficient to cover the costs of delivering emergency relief services (Williams et al., 2024; Belton et al., 2020). This is despite evidence to show that emergency relief services in Australia are highly efficient. A 2023 national evaluation of the Commonwealth-funded Emergency Relief program found that across Australia,

> *'… providers are skilled and adept at ensuring each dollar is utilised in the most effective and efficient way possible within the bounds of the grant/contract.' (Hall & Partners, 2023, p.27)*

Alongside this, 96 per cent of clients of Australian emergency relief services felt that the services met or exceeded their expectations (Hall & Partners, 2023). However, not only is the direct funding (i.e. cash) mismatched to costs of delivery, but there is also a heightened focus on the proportion of funding allocated to direct aid provision compared with that allocated to operational costs of delivery (Hall & Partners, 2023). This is consistent with the high commitment to maximising direct access to food and material aid for people in need.

[1] Uniting Vic Tas use the term 'consumers' to refer to the users of their services. This terminology will be used in this report except when drawing on published material that uses the term 'clients'.

As a result, emergency relief services operate within a complex network of funding and indirect goods and services, with a reliance on volunteer labour, donation of material goods and food, and access to food via food rescue organisations. This reliance on a cooperative network of labour and goods provision itself requires substantial resources to maintain. Inevitably, changes and gaps in resource flows undermine the capacity of emergency relief services to operate effectively, or even at all.

In short, emergency relief services are themselves experiencing constant precarity in a context where their services are the bedrock of a social safety net for Australians in need. In this context, emergency relief services are too critical to fail.

In the context of overstretched direct funding, heavy reliance on indirect labour and goods and increased demand from Australians experiencing acute financial hardship, this study seeks to explore precarity in emergency relief services and the factors that underpin it. This is a significant contribution to helping bring clarity to an opaque system and identifying the focus and quantum of investment and change needed to build a secure emergency relief system in Australia.

Background and context

The following provides an overview of food insecurity in Australia, and food relief provision in general, highlighting how such systems operate and the factors that influence food relief provision and contribute to its precarity. This is followed by an explicit focus on Uniting Vic.Tas emergency relief services as the primary evidence context for this study.

Emergency relief services: a critical provider of food relief

A complex infrastructure of emergency relief and food relief services has evolved to meet the needs of people experiencing crisis and vulnerability. Food insecurity is the most fundamental of these needs.

Food insecurity in Australia

In recent years there have been documented increases in household food insecurity in Australia, which has intensified since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within Australia food insecurity is measured in diverse ways, resulting in varying estimates of its scale (Williams et al., 2024). Recent Foodbank Australia data shows 21 per cent of Australian households are classified as experiencing severe food insecurity, and 12 per cent moderate food insecurity (Williams et al., 2024 citing Foodbank Australia, 2022). 2022 saw a spike in household food insecurity due to inflation and increased food prices, with 25 per cent of adults and 45 per cent of young adults aged 18-24 in NSW reported as food insecure. Similarly, in Victoria there has been a rapid growth in the emergency and community food sector since 1990, with a rapid increase in the last decade (McKay et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in record numbers of Australians coming to rely on emergency food relief. Foodbank Australia reported a 'sharp increase in demand for emergency food aid, up from 15 per cent of Australians in 2019 to 31 per cent' in 2020 (cited in Williams et al., 2024, p. 268). Similarly, food relief requests to one provider increased by 400-fold, with donations dropping at the same time, and one news outlet reporting demand surging by 200 per cent (Williams et al., 2024). The impact of the pandemic saw a change in the profile of clients. Many who were previously financially self-reliant were now less resilient in the face of financial vulnerability as their community and family supports also sought to cope with financial hardship (Hall & Partners, 2023).

More recently, Foodbank's Hunger Report for 2024 confirmed that, despite some recent improvement, in the previous 12 months close to 2 million Australian households (19 per cent) continued to experience severe food insecurity. As a result, they were often skipping meals, reducing portion sizes, or even going entire days without eating. This has led to charities experiencing a surge in demand for food relief, with more people accessing food relief and accessing it more often. The primary driver for this was the rising cost-of-living, as well as natural disasters, inadequate income support, unemployment and underemployment, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ipsos Public Affairs, 2024).

Food insecurity is more likely among women in low socio-economic households, people in remote and rural areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, low-income earners, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, refugees, single parents, younger adults, the elderly, people experiencing homelessness, and people with a disability (Ipsos Public Affairs, 2024; Williams et al., 2024).

Additionally, studies report many people are not seeking help because of the shame and stigma attached to doing so, or face barriers in accessing help because of difficulties travelling to access food relief (Botha and Payne, 2022; Ipsos Public Affairs, 2024; Williams et al., 2024).

Food and material relief provision in Australia

Within emergency relief services, food provision is the most common form of support.

It can take several forms, including the direct supply of food as well as access to food via provision of vouchers and other supports. While not exhaustive, a database of 601 organisations/providers of emergency and community food in Victoria (as at May 2020) found that the vast majority provided food via food parcels (82 per cent), pre-prepared meals (49 per cent) or a food pantry (44 per cent), while 40 per cent provided vouchers (McKay et al., 2021).

Within emergency relief services, food is sourced in a variety of ways. Key food suppliers include the Commonwealth-funded Foodbank, Secondbite and OzHarvest. These food rescue and relief organisations provide free or heavily subsidised food to emergency relief services to redistribute to people in need, serving a vital food reclamation and redistribution function (Bazerghi et al., 2016). In addition, food is sourced from a wide range of other providers and supporters, both at a cost (for example purchased from supermarkets), donated from local businesses, community groups, community gardens, farmers and individuals (Williams et al., 2024).

> *'Emergency relief providers receive pallets of food and pre-prepared meals from food relief organisations, bulk foods or toiletries from local businesses (e.g. butchers, grocery stores, etc), individual items donated by members of the community (including household items, clothing, furniture, toys). These goods are then given to clients as needed according to their emergency relief assessment.' (Hall & Partners, 2023, p.18)*

A recent 2023 report from Geelong, Victoria, identified that 80 per cent of food relief services in Geelong also purchased food from supermarkets to supplement other sources (GWYL & Feed Geelong, 2023). Where goods are procured, emergency relief services use emergency relief funding to purchase items. In some arrangements this is at a discount with some items provided for free (e.g. fruit, vegetables and bread) (Hall & Partners, 2023), but services also pay commercial rates for food and goods.

While food has been identified as the most common type of support sought, other forms of support are routinely available from emergency relief services such as clothes, support with utility bills, and transport costs (Hall & Partners, 2023).

Emergency relief providers are also often an entry point for clients to receive other assistance, and play a crucial role in the assessment, triage, and referral of clients onto other support services (Hall & Partners, 2023; Sharma & Middlebrook, 2023). This addresses concerns that emergency relief does not attend to the underlying issues that lead to hardship for individuals, and which require more than a limited response (Frederick & Goddard, 2008). In this sense, food relief and emergency relief services serve a dual purpose through providing immediate aid, as well as encouraging clients to pursue support and address the underlying issues that have led to their food insecurity and current circumstances (Belton et al., 2020).

A recent survey of emergency relief clients found that clients were most frequently referred to financial crisis, mental health and wellbeing services, followed by housing or accommodation, employment or training, and domestic and family violence services (Hall & Partners, 2023). Unless the underlying causes are addressed or eased, economic pressures continue to mount on individuals and families beyond the initial crisis that triggered the seeking of emergency relief support (Sharma & Littlebrook, 2023).

> *'This opportunity to assess and refer clients who present for food relief explains why the continued provision of food through emergency relief providers is vital for clients. A requirement for food relief provides a reason for clients to begin a conversation or seek assistance. Providers feel that it is this small request from clients that allows the development of rapport and trust to ensure the provider is able to gather pertinent information and assist or refer the client to further support.' (Hall & Partners, 2023, pp. 22-23)*

This triage role is a critical one, with emergency relief services supporting consumers to identify and initiate steps to address interconnected aspects of their crisis. As one Victorian consumer of emergency relief stated:

> *'I didn't realise I needed assistance with domestic violence issues until I explained*

my circumstances. The interviewer was great at picking up on my mental health issues as well. It wasn't until I blurted out a few things that I was helped in other ways apart from food issues.' (Campain et al., 2023, p.8)

A recent review of academic and grey literature (Sharma & Middlebrook, 2023) has noted that distinctive emergency relief delivery models or practices are scarce, so evaluations and comparisons are lacking. However, the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS) view emergency relief best practice as a 'one stop' model whereby a client presents for emergency relief and then is assessed and referred to targeted support without needing to explain their circumstances more than once. Sharma & Middlebrook (2023) note that 'wraparound' services or referrals are effective practices in providing information and matching services to needs. Referrals to other services routinely involve helping to fill out relevant forms and advocating for clients with other organisations, both internally and externally. Success depends on skilled emergency relief staff and adequate support services to refer to (Hall & Partners, 2023).

The factors affecting precarity of emergency relief services

The costs of delivering emergency relief services are not fully funded. The service environment is complex and the heavy reliance on indirect support, such as donated or subsidised food and material goods, necessitates a high level of collaboration and the building of networks and partnerships (Hall & Partners Australia, 2023; Sharma & Middlebrook, 2023).

Funding levels and sources

Emergency and food relief provision is precariously funded and is dependent upon the Commonwealth along with funding from state and local governments, corporations, not-for-profit (NFP) organisations, community organisations or members of the public. Funding is primarily delivered through grants or donations. Multi-service providers may also provide funding into emergency relief from within their own organisations as a result of their other activities or services, such as money received through a second-hand store (Hall & Partners, 2023).

In 2020, only 27 per cent of providers were receiving Commonwealth funding, 30 per cent state government funding, 47 per cent local government funding and 51 per cent philanthropic funding (noting organisations utilised multiple funding sources). Fifty-nine (59) per cent relied on community donations or fundraising for some or all of their operating costs (Williams et al., 2024). One study focusing on the Geelong region found that providers faced continual funding uncertainty, with funding predominantly from individual donations, philanthropic grants and corporate contributions, while government funding was less common (GWYL and Feed Geelong, 2023). Overall, as found by Belton et al. (2020):

'Budget restrictions within organizations create many challenges, limiting their capacity to assist vulnerable groups. An increase in budget directed at improving kitchen facilities, purchasing a greater variety of healthy food items and providing food training, would lessen staff and volunteer constraints while also increasing the food quality and variety.' (Belton et al., 2020, p. 321)

Attaining funding reliability requires, in part, multi-year funding as a vital mechanism to reduce financial vulnerability for NFPs (Social Ventures Australia and Centre for Social Impact, 2022).

Coupled with limited direct funding, emergency relief providers have to juggle required cash expenditure. Service providers are continually having to work within the remit of their Commonwealth funding grant, balancing multiple tensions to maximise the value of funding, particularly ensuring adequate administrative support while providing as much of the funding as possible for clients of emergency relief services (Hall & Partners, 2023).

Within these parameters, service providers are also dealing with rising costs such as real estate prices, leading to the insecurity of facilities as well as the reduced ability to store food (GWYL and Feed Geelong, 2023). Additionally, the cost of purchasing from supermarkets has been identified as expensive where this needs to be done to secure

adequate food provision (Williams et al., 2024). A study of seven social service organisations in Australia (Gilchrist & Perks, 2025) found they were substantially impacted by rising costs particularly in relation to information technology, vehicles, recruitment costs and regulatory compliance. The considerable impact of cost increases for even 'relatively minor cost items can also have a major impact on financial sustainability as the margins are so small.' (Gilchrist & Perks, 2025, p. 23).

This critical issue of emergency relief service financial precarity is consistent with the evidence of the broader 'non-profit starvation cycle.' (Bridgespan cited in Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact, 2022), whereby there is under-investment in indirect costs of not-for-profits. This is a critical issue both internationally and in Australia. Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact (2022) found that more than 60 per cent of Australian NFPs reported that funding from government, corporates and philanthropy did not cover direct or indirect costs. There is evidence of decreases in funding to charities (McKay et al., 2021), leading to some charities holding low levels of surplus funds and cash reserves becoming unviable. This, in turn, increases demand for in-kind resources such as volunteers to maintain services.

A recent Australian Government consultation paper highlighted inflation and a shortage of volunteers increasing the overall operating costs for organisations (Department of Social Services, 2023), with increasing financial precarity of social services resulting in reduced service offerings in Australia (Gilchrist & Perks, 2025).

Overall, not-for-profits in Australia have difficulty funding the 'true cost' necessary to deliver impact (Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact, 2022).

The link between the funding of indirect costs and service quality and effectiveness

While there is no evidence that organisations with low indirect costs are more efficient or effective, there is some evidence that those who invest more in indirect costs have higher impacts:

> *'There is clear evidence that spending insufficient resources on overheads or indirect costs can impact overall not-for-profit effectiveness, equating to lower quality program outcomes.' (Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact, 2022, p. 25)*

Data from benchmarking 12 community service organisations in Victoria in 2013 showed that 'the relationship between quality services and overhead investment was positive, meaning that low investment led to low quality services.' (Nous Group 2013, cited in Blueprint Expert Reference Group, 2024, p. 35). Cost constraints impact staff working conditions (e.g. high workloads; job insecurity; low pay; Occupational, Health & Safety risks) and therefore retention, and also creates risks for clients (including through organisational non-compliance with regulatory requirements) (Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact, 2022). Conversely, evidence from Australian reviews, including from the Productivity Commission, highlights that:

> *'funding of the comprehensive cost of service delivery, has been linked to better service outcomes, increased capacity to adapt to changing environments, and innovation.' (Blueprint Expert Reference Group, 2024, p.32)*

Funding directly impacts the number, intensity and quality of social services and thus directly impacts people experiencing hardship. The ability to deliver an appropriate service mix to meet consumer need, including 'the right quantity, at the tight time and in the right quality', is highly dependent on government funding design (Gilchrist & Berg, 2025, p.12). Ultimately, consumers are the 'shock absorbers' in the system as services diminish or close due to lack of financial viability (Gilchrist & Perks, 2025, p. 16).

Food supply

Previous research has documented both the precarity of access to adequate food by food relief organisations in Australia, and the heavy reliance on donated food, both of which affect the ability to meet client needs (Belton et al., 2020).

A reliable food supply is a significant ongoing problem (Belton, et al., 2020; Williams et al.,

2024). This has been a particular focus of research during the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting changes in the quality and quantity of food supply to food relief providers during this period. Among this data, 35–45 per cent of food relief providers reported being unable to source sufficient nutritious food groups. In part this was due to stockpiling and hoarding food during the pandemic or supply threats (McKay et al., 2021). During the pandemic there were reported shortfalls in the supply of specific food items – e.g. meat, eggs, fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy – with caps on food access to relief providers applied by statewide food distributors. As supermarkets sought to limit excess stock through their supply chains, this in turn limited the excess food available for food relief (GWYL and Feed Geelong, 2023). Similarly, natural disasters like bushfires or floods also interrupt food supply chains (McKay et al., 2021).

Instability and variations in food supply are noted in the most recent evaluation of emergency relief services in Australia (Hall & Partners, 2023). Repeating a common theme in the research literature, the inability of many emergency relief services to cope with unexpected influxes of certain types of food (fresh or frozen) relative to their storage type and capacity remains a problem (Hall & Partners, 2023). Reliance on donations affects the availability, type and quality of food available meaning that this may not meet recipients' nutritional and dietary needs (Barker & Russell, 2020; Bazerghi et al., 2016; Belton et al., 2020; Kleve et al., 2023). In addition, there are often issues with the freshness of the food and its longevity compounded by the inability to store perishables. This may result in food wastage (Hall & Partners, 2023).

Previous research with service recipients has identified concerns with the amount and type of food received and the lack of choice (Bazerghi et al., 2016; Frederick & Goddard, 2008). This continues to be an issue. Williams et al. (2024) highlight the importance of choice in relation to consumers selecting appropriate food from food relief providers as significant for people's health and dignity, as well as for cultural appropriateness.

Food relief providers and emergency relief providers have recognised the importance of a client selecting their own food and working together to offer food relief 'in such a way that offers choice, autonomy, dignity and a sense of community.' (Hall & Partners, 2023, p. 38). However, food relief providers rarely have a choice about the foods donated to them because they rely on redistributed surplus food from food rescue/relief organisations (Turner, 2019; Williams et al., 2024).

Reliance on volunteers

Emergency relief services rely heavily on volunteers to ensure the running and reliability of service provision. Volunteers comprised 92 per cent (8,316 volunteers) of the workforce of 122 emergency relief services surveyed in 2021 (McKenna & Evans, 2021 cited in Department of Social Services, 2023). In one region in 2023, volunteers in the food relief sector have been reported as outnumbering paid employees by a ratio of 22 to 1, with 6.7 volunteer hours for every hour of paid work. The challenges with limited paid staff include difficulty in establishing new programs, increased burnout, and loss of organisational and sectoral knowledge (GWYL and Feed Geelong, 2023).

Recent research highlights a decrease in volunteering (Department of Social Services, 2023; Blueprint Expert Reference Group, 2024), with 77 per cent of Victorian organisations experiencing a decrease in volunteer numbers. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a reduction in volunteers due to the advanced age of volunteers and their need to protect their health (Williams et al., 2024, citing McKay, 2021). Volunteer numbers have not increased to pre-COVID levels. In addition to fewer volunteers, there is also a change in work pattern.

> *'Volunteering patterns have changed including fewer people formally volunteering, and greater preferences among volunteers for episodic rather than ongoing roles.' (Blueprint Expert Reference Group, 2024, p. 6)*

There are a number of factors affecting the food relief and emergency relief provider workforce (paid and volunteer) including the rising cost-of-living affecting work availability, fatigue and stress (GWYL and Feed Geelong, 2023). Given the reliance on volunteers and the stresses that are often experienced, there is a need to invest in the volunteering infrastructure especially given that helpful and

knowledgeable volunteers and staff contribute to positive outcomes (Sharma & Middlebrook, 2023).

Limitations on service provision

Previous research with emergency relief recipients has identified the long-standing problem of the limits of emergency relief provision and 'the need for assistance that went beyond the type of help that could be provided by emergency relief.' (Frederick & Goddard, 2008, p. 278).

Shortened operating hours, selective operating days, and parameters on how often a service can be accessed have been identified as barriers for clients. Equally, clients have identified negative experiences when they are referred to other supports only to find that the service cannot provide them with adequate assistance, leaving them dispirited and feeling like they are bouncing around with no resolution (Hall & Partners, 2023).

The labour of managing complexity

Emergency relief services manage a high degree of complexity, both of client need and context, and also of accessing sufficient and suitable resources, personnel, budget and infrastructure to deliver the service.

> *'This vitally important program does not exist solely on financial support but rather relies on a multitude of financial and practical supports which are just as effective due to the complex combinations of Commonwealth support, community knowledge and information and organisational collaboration.' (Hall & Partners, 2023, p.16).*

This type of service environment requires a high level of collaboration and the building of networks and partnerships in order to bring together the necessary elements of operation (Hall & Partners, 2023; Sharma & Middlebrook, 2023). While not quantifying this activity, the recent evaluation of emergency relief services notes the administrative labour of managing the complex elements of the service with its reliance on volunteers, donations and local networks, while also needing to allocate time and resources to referrals and connections to other services (Hall & Partners, 2023).

Uniting Vic.Tas: a case study of emergency relief services

Uniting Vic.Tas (Uniting) is a community service organisation which provides emergency relief services throughout Victoria and Tasmania. Uniting is one of the largest emergency relief providers within Victoria and Tasmania, with a strong place-based presence, providing assistance to over 13,000 individuals and their families each year across 21 metro and regional locations in Victoria and two in Tasmania (as of 1st July 2025).

> *'As a service, ER [emergency relief] acts to strengthen family and community relationships, improve the wellbeing of children and young people, reduce the cost of family breakdown, strengthen family and community functioning and facilitate the settlement of migrants and humanitarian entrants into the community ...*
>
> *ER is central to Uniting's holistic approach to providing welfare support to families and individuals trying to break the cycle of disadvantage.' (Uniting Vic.Tas, 2019, p. 2-3).*

Most emergency relief services at Uniting receive some level of government funding. In 2018, Uniting was awarded a Department of Social Services grant for $7,088,499.56 for the delivery of emergency relief over a five-year period. The grant has been used by Uniting to support their emergency relief locations, though Uniting also currently funds two sites directly through donations, social enterprise revenue, or Uniting's reserves.

Each emergency relief service is managed at a local level, with service delivery, budget and support offerings varying between the locations. Emergency relief services are often co-located with other Uniting services.

> *'Each ER [emergency relief] location has its own service model which has evolved over time and tends to reflect physical environment, workforce, [local] service offerings, budget, funding requirements and local partnership opportunities. Each location has a budget that is used to purchase food, vouchers and material goods for ER [emergency relief] consumers.' (Uniting Vic.Tas, 2019, p. 3)*

Uniting delivers emergency food relief in two main forms: a pantry from which consumers select their groceries, or pre-packaged boxes or 'food parcels' on site. In some circumstances, mobile food delivery and outreach is available. Providing vouchers to purchase items at major supermarkets is a less common practice, but is available in some circumstances where a person or family has dietary requirements that cannot be accommodated through food options available at the emergency relief service. Provision of material relief includes clothing, blankets and sleeping bags, while utility bill relief, support to purchase medicines, children's school supplies and vouchers for fuel were also common across most emergency relief sites.

Most services offer referrals to other community services including crisis support, family violence, mental health, family services, housing and homelessness, and alcohol and other drugs. Most sites have no more than one paid staff member, with a heavy reliance on volunteers (Uniting Vic.Tas, 2024).

Uniting delivers its emergency relief services through a predominately volunteer workforce. As reported by Volunteering Australia, formal volunteering across the country is below pre-COVID levels, with the average number of hours people volunteer declining – likely influenced by cost-of-living pressures and an ageing population (Volunteering Australia, 2023).

The volunteer workforce at Uniting is closely linked to Uniting congregations, which are, in general, an older population less likely to be able to maintain their volunteering efforts in the medium - to long-term.

Overall, the Uniting context echoes the evidence about emergency relief services across Australia.

The need for evidence

While there is recognition of the complex arrangements needed to provide an effective emergency relief service, a recent review of academic and grey literature has yielded little in the way of distinctive emergency relief delivery models or practice, with the rapid evolution of emergency relief practices outpacing academic research in recent years (Sharma & Middlebrook, 2023). As a result, evaluation and relative comparisons of practices are difficult.

Some recent works offer ways forward to examine emergency relief in Australia. Sharma & Middlebrook (2023) have identified key drivers of robust emergency relief service delivery. These include: 1) service integration or redesign, 2) organisation and workforce, 3) technology and targeting, 4) partnerships and innovation. Using a different lens, Bogomolova et al. (2024) have constructed a 'Food Relief Good Practice Guide' that highlights elements of food relief provision across a range of dimensions including: being people-centred and dignified; providing nutritious food; place-based collaborations to offer not just food but additional supports to meet community needs; enabling barrier-free access in seeking support; attending to the business model and workforce capability; tracking outcomes and using co-designed methods for quality improvement; and sharing information to foster client and service integration.

These studies highlight the multiple elements of emergency relief design and delivery but do little to explore this in the context of managing its funding and resourcing. Gilchrist and Perks (2025) highlight that there is minimal research into the 'real costs associated with operating a social service organisation in Australia.' (p.6), particularly with consideration of the impact of financial sustainability on service delivery. At the same time, there is evidence that there is little organisational capacity to adequately interrogate service costs. Within the Australian not-for-profit sector:

> *'Many organisations lacked the resources to properly articulate indirect costs in complex models, and non-finance teams often have a limited understanding of the "true" indirect costs of their programs.' (Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact 2022, p. 22).*

In this context, Uniting commissioned this study to explore the complex service delivery environment, while simultaneously investigating the associated costs and strategies for delivery. In doing so, it seeks to understand the precarity in emergency relief services and the factors that underpin it. It is hoped that the results will assist in identifying solutions to stabilise, and potentially scale, emergency relief services.

Research approach

There were two focuses to the research, each with their own methods:

Focus 1: Uniting emergency relief financial and operating model.

This focus builds a picture of emergency relief operations through interviews with Uniting staff and analysis of financial and operational data. It provides a financial assessment of emergency relief provision to understand the discrepancies between funding provided and the 'true cost' of emergency relief – revealing hidden and in-kind costs upon which services rely.

Focus 2: the experience of service precarity in Uniting's emergency relief services.

This focus draws on interviews with staff focusing on how emergency relief services work and what are the experiences of precarity in the service (including the challenges and barriers to service delivery).

Research Sites

Eight emergency relief sites across two states, including five metropolitan and three regional sites, were selected to represent a range of operational models and geographic contexts.

The emergency relief sites/services agreed to participate following the distribution of project information and an invitation from the Uniting Vic.Tas Advocacy Team. Participants were advised to contact Swinburne researchers directly to provide their consent.

Following consent to participate, Uniting Vic.Tas and CSI Swinburne staff reviewed the proposed site list to ensure a degree of diversity amongst the sites in terms of location type (rural/urban), funding structure (DSS

funded/not DSS funded), and service delivery model (appointment process, delivery hours, staffing/volunteering levels). Five sites were included in the first round of selection and represented 100 per cent of those that had volunteered at this stage. Three site visits were conducted to understand the physical layout and infrastructure of each site and to further understand the day-to-day operation of emergency relief.

Following the first set of financial data collection and analysis, an additional three sites were added to further test the financial data analysis with a broader sample. These three sites were purposively identified and invited.

Throughout the report, interview data from the emergency relief services is coded and identified as shown in Table 1 (below). The table also rates the socio-economic characteristics of the area in which the emergency relief site is located. The rating uses the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD) - a general socio-economic index that summarises a range of economic and social information using measures of relative disadvantage. A low score indicates relatively greater disadvantage (e.g. many households with low income, or many people without qualifications, many people in low skilled occupations), while a high score indicates a relative lack of disadvantage (e.g. few households with low incomes, few people without qualifications, few people in low skilled occupations) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Focus 1: Financial and operating model – data collection and analysis

As discussed above, the true cost of delivering emergency relief services is often obscured by a reliance on volunteer labour and donated goods, as well as reliance on non-direct service activities such as the provision of administrative, fund-raising and other support by the host organisation. Data collected aimed to estimate the full cost structure of emergency relief delivery by identifying all goods and services (including in-kind) involved in the process and estimating the cost of delivering these in a commercial setting where all goods and services would need to be purchased.

The task was approached by:

- Identifying the processes and costs involved in the delivery of emergency relief services
- Establishing which components of the service are purchased (incurred costs) and which are provided in-kind
- Gathering incurred cost data from existing internal financial reporting for those emergency relief goods and services that are purchased
- Calculating the value of those goods and services not purchased but provided from in-kind sources
- Calculating personnel costs including costs of paid staff and the value of unpaid personnel
- Establishing an appropriate overhead to represent the cost of head office functions that support the emergency relief service delivery.

Discussions were undertaken with eleven emergency relief service staff, finance staff and fundraising staff to understand the assortment of costs and how these are calculated and reported across emergency relief services. Discussions largely took place online and were carried out by at least one Swinburne researcher. A variety of financial sources and program data were provided by Uniting for discussion, including financial reports, data from a Uniting case management system (CDS), and the Department of Social Services Data Exchange (DEX). These data sources provided quantitative data on staffing, incurred costs, in-kind contributions and consumer volumes.

Further detail on the method to determine the true cost of emergency relief services is provided in the Appendix.

Focus 2: Service precarity – data collection and analysis

Nine interviews were conducted with emergency relief service staff or volunteers from the five sites initially selected for the research project. All service staff and volunteers interviewed had worked or volunteered at the emergency relief site and/or as area managers for a minimum of 12 months and therefore had a strong understanding of the service. Interviews (30-60 mins) took place

online and were carried out by one Swinburne researcher and one Uniting staff member.

Table 1. Project site details

Site code*	Site description	IRSD	Interviewees **
Metro 1	• Inner metropolitan region with pockets of entrenched disadvantage • Co-located with other Uniting services	7	2
Metro 2	• Two locations operating as a single service: a) an inner-city location supporting people experiencing homelessness and b) a suburb with high disadvantage • Co-located with other Uniting services	9 & 1	2
Metro 3	• Suburb with significant disadvantage • Co-located with other Uniting services • High proportion of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers	1	1
Metro 4	• Suburb with pockets of disadvantage • Co-located with other Uniting services, predominantly a homelessness service	8	0
Metro 5	• Outer metropolitan suburb • Co-located with other Uniting services	5	0
Regional 1	• Large regional city • Co-located with other Uniting services	2	1
Regional 2	• Outer suburb of large regional city • No co-located Uniting services	1	2
Regional 3	• Large regional city with pockets of disadvantage • Co-located Uniting services	5	0
Additional Interviewee: Metro/Regional	• Co-ordinator overseeing a variety of sites, supporting staff and ensuring sites run efficiently • Major focus is to assist with raising funds and assisting with volunteer and student recruitment and training	NA	1

* Each site is either 'metro' or 'regional' and accompanied by a unique number except for 'Metro/regional' which refers to a co-ordinator covering multiple sites across regions.

** Number of interviewees refers to individuals. Where there is '0' these sites provided financial data only.

Semi-structured interviews sought to gain a detailed understanding of the various emergency relief models that were in operation, the unique challenges and complexities involved in the work, the precarities that exist within the current emergency relief system, and the strengths of the current system. Interview questions were developed in collaboration between research partners, following a rapid literature review of emergency relief delivery in Australia.

Transcriptions of interviews were analysed by a team of three researchers - two from CSI Swinburne and one from Uniting Vic.Tas. Interviews were analysed for key themes that emerged across the data set rather than solely on the unique features of individual cases. This involved abductive thematic analysis (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) with three researchers reading the interviews multiple times and becoming familiar with the content. The data was organised into shared meaning-based themes with the aim of locating individual experiences/insights into wider and shared socio-cultural contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2020). These themes were discussed and refined by consensus among the research team. A draft coding frame was developed to identify these key themes in relation to the research questions.

Note that interview quotes used throughout the report have been edited for the sake of brevity and clarity while remaining true to the intended meaning.

Limitations

While the findings detailed here provide useful and illuminating insights about the precarity and cost of delivering emergency relief and the various pressure points within the system, some caution must be exercised in applying the results more widely as they derive from a small sample of eight emergency relief sites in two states. However, while other sites may yield different data and different insights regarding the emergency relief system, the sites here are arguably representative of the emergency relief system given there are strong trends in the data, as well as correspondence with existing research.

Limitations related to financial assumptions and calculations are further detailed in the Appendix.

Ethics

The project was approved by the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref. 20258189-20597) and by senior management at Uniting Vic.Tas.

Findings

Findings from this research are presented in three sections. First, an analysis of the financial precarity of emergency relief services. Second, an exploration of the key aspects of delivering Uniting's emergency relief services. Third, an analysis of the challenges and service responses related to service precarity. There is strong consistency of conclusions drawn across diverse sites and with the financial data.

The financial precarity of emergency relief services

Analysis of operational and financial data of emergency relief sites sought to understand the 'true cost' of emergency relief – including hidden costs and in-kind costs upon which services rely. The analysis also revealed different factors potentially impacting the extent and value of service delivery. These are echoed later in the report through the analysis of staff experiences of service precarity.

The 'true cost' of emergency relief services

This research sought to estimate the total costs of delivering emergency relief services. This included labour costs such as paid and unpaid labour within the service (including consumer-facing activities and activities sourcing, transporting, shelving or packaging material goods), and labour directly supporting the service (such as an on- or off-site manager). The model also included the actual and in-kind costs of material aid (for this analysis defined as food and other goods) allocations for infrastructure costs, including facilities and equipment, and for overheads including 'backbone' activities and costs related to the host organisation.

In this context, the median incurred cost of delivering emergency relief services across the eight sites is estimated to be $106.00 per consumer visit while the 'true cost' is estimated to be $274.00 per consumer visit.

This analysis finds that the emergency relief system is heavily reliant on in-kind contributions, both in volunteer labour and donated material goods. Table 2 shows that 61 per cent of the total emergency relief service cost relates to in-kind costs.

Across the sample of eight sites, however, there is some diversity due to differences in provision of cash funding and other factors. While all sites are heavily reliant on in-kind contributions, this reliance ranges from in-kind provision comprising 39 per cent of service costs (Metro 4) to 80 per cent of costs (Regional 1), as detailed in Figure 1.

Table 2. Median cost ($) per consumer visit split by incurred and in-kind costs

	Incurred ($)	In-kind ($)	Total ($)
SERVICE DELIVERY COSTS			
Labour costs	43	65	108
Infrastructure and other costs	10	8	18
Overheads	14	12	26
Subtotal service delivery	**67**	**85**	**152**
MATERIAL GOODS COSTS			
Material goods	31	71	102
Overheads	8	12	20
Subtotal material goods	**39**	**83**	**122**
Total true cost per consumer visit	**106**	**168**	**274**
Percentage of total cost	39%	61%	100%

Figure 1. The total cost of emergency relief per site split by the percentage of costs that are incurred cost versus in-kind

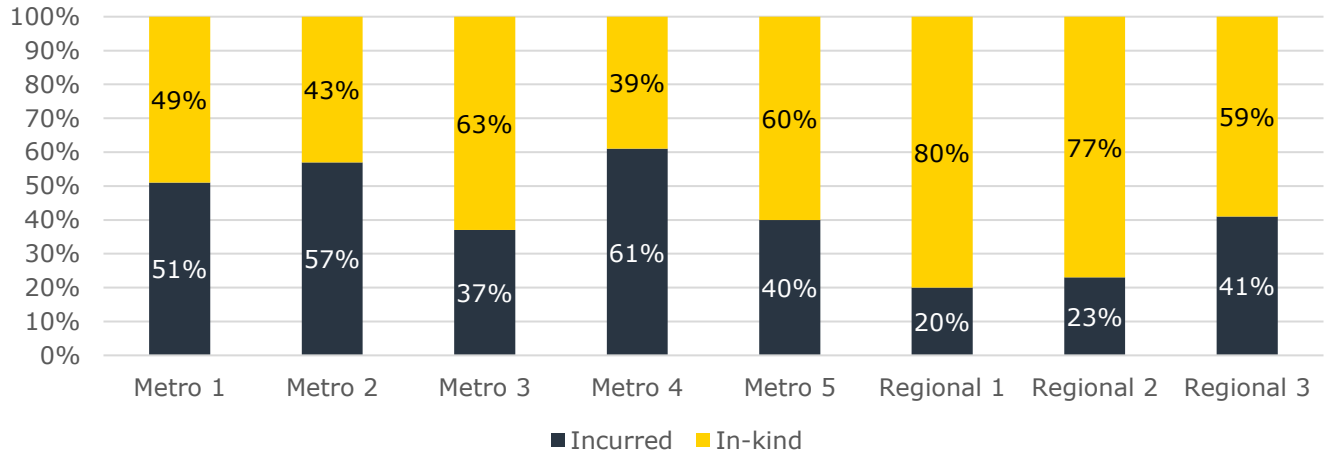


Figure 2. The material aid cost per site, excluding overheads, split by the percentage of costs that are incurred versus in-kind

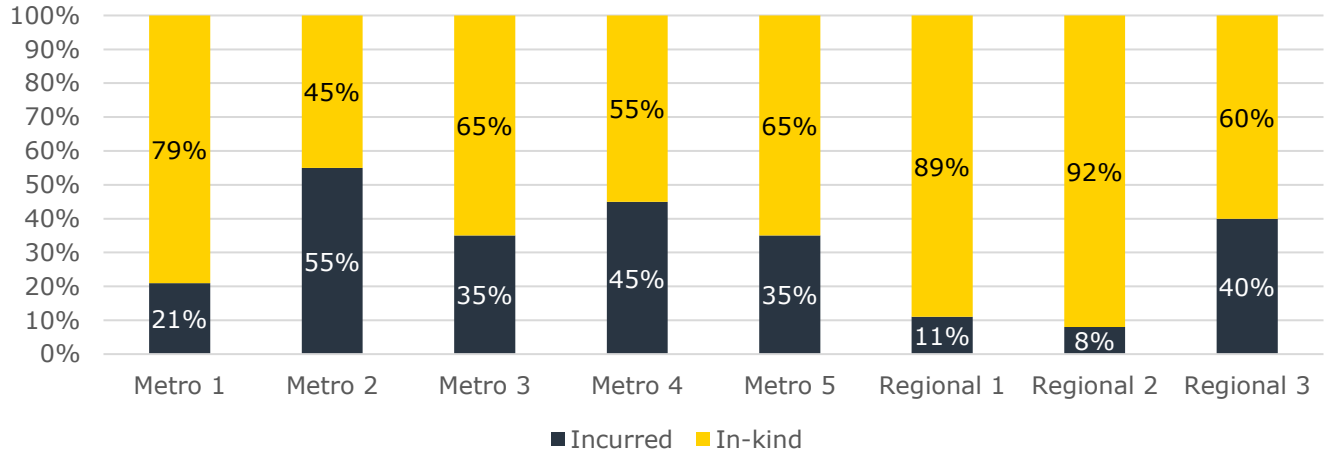


Figure 3. The labour cost per site, excluding overheads, split by the percentage of costs that are incurred versus in-kind

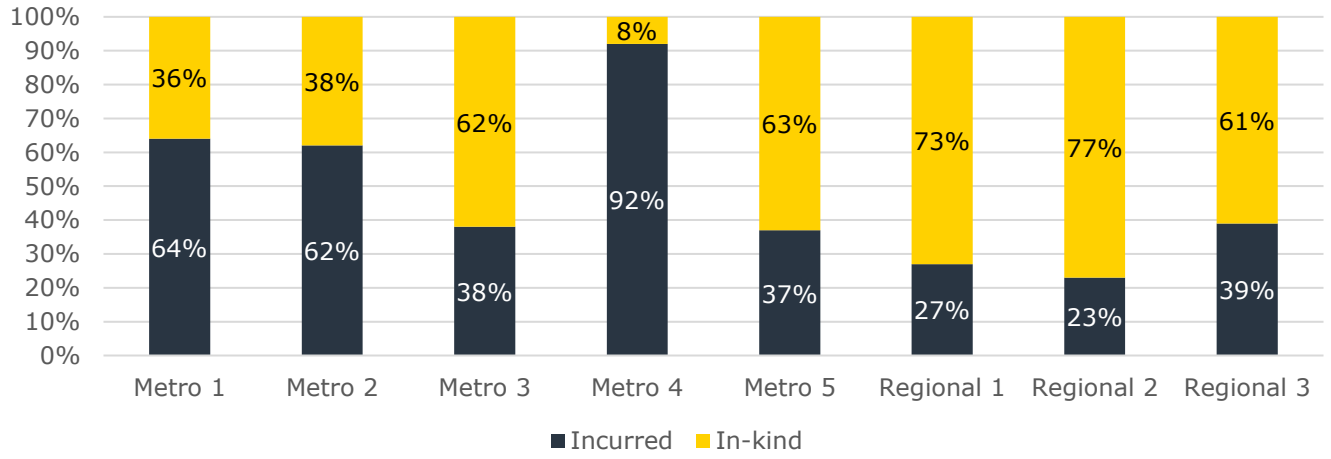


Table 2 shows that, on a cost-per-consumer visit basis, both service provision (i.e. largely staffing) and the provision of material goods is heavily dependent on in-kind contributions (with in-kind comprising 56 per cent and 68 per cent respectively, as calculated from Table 2).

Donated material goods (excluding overheads) account for $71.00, or 42 per cent, of the $168.00 median in-kind cost per consumer session. This heavy dependence on donated goods was a common theme across all sites.

As observed in Figure 2, Regional 1 and Regional 2 rely on donated goods for approximately 90 per cent of the value of emergency relief assistance they provide to the community. The site least dependent on in-kind contributions for material goods, Metro 2, sources 45 per cent of the material aid they provide from in-kind sources. This variation in result is likely to be explained by a combination of factors including funding model (i.e. access to direct funding), and the availability of in-kind material aid dictating the level of requirement to purchase material goods (such as food) in order to maintain an adequate supply within the service. As described in later qualitative commentary, these factors are highly variable across sites and over time.

Staffing of services is also heavily reliant on unpaid labour. In this model, unpaid volunteer and student labour hours are a significant component of the in-kind contributions, accounting for 60 per cent (median) of labour costs or 39 per cent of all in-kind costs per consumer session (Table 2).

However, Figure 3 shows that there is more variation across sites than when compared to the costings of material goods. Three of the eight sites paid for around two-thirds or more of their labour time, with one site, Metro 4, paying for over 90 per cent of its labour and utilising in-kind labour for just 8 per cent of its total labour value[2]. Two sites were particularly reliant on volunteer and student labour, with around three-quarters (73 to 77 per cent) of their labour value being provided from these in-kind sources.

Direct costs, that is the components of the emergency relief service that are purchased, are funded via a range of sources. Therefore, the current levels of Commonwealth government funding contribute to only a small portion of the total cost of delivering emergency relief services. Based on the eight sites included in this study, the anticipated DSS funding for financial year 2025 (FY2025) represents just 26 per cent of the true cost of delivering the emergency relief service. Hence, emergency relief services cannot operate without in-kind contributions.

This structural reliance on in-kind goods and labour, and limited government contribution towards the total emergency relief costs, exposes the system to risks such as volunteer shortages and supply disruptions which can impact service provision to the point of closure.

The value of material aid delivered

Despite relying on in-kind resources, the median value of material assistance (excluding overheads) provided per consumer session across the eight sites was $102.00. Again, this varied across sites from $77.00 to $212.00 (Figure 4 below). It is important to remember that the full benefit of the service to the consumer is comprised of both material aid as well as other services/supports provided through interaction with staff and referrals.

Infrastructure influences the level of material aid and drives greater impact

The amount and nature of material aid provided through emergency relief services is influenced by a range of factors (discussed later in this report). However, both the financial and qualitative data aligned to suggest that infrastructure, particularly the nature and size of physical space, is a likely determinant of service impact. In the financial data, this is extrapolated through the alignment of the total value of assistance provided to consumers with the level of site infrastructure.

[2] The limited reliance on in-kind labour with the Metro 4 site is due to the sites shared location with multiple specialised services, where the emergency relief service is supported by staff from across these services including a shared reception where consumers are assessed. Qualified staff from other services assist with emergency relief assessments in times of high consumer volumes and staff from these services assess and refer consumers to emergency relief.

Sites with access to large storage space and equipped with advanced storage facilities, such as a walk-in coolroom and freezers, can provide higher levels of material assistance to consumers. These sites can take delivery and store large amounts of material goods, enabling the stockpiling of food and other goods to support the distribution of more goods per consumer, while also mitigating the precarity associated with the unreliability of food supply. Where storage capacity is high, consumers appear to receive a higher value (and likely increased amount) of material aid, including food.

For example, Regional 1 has significant storage capacity, allowing it to stockpile material goods. As confirmed by qualitative data (discussed later), this enables Regional 1 to provide the highest assistance value per consumer session ($212.00, Figure 4), around one-third more than the next highest site and three-quarters more than the average across the eight sites studied. In order to keep the large storage facilities well stocked, this site utilises various longstanding partnerships with local businesses and community groups that donate material aid. The significant number and scale of these partnerships enables this site to maximise the benefit from available infrastructure, resulting in a higher value of material aid provided.

The sites with the second and third highest value of assistance provided per consumer session (Figure 4), also benefit from superior storage space compared to other sites. Regional Site 3 is a purpose-built emergency relief facility with the appropriate infrastructure to unload and store large deliveries. Metro 4 is a large site, housing multiple programs with a sizeable basement space that the emergency relief program utilises for storage.

Conversely, sites with very limited storage capacity, such as Metro 3, offer a far lower value of material aid assistance ($81.00). Qualitative data (presented later) confirms the negative impact of this lack of space and storage facilities on service delivery capacity.

The appropriateness and design of the physical building space used for emergency relief service delivery is also an important factor in service scale. Space to interview and support consumers impacts the level of consumer throughput and, in turn, influences cost of service delivery per consumer visit.

Using the cost-of-service delivery metric (i.e. labour and infrastructure costs including a share of overheads, Table 2) helps to underline the link between infrastructure and efficiency. Table 2 highlights the median cost of service delivery as $152, however individual site costs range from $121 to $201 per consumer visit. The site with the highest service delivery cost is Metro 3 at $201 per consumer visit.

Metro 3 faces consumer assessment bottlenecks due to inadequate interview space and has the second lowest level of consumer throughput per full-time equivalent (FTE) of all sites. Only one consumer at a time can be interviewed and aided. Only after both these processes have been completed can the next consumer be serviced. This severely limits the number of emergency relief consumer sessions it can accommodate, thereby significantly inflating its per consumer costs compared to other sites. When this is coupled with the low value of material assistance delivered due to restricted storage space, as discussed above, then the cost to deliver $1 of assistance is the highest of all services at $2.48, compared with the median across the 8 sites of $1.66.

Higher ratios of paid versus volunteer staff support a more efficient service model

The level of staffing at each emergency relief site varies. However, most sites (five of the eight studied) operate a staffing model based around one on-site paid staff member, with support from an on- or off-site manager/team leader and, in some instances, shared paid administration support. These sites depend heavily on volunteers and students to provide emergency relief services, as shown in Figure 5 (below). Overall, only three sites, all metropolitan, relied on a higher proportion of paid staff than volunteer staff, with limited volunteer or student labour.

Emergency relief sites have limited hours of operation per week. Despite this, and the low numbers of staff supporting service delivery, the median number of emergency relief consumer sessions per FTE is 816 across the 8 sites. The highest level of delivery (or consumer throughput) per FTE was 1,100 sessions per FTE (Metro 4).

It is possible to see a trend in the data to suggest that the model of a higher ratio of paid staff is linked to the highest consumer throughput per FTE and lowest labour cost per consumer visit (i.e. Metro 4) (Figure 6 below).

Both Metro 1 and Metro 4 sites were able to implement this type of staffing model due to their location within a site incorporating multiple Uniting programs, with at least some of the emergency relief staff working across more than one program. This co-location also provided these sites with access to 'backup' support of skilled staff either permanently shared with, or sporadically accessed from, other Uniting programs who could assist with complex emergency relief consumers or instances of key emergency relief staff absence.

Relying heavily on only one paid staff member at most sites risks limiting service reach, disrupting service continuity, and negatively affects staff wellbeing (as explored later in the report).

Figure 4. The value of material assistance, excluding overheads, provided ($) per consumer session

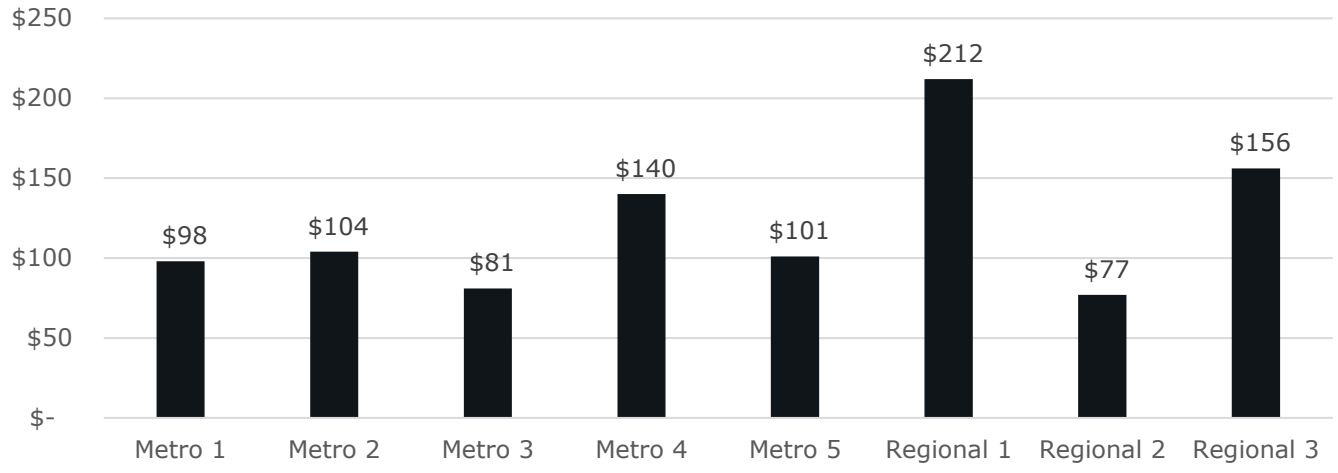


Figure 5. The average daily full-time equivalent staffing[3] for the days the site operates, by emergency relief site

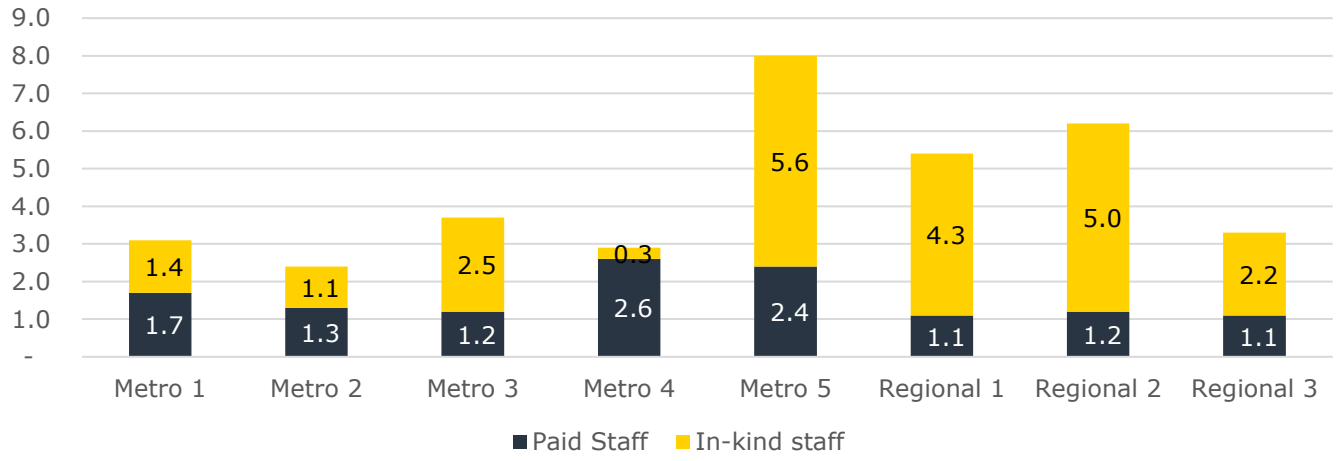
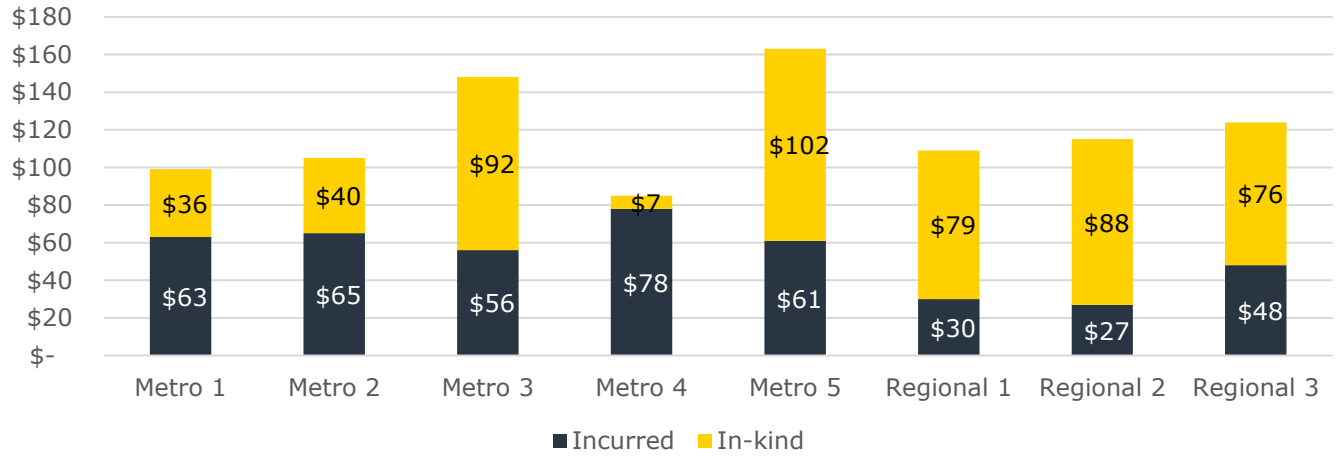


Figure 6. The labour cost, excluding overheads, ($) per emergency relief consumer session



[3] Paid staffing includes any onsite paid personnel, support from an on- or off-site manager/team leader, and, in some instances, shared paid administration support accessed by the service. It excludes contributions from paid staff in 'backbone' roles in central office.

Delivering Uniting's emergency relief services

The following is based on interviews to explore staff experience of operating emergency relief services. While emergency relief programs displayed flexibility and unique features attuned to the local context, there were common features and ways of working across the services.

Analysis has identified five key attributes that interviewees spoke about:

- Prioritising through triage
- Dealing with complex and layered needs
- Responding to seasonal pressure points
- Collaborating and building local networks to meet community needs
- Increasing food access through additional meals initiatives.

These elements respond to the complex environment in which services operate and are further outlined below as an introduction to the grounded experience of delivering emergency relief services.

Prioritising through triage

Overall, emergency relief services are seen to be the first, and often only, port of call for those in significant need, with staff providing frontline emergency triage.

> *'These people don't get the help they need, and we are on the frontline. I don't know what I'm expected to do as a worker in this space other than do everything I can to help the people to get where they need to be.' (Metro 1)*

All emergency relief services incorporated intake and assessment processes to help determine the urgency and type of support needed. Questions asked often focus on a person's situation and difficulties they may face in order to determine the level of need required for food, material aid, and whether additional services are required, such as for medical support or to meet the needs of children.

Consumers access Uniting emergency relief programs face-to-face via a combination of appointments and walk-in services. While most services booked appointments with consumers to allow for more in-depth assessment of circumstances and needs, many also provided an immediate response to people who walked in on the day without an appointment. Some services reported a distinction between the type of response offered via an appointment, versus that provided to someone who walks in without an appointment where support may be limited to a food parcel, but with the opportunity to book an appointment and return the next day. All sites indicated their tendency to never turn a person away and to provide some form of immediate support. Some services do operate solely on a walk-in service model (three of the services interviewed). Within these walk-in models, time was built in to allow for assessment and understanding of needs, similar to the functioning of the appointment-based models.

The main way that consumers access food relief at Uniting emergency relief services is via a pantry from which they can select their groceries, offering the chance for people to select food and goods, on their own, in a way that provides choice and dignity. Other forms of food relief include pre-packaged boxes that are collected by the consumer when visiting the service and vouchers to major supermarket retailers (when available).

Material aid was also routinely provided including blankets, clothing, sleeping bags and tents. Other forms of emergency relief included utility bill relief, support to purchase medicines, and vouchers for fuel.

While not directly emergency relief, shared space with other services, such as family services, family violence programs, mental health, alcohol and other drug and homelessness services, and financial counselling, enabled collaboration and opportunities for emergency relief recipients to access additional services.

Dealing with complex and layered needs (within constrained resources)

Emergency relief staff spoke about the importance of providing a service that accounts for the circumstances, needs and situation of the individual or family seeking support. Uniting staff and volunteers reported that many consumers present to emergency relief with complex and multilayered needs that may require more intensive, longer-term support than a one-off emergency relief presentation can provide. While the core function of emergency relief services was understood as the provision of food relief and material aid, there was an acute awareness of the co-occurring needs and circumstances of many consumers, including:

- housing insecurity and homelessness
- experiences of family violence
- mental illness and substance dependency
- physical illness and/or chronic conditions
- living with disability
- job loss and unemployment
- displacement and the experience of seeking asylum in Australia.

While emergency relief services primarily exist to distribute material aid, many staff highlighted the important role of emergency relief services as a 'front door' or 'gateway' to other supports and services:

> *'I think it's often the first access that people have to services. Because people will come in asking for a voucher, and then after two hours they realise that they can get housing, or they can get linked in with support services. Because once you give them food, there's this trust that gets created a little bit.' (Metro 1)*

Responding to seasonal pressure points

Services highlighted seasonal pressure points and adaptations that form part of their yearly planning process. The two main seasonal variations discussed were the Christmas and winter periods. Christmas is a significant time in the emergency relief calendar where services undertake additional activity to support people with Christmas hampers and presents for children. This is typically supported via community donations and targeted fundraising efforts like the Uniting Christmas Appeal. Some services reported relying on the additional donations 'leftover' from Christmas to get them through the months when donations drop away.

> *'We always find during winter we're kind of running off the bare minimum. We get heaps of donations at Christmas time and in January I think that's when a lot of local organisations and schools – and even personal donations – will come through at Christmas. But we do find around March – then going forward into winter – they really drop off. I think towards the end of the year there is just a bit more of that awareness that people are doing it tough. But when it does come through to winter that's probably the time that we do need it the most – because that's when people are choosing between their electric bill and buying food.' (Metro 1)*

Services spoke of the winter season as a time where they see more people who are experiencing homelessness seek assistance with blankets, winter clothing, sleeping bags, portable gas cookers and tents.

> *'In winter most of the people in [area A] will ask for sleeping bags [or] tents – there are more homeless people in this area. But in [area B], it's more families. But they are struggling with domestic violence or drug abuse or something like that. But here [area A] we see more homeless and single people – they always ask for sleeping bags, tents and jackets because they have nothing to survive in the cold weather.' (Metro 2)*

Though not common, some emergency relief services are co-located at a Uniting service site which also provides access to showers and laundry facilities for people sleeping rough. For similar reasons, one Metro emergency relief service had recently extended their community meals program from a lunchtime service to also offer a free winter breakfast program providing a hot breakfast alongside cereal, fruit and toast. The breakfast program averages around 40 to 50 people per day.

Collaborating and building local networks to meet community needs

Each emergency relief service relied heavily on local level collaboration to fulfil its role of providing food and material aid relief to as many people as possible. This helped to sustain and expand the amount and variety of food available for distribution, as well as expanding the support available to consumers, including referrals to other resources, programs and services.

> *'Without community partnerships [and] networks, you're working in a silo. It doesn't work – does not work at all. So, you've got to have all those relationships in place and keep everyone happy … You've got to reach out to all those agencies and work with them.' (Regional 1)*

How this collaboration occurred varied depending on whether the service was co-located with other Uniting programs or was operating as a stand-alone site. Where emergency relief services were co-located with other Uniting services, there was evidence of linkages and warm referrals to programs like community meals services, homelessness and tenancy support programs, and financial counsellors. However, even co-location did not always guarantee immediate access to other community programs given each have their own intake and assessment processes, wait lists and criteria.

Successful collaboration involves strong relationships and connecting the emergency relief service to other actors in the local food network. Often volunteers are key to sustaining these linkages and supporting the connection between food relief organisations like Foodbank and emergency relief services. Volunteers will often collect food from distributors and deliver it to an emergency relief site, help sort and stock shelves, and pack parcels. These relationships support the provision of material aid, particularly at times of high need like winter. The additional workload, in terms of time and energy to sustain relationships, is seen as a worthwhile investment because of the outcome for consumers in need.

> *'I head the emergency relief providers' network. So that's a network that was set up probably over 20 years ago – we have quarterly meetings. There's over a hundred members within it – all sorts of different agencies. They could be emergency relief, employment agencies, disability, housing, [or] mental health [agencies]. We all come together quarterly and talk about what's new, what's not, what's gone, what there's no funding for and so forth. And all that information gets generated and then that also trains the volunteers as to where they can refer to and so forth. That's very important to have those networks, otherwise you don't know who to refer to, and what agencies have gone broke, or what they're funding and what they're not funding.' (Regional 1)*

Direct partnerships with the local community were also highlighted as necessary and beneficial to increasing the food capacity of the local emergency relief service. Regional 1, for example, benefits from the implementation of a local program in which people donate fruit or vegetables that they may be growing at home, while relationships with local businesses also provide additional food.

Importantly, too, local level partnerships were reported as highly valuable in expanding linkages to a range of other health and welfare services that could benefit consumers. Strong relationships have resulted in co-location of external services at Uniting emergency relief sites to facilitate access. For example, in one region the emergency relief service is located at a Uniting Church, however other local services – such as health, dental and housing services – have an ongoing attendance roster at the Uniting emergency relief service with visible benefits.

> *'At times we did a collaboration with Jobs Victoria – they sat onsite one day a week in both our sites. Amazing. You come across someone who's looking for work and you go "Right, I'm going to take you out to see Paul". And we had a housing worker here for a while. "Homeless? Okay, Len, would you be able to see Derek? Derek's here. I'll book him in for next week". Having them onsite and around has been wonderful.*
>
> *We did this with [Regional] Health as well for a spell. They had some money to try and help people in need connect into*

services. And they sat in our reception one day a week and connected people with different health services – and dental and housing and different things like that. It was having that ability – I see and hear your problem and I'm immediately going to get something done for you.' (Regional 2)

Other emergency relief services reported similar strategies along with bringing important cultural events and personnel onsite, such as during NAIDOC week. Where services were co-located with other Uniting programs and infrastructure, there was additional opportunity for innovation and expansion of what is made available to consumers. However, notably, these relationships took time to establish and human resources to maintain.

In cases where a high level of need was identified, but other services were not immediately available, some emergency relief sites developed 'work arounds'. In one region, this occurs by providing short term 'intensive support'; that is, regular support for a short period of time to ensure consumers get linked in or referred to appropriate services.

One other Metro emergency relief service has formalised this 'gap worker' role by applying for grant funding to employ a 'mental health duty worker' two days per week to provide longer-term support and service linkages. A snapshot from the mental health duty worker role over a 12-month period showed that 215 referrals were made across a broad range of needs: 83 per cent of consumers were referred to homelessness and housing support, 45 per cent to financial supports such as financial counselling, 43 per cent to mental health services, 30 per cent to legal services, 25 per cent to domestic and family violence services, 20 per cent to medical services, 17 per cent to disability supports and 11 per cent to alcohol and other drug treatment services.

Increasing food access through additional meals initiatives

While not explicitly a part of funded emergency relief, some emergency relief services have adopted innovative models to extend food access.

Some sites have a café or community kitchen attached to the service and thereby provide an additional service that works in tandem with emergency relief. Such services provide not only food, but also a valuable community space for people to gather and feel welcome. In some locations, cafés operate adjacent to the emergency relief service. People can access the café either before or after accessing the emergency relief service. The focus is on providing low-cost, nutritional food and a safe and welcoming environment that addresses the need for social inclusion. The cafes/restaurants typically rely on volunteers (including TAFE students, disability/community groups), providing opportunities for people to learn skills, gain work experience and to engage in a community building activity.

Three of the sites also provided community meals programs, typically a lunch, at no- or low-cost. While these are not formally part of the funded emergency relief service, they operate adjacent to the service and are another mechanism to provide food relief to the community. For example, one of the Metro emergency relief services utilises the kitchen connected to the onsite free meals program, NoBucks, to cook a range of healthy meals that are frozen and distributed to people via two emergency relief services. This involves employing people with disability to work in the kitchen, which is independently funded and supported, to make packaged meals, which are then provided to emergency relief at a modest price.

Emergency relief services also sought to address the needs of populations who are underserviced via traditional emergency relief models of operating. These included community members with mobility issues and language barriers. There was recognition that not all community members who need food relief are able to access an emergency relief service in person. A physical illness or a disability affecting mobility, or certain mental health conditions, made it difficult for some consumers to travel to a physical site to access emergency relief.

To reach these consumers, models have been proposed whereby staff and volunteers can in-reach into people's homes to provide emergency relief including food parcels and material aid. In one region, a mobile food service was established and operated out of a local community centre one day per week for a five-month period in 2024. The service was designed to expand food relief to newly arrived communities for whom English was not the main language spoken at home. The mobile

service allowed the Uniting emergency relief service to be delivered in a trusted community setting and helped raise awareness of the main emergency relief service in a neighbouring location.

> *'We utilised the fresh fruit and vegetables from [the emergency relief service] for the project. We would go down with about two or three helpers. The van would pull up, we'd load everything out on the tables and we'd just help people for the four hours that we were there. And some of those have now started coming to the emergency relief service for additional help. But we found such a huge array of people that went, "This is magnificent. Thank you so much". But I don't think the funding was ever [secured] which is such a shame because there was obviously a need for it.' (Regional 2)*

Innovations like mobile food vans and outreach food relief activities were often short-term extensions of existing services, made possible by one-off grants. Staff saw significant potential in making these ongoing features of emergency relief.

Service precarity on the ground: challenges and service responses

In considering the challenges that emergency relief services faced, interviewees identified six key themes that highlighted the ongoing precarity of the emergency relief service:

1. Determining crisis and the level of need
2. Workforce pressures and the reliance on volunteers and students
3. Food reliability and supply
4. Physical infrastructure
5. Funding uncertainty
6. Gaps in service provision.

Often interviewees spoke of the challenges, while also highlighting the strengths of emergency relief provision and their innovative responses to mitigating the challenges. For example, the commitment of volunteers was a strength that enabled emergency relief services to operate, while the extensive reliance on volunteers (and students) is also a key factor in the precarity of the service.

1. Determining crisis and the level of need in a resource rationing environment

While staff were clear that the role of emergency relief is first and foremost to provide immediate access to food and material aid within the context of an 'acute' episode or crisis (and noted the Commonwealth funding body also viewed the function of emergency relief in this way), a majority of people are presenting with complex situations that are compounded by a financial emergency and/or ongoing financial hardship.

Community members experiencing persistent, long-term hardship often relied on emergency relief as a necessary component of how they deal with chronic financial hardship and food insecurity. This was a clear tension for staff, who spoke about how the limited resources, including food, funding and staffing, necessitate difficult choices about resource distribution and when people can return.

'We call it a crisis service – in crisis "at the moment". That's one of our problems – in our minds we are defining crisis: [for example] your house has burned down, you've left your husband, you've got some massive bills come in, the car's broken down. It's something that's happened out of the ordinary and that's how I think we're supposed to look at it. Because as much as we're supposed to be non-judgmental, we have to make a judgment on what they're saying to us as to whether they get a voucher or not – because we don't have enough to give everyone.

Because we are in a cost-of-living crisis, effectively just about anybody could attend and say, "I'm in crisis, I can't afford my groceries". It's a lot of people.' (Regional 2)

'Not everyone that's coming through can get a voucher although they'll get food – we've got to prioritise who's in real crisis versus people that are coming in and things are a little bit tough. So that is a challenge because everyone coming through sees themselves as "I'm in crisis". So, everyone's got their own perceptions. So then for the teams, the challenge is to be able to communicate, make them feel supported, and being able to manage these challenges. [To say to someone…] "No, you don't automatically get a voucher". It's very, very hard.' (Metro/Regional)

One of the challenges staff face is determining how much support they can offer people in crisis given that the role of emergency relief is immediate support and not ongoing case management.

'This comes down to the definition of our role within the Uniting structure in that we're not caseworkers. We shouldn't be [case] managing. We can offer referrals, we

can suggest other services that might be able to help them, but as to how far we can actually go is a bit of a grey area within Uniting … But it is hard, and it becomes the choice of that person to actually take up the suggestions that we are offering as well.

With things like domestic violence, we will offer assistance if they need help applying for the Escaping Violence funds and things like that. We'll help them with that, but it's got to be them to take that step. We'll try to offer them assistance. But [coordinator] will go that extra step because you can't not help these people. And that's where it's hard from the volunteer side as well too - because we don't want to lose the trust of the person that we are dealing with, but we don't want to overstep what we are allowed to do.' (Regional 2)

Responding to increased demand

A common theme across all sites was the increase in consumer numbers reflecting the difficult economic times and daily hardship people face. More new people are coming to emergency relief services alongside the high number of people returning on a regular basis. This stretches the capacity of service provision, risking diminishing service quality and having to turn people away. People often become upset, with staff having to manage people's reactions along with their expectations.

'From when I started [four years previous] we might see six families a day – and now it's twenty-six.' (Regional 2)

'And the increase of need that we're getting at the moment … We are finding that we're having a lot more new people introduced to the service. We're also seeing people just coming back. We tend to often see the same person coming every single month. I think just cost-of-living in general – that's what's bringing the need.' (Metro 1)

'Due to the increased need within the community – it does pose an issue in terms of how many people that you can support … There were 70 referrals that were processed in that time [eight-week period]. There was also 286 consumers turned away in that period. Fifty-six of those consumers were not eligible in terms of that eight-week timeframe. That shows you that we're getting people – they're potentially in need and they're trying to get an appointment. That's 230 people who've tried to call and haven't been able to secure an appointment.

We do see a lot of disgruntled consumers: "We've been trying to call for however long". As a human you want to support people who are in need, but we've had many a conversation of, "This is our system. This is what we've got to give. We're doing our best to create more opportunities" … The year before we opened up 12 appointments a day – it turned into chaos.

We were supporting more people – it was fantastic, but the quality of our service diminished. It really comes down to what do you want, quantity or quality? We've got a lot of people who are experiencing really complex situations and when you increase your appointment availability you have less time to listen. Then you don't have that opportunity to link them in with those services moving forward. Expectation is a huge thing – you have to monitor what you're doing with that and try not to create one [expectation] that's not feasible.' (Metro 3)

Decisions about the rationing of aid are constantly being made daily as staff determine how many people they can support with the resources available.

'It [emergency relief food supply] doesn't actually go very far. We could have a massive donation at the beginning of the week and by the end of the week it's actually all gone – just because of the [number of] people that we see.' (Metro 1)

'We have a strict budget that stays the same throughout the year. Unfortunately often the reality is that if you start to have more people come through the door you can either get to a certain number and then say, "Sorry, we've reached our limit for today, or this week, and we can't help you" – which we don't do that – but what we then subsequently have to do is start to adjust for the following month how much

we can actually provide. So, if people are coming in and it's reasonably stable or quiet we can give out 50 bucks worth of product to everybody. If we see our numbers start to increase, we have to start paring that back to maybe $30 worth of food, which isn't good – but that's the only way we stay viable and sustainable.' (Metro 2)

Increase in consumer complexity

'There's so much complexity coming through. I mean you're getting complexity in all sites, but some sites it's just at another level.' (Metro/Regional)

Along with the increase in numbers is the increase in complexity of the consumers and the need to address difficult issues that extend beyond emergency relief.

'One of the things that I've noticed in the time that I've been there is the increase of the people that we're assisting. And because we're in such a poor demographic area, we have a lot of unemployed people, a lot of single parents. We have a lot of mental issues, drug issues. We are finding a lot more domestic violence situations coming in with both females and males.' (Metro 3)

'They're extremely complex consumers. There's only so much the team that are assessing can do. And [the coordinator] will step in and support where she can and get those referrals. With only one staff member there's only so much you can do.' (Metro/Regional)

'If we do have a complex consumer come through and they need quite a bit of support – and we don't have the time to give them – that can be quite difficult. We obviously want to be able to come up with some sort of solution but sometimes we just can't – it's out of our service and it's not something that we do. So, they can be frustrated – and then that makes us feel a bit frustrated.' (Metro 1)

'If someone comes in with really complex problems then you can't push them out to nine weeks [emergency relief access cycle][4] – they become an "intensive". Once they present with such a lot of complex problems then we see them regularly – I think there's a duty of care involved. If it's a big domestic violence case and they're in the throes of leaving, then they generally come in here. But there's so much to deal with. You can't deal with all that in one session. They're already upset, they're really going through it, they're offloading. They've got so many issues, and you just can't fit in everything you can help them with – it's overwhelming. Sometimes it's just a case of "let's get you food today so you've got food to take home and as long as you're safe then we can look at doing the EVP [Escaping Violence Payment] and help you with that.' (Regional 2)

There has also been an increase in the number of refugee and asylum seekers in some services, which can create communication challenges due to language barriers. Services have tried to adopt translation practices with mixed success.

'Our refugee and asylum seeker input has increased significantly over the last couple of years. And that's a real struggle because these people don't speak English. Trying to get translators and support for them when the language barrier is there is very difficult.' (Metro 3)

'We've got a lot of refugees come in now. They're just here and they just have nothing. They don't speak English. Someone's pointed them in our direction and – wow. A lot of them have got a lot of kids or their wife is pregnant: "We have nothing." And you're just like "Wow. We've got to do better than this.".' (Regional 2)

'The likes of Google Translate doesn't get you very far. We did try getting a tablet here for the office so it could sit there, and we had something at least bigger than fiddling about with a phone, but it didn't help. There is a translation service we can

[4] This site operates a nine-week period/cycle (for repeat or 'regular' consumers) before consumers can return for further emergency relief. Where people present with complex needs or significant crisis then intensive support is provided until other services can be provided.

call which is called TIS [Translating and Interpreting Service] but sometimes you've got to wait an hour for an interview and then it doesn't work, and it cuts you off after a certain time. It just stops – and you can't even explain to the consumer what's happened.' (Regional 2)

2. Workforce pressures and the reliance on volunteers and students

Both paid staff and volunteers experienced daily pressures in working to support people in crisis and with complex needs. There were a multitude of challenges identified highlighting the stresses people faced, while also recognising the qualities of staff and volunteers working in an under-resourced environment.

The reliance on volunteers

Without exception, all interviewees highlighted the role of volunteers and students as a key strength of the emergency relief service and the reliance on dedicated volunteers over time to deliver a valuable service to those in need.

'We rely very heavily on our volunteers. And I think if they were to all leave, there would be huge gaps and be very hard to fill.' (Metro 1)

'[The main strength of emergency relief?] Definitely the volunteers – they do some amazing work with us. A lot of them have been here longer than us staff. So, they've seen quite a few changes. And they've just sort of adapted with us – they've been really great with that.' (Metro 1)

'We tend to cover for each other. We tend to be a pretty small operation with everyone doing multiple things. We rely heavily on volunteers. We have a couple of volunteers who find time in their own schedule, in their own vehicle, to come out here and collect items and take them out to [the site] for us.' (Metro 2)

'I think the strength is the volunteers; without the volunteers there would not be a Uniting in [this area]. So, keep those relationships going – I don't think Uniting rewards their volunteers enough … We need to be celebrating our volunteers a lot more. I don't know how, but seriously you wouldn't be able to run a program this big without them – and keeping them here, happy and so forth [is critical].' (Regional 1)

One of the key qualities of volunteers (and paid staff) was their ability to listen to people without judgement, providing the opportunity for people to be heard and valued.

'Sometimes because they [consumers] are living alone, they just need to share their feelings. They have no one to talk about their circumstances, how they are feeling, what they need. So, they just come here because they know that we are here to listen to them – we are not here to judge them. They just want to share their feelings.' (Metro 2)

'They feel comfortable, they don't feel judged when they enter, and they're made to feel secure and safe. We find that some of these people say to our [intake] interviewers "It's so nice having somebody listen to me for a change" – which they don't find at other agencies. They just find, "Oh, well, here you go. Here's your stuff, off you go." These guys will sit and talk to them. They get really chuffed as well when I recognise them when they come in and I address them by name. You get to recognise them and that just makes them feel so much better.' (Regional 2)

However, the substantial reliance on volunteers to maintain the service highlights the precarity of relying on a cohort that is often (though not always) short-term and transient. Respondents noted that it is becoming more difficult to employ volunteers and to retain them.

'It's definitely a challenge relying on volunteers. We've got two volunteers who do the bulk of our deliveries and if they were both to leave it would be very hard to fill those positions. They're both retired – they're doing multiple hours, multiple days a week. It's challenging.' (Metro 1)

'The volunteer workforce is significantly different than it was five years ago. It now tends to be younger students who are

wanting to get some career benefit out of their volunteer work as opposed to older people who've said, "Well I'm now at a point where I've got some free time and I'd like to do something for my community"...

We occasionally have some of them but they're really rare and really valuable. We just don't have the number that we used to … There's a lot of competition too – there's a lot of organisations and agencies [needing volunteers].' (Metro 2)

'It's very difficult – a lot of them don't want to do a day that's not theirs. A volunteer will commit to a day and a time – and if you're short you try and call them in: "Sorry I'm volunteering somewhere else that day". They have more than one volunteer role generally.' (Regional 1)

'Emergency relief services probably have the least volunteers [compared with other services]. We struggle to have a volunteer on every day.' (Metro 1)

'And as soon as the frost hits the ground, they're [volunteers] all gone. Everyone goes travelling when it gets cold here so then you find yourself very understaffed. I was understaffed anyway. I had four away – generally I like 10 on a shift – but if you've got four away you've got to step into those roles as well.' (Regional 1)

Added workload flowing from students and younger volunteers

While bringing great value to the emergency relief service, student placements take time with onboarding and supporting them initially, while having to accept that the placement time will be limited and then the cycle begins again. This places great strain on paid staff (and volunteers) who have the ongoing workload of having to repeatedly onboard and train new volunteers.

'Even with the great volunteer support we get through the broader Uniting and dedicated volunteer engagement staff, it's still a significant imposition on [staff member's] time to be regularly training, inducting, bringing on more volunteers and then [they are] leaving. Students come, complete their placement hours, and then they leave. They just keep on coming and going. We have to check their documents first, and then when they come here we have to train them … You're getting them up to speed with the processes of the program. Then they'll be here for X amount of time, then they drop off. That's me all year [i.e. repeating the process].' (Metro 3)

'It's not worth us having student placements if we're recruiting them every two or three weeks, because it's a lot of work involved in interviews. It's basically screening candidates, arranging interviews. They may or may not be suitable – most of them are. Then there's reference checks. There's a lot of work in the background, getting [mandatory] police checks and things like that. So, it's got to be worthwhile for the student, but it's also got to be worthwhile for us when you just don't have the workforce on the sites [to do the workload of volunteer recruitment and onboarding].' (Metro/Regional)

'And without the volunteers we just wouldn't be able to do it. And that's actually one of the things that we're struggling with – trying to get people on board is hard. Retention isn't so hard when they're older volunteers because they're generally past the whole job-seeker situation … It's the younger ones that come in that may be students or they're looking for job placements.

They want to get the experience – which is great. But they don't want to stay on as volunteers – they want a paid position. And even with the job-seeker side of things they're pushed by Centrelink to do a certain quota of job interviews – they still have tasks that they have to perform. So, it makes it hard to get people in a lower age group to do the volunteering and to retain them.' (Regional 2)

'One of the realities if you've got those more traditional older volunteers, they're here because they really wanted to be here – they've got a connection to what you do. They're really passionate about what they do … It's a very different group of people [students] than the more old-school volunteers. Particularly when there might not be the passion there.' (Metro 2)

The toll of working in crisis relief and support for staff

The demands of the job are evident for paid staff and volunteers who are subject to the strains of dealing daily with people in crisis and limited resources to address their complex needs. In some instances, there may be safety concerns with the potential for serious incidents, while the mental and emotional challenges can be demanding.

'I come in and I don't know what I'm walking into. There can be somebody sleeping in the garden all dirty – needs a shower or needs food. Homeless people turning up, domestic violence turning up. Somebody the other day screaming about how his daughter's buried in the garden, and God keeps moving the police, and we've got to phone America, and he's been sent here after 9/11, and lasers in his eyes and stuff like that. It is just constantly reactive.' (Regional 2)

'Emergency relief is quite – I don't know how to say this – it can be quite sad to be working in this space. People are coming through because they're in crisis, and we do have a bit of a conversation that isn't always a nice conversation. So, to have to listen to that and then go in and help with the food … And some people can be upset – and they do just tend to unload their problems. So, I think it does take a certain person to be able to listen to that.' (Metro 1)

'There's definitely a safety challenge as well – we are very conscious of the serious number of incidents. And they're becoming more serious incidents just because people are more unwell, or cost-of-living is higher and we're just getting more numbers in – it's this ongoing effect. On a one-off basis the worker might be fine, but over a number of incidents we're noticing the impact – and that can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue and those type of things as well.' (Metro 1)

Given the challenges of the job, it is vital that staff, both paid and volunteers/students, feel supported and have opportunities to debrief and share their experiences, with further professional support available if required.

Overall, it appears that staff work together well in supporting one another, with Uniting also providing more formal support if required.

'I can't even describe the things that I've heard when sat in an interview in emergency relief. And they [the interviewers] go home with that – and so we have to talk about that when they've had big days. I've given them time off, I've spoken to them … Around this time of day when the interviewers are going home, I'd be sitting here in the office, and they come in and we talk about it. Talking amongst ourselves is really important because often there can be further suggestions, and you think, "I can do that next time I see them, or I can follow up with that". But I think just saying what you've just experienced is really helpful just to deal with it. And we just sit here and shake our head sometimes – because sometimes it's just a big day.' (Regional 2)

'We've got the volunteer coordinator – so that would be probably the main person supporting the volunteer. I'd be the main person supporting the staff. And then I've got my manager and senior manager. We've got the Work Health and Safety team. We've got a lot of support services within Uniting that we can reach out to.' (Metro 1)

'She's helping support her team that have to debrief to her, but she needs someone to debrief to. So, she knows she can always come to me to chat – and sometimes we don't always have the answers because it's just outside our realm. But sometimes we can brainstorm and go, "Oh, have we tried this or tried this?" But it's important – she's got to have the opportunity to debrief as well.' (Metro/Regional)

The pressure extends when there are volunteer shortages or if a worker is unable to do their shift. Not all volunteers can work in the consumer-facing roles, given the specific skill set required, and many volunteers choose not to interface with consumers.

'If we don't have any volunteers and it is just the support worker doing the shift and if it's a busy day and you've got people – you can have like six people waiting outside

and you're inside with someone and then you've got to take them through to the food – it's a demand on the support worker. And it's just that constant appointment after appointment after appointment with no break … You can see the support workers at the end of the shift are very much, "That was a big day". It's half-nine till about one o'clock – just consistent. People who are waiting are getting frustrated … We're trying our best, but it does frustrate some people.' (Metro 1)

The work requires a significant level of specialised skills, for both paid and unpaid staff, which adds to the difficulties of recruiting and retaining staff and volunteers.

'I have had to change the type of volunteers I have in the interview rooms because of the clientele I have now. I can't just have a well-meaning person off the streets come in and interview. I need ex-social workers, ex-teachers, ex-nurses, people with mental health experience, or the students … But probably within six months – once I found my feet with this job – even the interviewers that were here were coming to me going "this is way beyond my pay grade. I don't know how to deal with domestic violence. I don't know how to deal with suicide". You get it wrong – you seriously get it wrong. And you can retraumatise people – it is quite a serious thing.' (Regional 2)

Critical lack of paid staff

A common theme across interviews was the general under resourcing across the emergency relief system, including limited direct funding for staffing, which meant services generally operated with one full-time equivalent coordinator role and were therefore heavily reliant on volunteers for daily service functioning and operations. The lack of paid staff, or the reliance on a single paid staff member, meant a high workload for that individual and the inability to take time off.

'I'm alone on this site. I'm the only paid staff member. It's just me and then everybody else is a volunteer. And that is one of the pressures that I find – I just don't feel I can take time off because I'm letting my team down. We're a very tightknit team and everybody doesn't want to let anybody down. There's also the pressure on the volunteers as well because they apologise when they book a holiday: "I'm so sorry, but––". And I feel the same way. I feel I can't take a sick day or take a holiday. That is one of the issues because there's no other staff member.' (Regional 2)

'There's a lot of pressure within these programs – I'm the paid staff member and there's no other one. It's all on me in a sense. To take a day off – how do you do that when you're the staff member and who's going to run the program? … It's a lot. It's trying to juggle all that and then do the background work which is quite excessive as well.' (Metro 3)

'I don't have admin. I have to answer the phone and be the backstop for everyone. We're always very short-staffed – but no one wants to fund wages. They want to fund programs, but you don't get the money for wages which makes it really difficult to do your job … And not having a paid admin person – the role is so big. I'm called an emergency relief coordinator, but I don't get to coordinate very often because I'm doing all the other tasks. Like you've got to do your own invoicing and all that sort of stuff. It's a big job.' (Regional 1)

'You have no choice in a role like mine to give a bit extra, even though you only have your work hours. But if you don't do these certain things outside of that … it's going to crumble.' (Metro 3)

With services reliant on unpaid volunteers and one paid staff member within the service, it is inevitable that there are times when the service delivery cannot occur.

'There's been a couple of times that we've had to decide to close because we just do not have the workforce. It's not good for the consumers – but we only do it if we haven't thought of every scenario. It's happened a couple of times which is challenging because that means the consumers do not have a centre to walk in to.' (Metro/Regional)

3. Food reliability and supply

A significant amount of time and energy is spent in sourcing food for emergency relief services. Food acquisition is a necessary skillset required of staff (paid and unpaid). Staff were resourceful in utilising their networks and relationships to ensure a consistent and adequate food supply. Staff spoke of the considerable time they invested in building and maintaining these relationships, including with mainstream food relief suppliers. This highlights the skills, knowledge and resourcefulness of Uniting staff, and also the precarity of the system given that it is highly reliant on these personal relationships and networks that have been built over a considerable period of time.

> *'Because I have such a big knowledge of all the food producers and so forth, we still receive a big capacity of food. Most of that is from Foodbank Victoria, because I've got a good relationship with them. And they deliver directly to our door – not everyone gets that. And I also receive three deliveries a week from the Regional FoodShare. So, we have huge capacity for food. And because I have local knowledge as well – we have a program that I started with Foodbank, another program called Street Harvest.' (Regional 1)*

Examples that help expand available food include partnerships with local greengrocers, butchers and local food networks. On the ground, coordinating and managing this network of food delivery across a range of providers is complex and time consuming.

> *'We get Fair Share every week and that's about eight trays of frozen meals which is really helpful for emergency relief. We get daily deliveries Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday from two different Coles and three of those days we also get ALDI. ALDI's been sort of a bit of a game changer for us from mid last year – they do more than fruit and veg and bread, and often we can get meat from them which is a big one … We have a supplier who also does fruit and veg and that's really high quality. They've been really awesome. We get them twice a week as well.*
>
> *We've got a company called FoodFilled. And FoodFilled basically are a company of volunteers who pick up from different places. Could be a local bakery or it could be from a Coles or a Woolworths type thing as well. So basically, we're just getting more of the same things but it's just another supplier basically giving the same type of food. So, we do double up, but it does help because sometimes things fall through. We get Baker's Delight once or twice a week. And we also get some pastries from a bakery around the corner – and they do a lot of donuts and nicer biscuits and things which can be quite helpful. They're the regular donations I think in a week.' (Metro 1)*

Added to the workload of building the relationships with food suppliers and coordinating multiple deliveries or pick-ups per week, staff also worked to source specific food to meet cultural or dietary needs where they could.

> *'If there's a main cohort, we try and look at what their food is – there's no use them coming in and handing out a standard food parcel and they're only going to use one quarter of it because of their cultural needs around cooking and things like that. So, we've made some implementations where we started offering a few of these foods as a food option. We can get halal through [supplier] in frozen meals so that suits that cohort. And we can also order things like gluten-free pasta.' (Metro/Regional 1)*

However, the flow of food into emergency relief was often unreliable, making planning difficult. While food supply could be plentiful, it was also scarce at times. Overall, the food supply chain was difficult to predict and required continual effort to maintain steady supply to emergency relief consumers. The unreliability of food provision often necessitates having to buy food from local supermarkets at higher cost.

> *'Our [food relief supplier] is often quite short supplied; they just don't have certain products … so all of a sudden, we have to try and source that somewhere else. And if we have to buy it, then we have to buy it. We're not budgeted for those things.' (Metro 1)*

'I'll never know what I'm going to get on a Tuesday morning. I can book for three interviews all week and then I get a hundred kilos which isn't going to last the day. Fruit and veg can be a bit dicey. As for stuff that we buy – sometimes I go to [the area coordinator] and say, "Look, we've got no sugar, flour, all the basics", and she'll say, "Yeah, go and spend two and half or three thousand at such and such". Every three months I do a supermarket order.' (Regional 2)

'The challenge initially was having enough food on hand – the food demand was the hardest thing to start with because when these numbers started coming up, we were running out of food maybe on the second day of service with another day and a half to go. And that's when we would have to do some shopping against the small amount of funds that we do have. So, then we're paying supermarket prices for these products which is not great by any means, because then we are being affected by the same challenges that the people coming to us are struggling with.' (Metro 3)

The pattern of access to food sources is constantly subject to change which adds an adaptive workload for all actors in the system. Where some emergency relief centres could once rely on regular donations from major supermarkets, this may not now be the case. Equally, food provision may be reliant on local harvests, which can be impacted by multiple factors including weather conditions. Major food relief suppliers themselves experience considerable unreliability of food provision. This unreliability impacts the ability to plan with any certainty.

'Not a lot of stuff gets donated from Woolworths and Coles anymore … And then over the years Sunrice used to donate a lot for Foodbank, but Sunrice has a drought – there was drought in the Riverina and there was no excess rice. So, Foodbank had to be proactive and fundraise and then purchase shipping crates of rice out of China to get rice for the emergency relief sector. So there is no preplanning. You don't know what's going to come around the corner. Ultimately anything that's on a supermarket shelf may end up in your pantry the next day or it may not. It depends on the weather; it depends on whether it's hail damaged or fruits that no one wants to buy.' (Regional 1)

'I think also the variety of food has always been a challenge. We do get the same food options from suppliers. Non-perishables are very challenging. We are always looking for suppliers to get certain products like milk and coffee, and sleeping bags and things where we see there is very high need. But no one's really donating those products to us so we have to either buy them, or either – hopefully – we can get them a discounted price. But not always. So, it's just getting that consistency – thinking long-term.' (Metro 1)

Ultimately the unreliability of food provision has a significant impact on consumers and the capacity to meet their needs.

'If we don't have enough food that can be quite difficult. Because people are coming and they're like, "Well, we've waited to come here, and you can't give us anything that we need." That can be difficult.' (Metro 1)

4. Physical infrastructure

As highlighted in the financial analysis, physical infrastructure, including both office space in which to conduct intake interviews and storage space and equipment, drastically affects the capacity of the emergency relief service to meet demand and do so efficiently. The majority of venues did not have the desired storage space they would like. One site, which did have a large storage capacity, outlined the value of this in terms of providing a more reliable service, as well as being able to adequately meet the needs of the growing numbers of consumers. Capacity to stockpile reduces the need to supplement food supplies with commercially purchased items, and means the service is more likely to have sufficient food to distribute.

'So, storage – we have large capacity. So, my coolroom I would say holds four pallets of veggies and stuff, then there's the walk-in freezer, plus a house. So, the house is like a big, huge pantry, so we do food in a big way. If a person comes here for a food parcel, they get a very large parcel that

should last seven days, but realistically it would last them two weeks. Because we have big capacity, we can actually order a lot more from Foodbank than most agencies, and we can then stockpile. And we sit right next to [food manufacturer] so we get truckloads of cereal.' (Regional 1)

However, most sites had limited storage capacity which affected how much food could be kept on hand, the types of food on offer, and the ability to take on additional food and material goods when they became available. This led to missed opportunities for aid acquisition. For example, services without large refrigeration and freezer capacity were limited in their ability to accept supplies of fresh produce, fruits, vegetables and meat.

'We couldn't take 30 crates of fruit and veg because we don't have the space. We've got one fruit and veg fridge – so that always impacts our ability to say yes to things. I think the week before we only got 14 crates. If it's non-perishables, we always say "yes" because that's something that we can store. We can find purpose for that. When it comes to fruit and veg, we don't want to say "yes" and then waste it.' (Metro 3)

'There's a lot of amazing stuff we can get through Big W or Good360 – brand new stuff – that we can take but we don't have the space. It's always an issue.' (Metro/Regional)

'We don't have the best storage. We just have our pantry, so we try our best to store what we can. We've got a little cupboard on our floor at emergency relief that is full of Christmas stuff so we try and fit what we can in there. But storage is not the best. And then come the end of the year, when we get all those donations, we're just kind of piling things on top of each other because we don't have the storage.' (Metro 1)

Some services without space for a pantry in which consumers could 'shop' for groceries were only able to provide a pre-packaged food hamper to emergency relief consumers, thereby limiting the likely match to individual needs and preferences (including cultural and dietary).

Of equal concern was the limited capacity to interview and engage with consumers in a dignified and private manner. Smaller venues or venue layout, including lack of 'private' spaces for confidential discussion, limited the number of consumers that could be assisted by a service.

'We don't actually have an office that we can use within our building to do intake assessments. We can only have one person down at a time because we want to create that safe space for them – that private space where they can come along. We do sometimes have complex consumers so it's really important.' (Metro 3)

'The site is only doing phone assessments because of the space issue. There's a limited number of rooms to do face-to-face, so we only do it if someone walks in and they're really complex. Then the coordinator will have to jump in and have a chat with them and find a private space. But otherwise, we're doing assessments over the phone because there's limited availability.

And that's where it's tricky I think for the teams – because sometimes people are coming in, and there's others in reception, and they're just really stressed and they're anxious and they start talking about their stuff. So, it's really important to try and say to them, "Just give me a second. We'll find a room for you". Because they're not even thinking about whether everyone's listening. It's not the space to unpack about their personal stuff. So, it's challenging, because the teams have to go, "Hang on a second. I'm with you. Just give me a sec. I'm going to find a space". So that's a bit tricky as well because you want to make sure that they've got that private space.' (Metro/Regional)

Lack of space (and limited staffing) affects the number of consumers that can receive support on any one day, leading to delays of two to three days for an appointment. Staff have an added workload to triage consumers and assess levels of crisis, and 'juggle' service availability as best they can within the physical constraints of the service.

'But some people are coming in in real crisis, "I've got no food. I can't wait till Thursday". So, we really have to use our initiative to say, "Look, just hang on a second. We'll book you in, but I'll give you a little parcel with some food". It's really tricky. We were booking out two to two-and-a-half weeks ahead – so that's tricky. If we start booking consumers that far ahead, they forget about their appointments … someone that's booked three weeks ahead is not going to show – and then it's taking up a spot that someone else in crisis could have had. So, it's juggling, depending on the sites, what are the resources, what are the size of the rooms, the space. There's a lot of juggling going on.' (Metro/Regional)

Where adequate space is available, the experience for consumers is vastly different and one where their privacy and dignity can be respected.

'It supports a quality service the way we're set up because we've got a big enough venue at both sites that people have got somewhere they can come in and wait. So, there's an element of dignity in having conversations where you do go into details with someone about their experience or circumstances – there's the ability to do that privately. And then there's the ability for them to go in and shop, and then walk out and walk down the road carrying grocery bags the same as everybody else does.' (Metro 2)

Space concerns also impact the number of staff and volunteers a service can accommodate, limiting the personnel available to the service.

'The issue that we have is space. We wouldn't be able to have any more than five to six volunteers/students on any day. It would almost become a bit of an OH&S issue because we'd probably be tripping over each other. So, it's trying to navigate that.' (Metro 3)

5. Funding uncertainty

'It's a challenge because overall there isn't enough money to meet the need.' (Metro 2)

Staff identified the precarity of insufficient funding, as well as the related issue of uncertainty, where sites are unsure of whether they will receive funding and what the amount will be. This applies to government funding, as well as grants and donations from other sources. Funding uncertainty impacts planning and often leads to programs being in deficit as they continue to expend funds while waiting for outcomes of funding applications or coping with higher-than-expected costs and volume.

'As someone who's trying to run a program it's a very big challenge. Before you start, you're saying, "OK, we're gonna be heaps in deficit" – even if you put a lot of work into fundraising and grants. And then you sort of just wait to see. And if you get a grant or something like that it's kind of like a bit of a relief. So, we've just been trying to keep our head above water.' (Metro 1)

Staff across emergency relief sites are frequently forced to adjust aid distribution due to changes in funding. Frustratingly, funding can become available but may then need to be spent at short notice. Again, this impacts planning and running the service efficiently as well as creating confusion for consumers.

'We have ways to reduce cost – it's very difficult. It's definitely something that we go, "Well, we can't do that because we don't have the budget". It's quite a common answer to a lot of things. So, on the website it says that most emergency relief services provide bill and financial assistance – we've recently received word that there's a little bit of extra funding so we can do that now – but we haven't been able to do that for the last six months. We reduce costs wherever we can and then when we're told we can spend a bit more, we'll spend a bit more.' (Metro 3)

'[The biggest challenge?]. Knowing what your funding is at any one time. And it changes all the time. You don't know whether you're going to get a grant until you nearly run out of money and then all of a sudden, the government will give you money. And then you've got to spend up big – you've got all this money to spend before the end of the financial year. "Well, why didn't you tell me that months ago?" It's just very disjointed that way – I get

told "now you've got this much money you've got to spend it in two months", or you've got nothing … But you can't run a program if you don't know what's happening with the money.' (Regional 1)

The constant need for additional funding to maintain the service requires the ongoing fostering of relationships to help funders understand both the value of the emergency relief service and the value of the funders support. Staff often spend time applying for funding through grants and seeking donations. While often successful, it is a task that takes up much time and adds to administrative burden.

'We're running two emergency relief sites with no government funding. So, there's a bit of work that's involved where we have to work with a lot of philanthropic funders to make sure that we get some big grants to help go towards running the services – whether it's paying for the overheads, whether it's paying for coordinators salary, or to assist with some brokerage amount so at least we can spend some money on brokerage. Obviously, we can't always rely completely on the funders in the community giving us donations. So, there's a lot of grants and acquittals that I work on as well … Because we're not getting the government funding, we just don't have brokerage to pay for all these vouchers and things like that.' (Metro/Regional)

'I'm part of a food assistance network, which I attend all the meetings [for] on a quarterly basis. So that's adding to the relationship building – because we have representatives in food relief across the region, including all those big philanthropic funders. So that's allowing one way of continuing those relationships. But there's also a bit of work in the background to keep the relationships going – I have to attend grant acquittal sessions that might be a couple of times a year – not just phone conversations – it's actually in person.

A couple of years ago I started inviting funders to come out on the ground and meet the coordinators so that they are building relationships with them as well. And they're actually seeing all the work they're doing and how it is actually run. It's a continued ongoing process of keeping those relationships. It's not like meeting them once and saying, "Great, you're our funder. Thank you very much" … It's something ongoing all year round to keep those relationships.' (Regional 1)

For staff (and consumers) there is also the anxiety as to whether a site will continue, while having to remain working despite the uncertainty.

'When it comes to finally setting budgets, we can't. We haven't even got anything signed off [from the Commonwealth] … So it's around trying to make staff feel as supported as possible when you don't always have the answers when they want them. It can be very, very tricky. I put myself into the shoes of staff under me – it's hard not knowing for periods of time which can be very, very challenging.' (Metro/Regional)

'We only get grants for 12 months – and how can we plan five years in advance if we don't know if the program's gonna exist? We might not have funding to do emergency relief ongoing. But I'm hopefully confident that we would get the same, if not more funding for the future – but we don't know.' (Metro 1)

While co-location of services is seen as valuable in terms of increasing service referrals and supports for consumers, it can come with additional costs. The allocation of costs within sites where there are shared resources is challenging and often requires having to unexpectedly incur costs that were not part of an initial budget.

'The costs are getting higher – wages are increasing, property costs are increasing and things like that. I think one of the big challenges we're having at the site is because we have multiple services from multiple divisions … and so, because of that, you'll often see costs cut in certain aspects. We got rid of security here and we've recently brought it back and so that's just another cost. And that's not something we're budgeted for – and now that's a cost that we're paying for. Now is it needed? Yeah, probably. But there might be things added that don't affect our service that we

need to add in and there might be things that we really need that won't get in because other services don't need it. So that's just a consideration with the costs as well.' (Metro 1)

6. Gaps in service provision

Emergency relief services have identified particular needs for additional support activities and, in some cases, have been able to find funding for staff to assist in assessment and referral. While such roles are valuable and offer additional support, they are reliant on funding that is not necessarily ongoing.

'Currently we have someone two days a week [as the mental health duty officer] and this potential funding will allow to have someone every day which would be huge. Their role is around that support, advocacy and referrals pathway – basically identifying people either through the café or through emergency relief that someone needs more assistance and that we need to spend more time with. Anything that's raised around homelessness or family domestic violence or something like that – that you can't do in a 15-minute appointment – then the duty worker would come in and spend more time with them … a big part of their role is networking. They attend regular meetings of different services just to make sure we've got those pathways and know exactly who to talk to about an issue. But it's one person two days a week. So how much can we do? Some days there'll be 10 people waiting to see her.' (Metro 1)

However, an emergency relief service's ability to efficiently link a consumer to longer-term support was variable and referrals were frequently met with complex intake processes and lengthy wait times at the next service point. Uniting emergency relief services were left 'filling service gaps' by providing brief interventions or short-to-medium term support that was technically beyond the scope of the emergency relief service. Sector-wide difficulties often mean that services referred to are not readily accessible or may in themselves be under-resourced and unable to provide the immediate support needed. This has implications for the consumer but also for staff who have to try to support a person knowing that the support required beyond emergency relief is often not adequate to meet demand and need. Consequences for consumers include compounding of trauma, a sense of hopelessness, shame and loss of faith in the service system.

'If we're out here on the frontline we need to feel confident that when we do a referral it's as good as the service we've provided here. I don't want to be referring out to people who let them down. They're already disadvantaged, they're already suffering, they're already going through trauma. You should try ringing these places – you can see why people give up … What I point out constantly is that getting into Orange Door or getting into services for rehab or getting into mental health services – there's a gap, there's a wait. You don't just walk in there and get it.

And we hold their hand while we're doing that. It's beyond emergency relief. It's not like they just come in, get their food and go again. We sit through their problems week after week when they're on an intensive [service level] to keep them going, to get them to the services they need to go to … If their son's not been to school for six weeks then that's not good for the son – then I'm calling schools and things like that to see if we can get the kid in a school, because there's a gap between emergency relief and the services that are out there.' (Regional 2)

'A lot of people are coming in and their issue is they don't have safe and secure, stable housing. They've tried all of the avenues – they've called the same numbers we could give them, and they've spoken to the same people we could put them in touch with. There's very little we can do when there's just not enough safe and secure housing spots available. The reality is there's not as many legitimate referrals to happen as we would like because they're either already in place, or there's a reason why the person doesn't want or can't access them.' (Metro 2)

'There's a huge wait list. So, we've been trying our best to fill the gap of those experiencing family violence. Often, they'll go into a safe house. They have immediate support in terms of their support worker who will come in, then there's a gap before they're actually linked in with another service. Often that means that the family may not have access to food or material aid, so that's where we try and step in – to fill that gap before they have been linked in with those other services.' (Metro 3)

'One of the things we recognise in emergency relief is there's a gap between referring them on and then getting them hooked into the right services. Some consumers you can give them information and they're just so overwhelmed that they don't do anything – they're stuck in that limbo.' (Metro/Regional)

One of the consequences of funding limitations is that other services are experiencing similar issues and may end up referring on to Uniting's emergency relief services. This creates a merry-go-round of service referral to try and access supports in a context where all services have reached the limits of what is available within their operational budgets.

'But government-funded agencies are actually referring a lot of people to us for assistance, claiming that their budgets have run out – that they can't do anything for them. They're basically turning off their phones at 10 o'clock in the morning and saying, "that's our capacity for the area". And the area has a large demand.' (Metro 3)

'And don't even start me on finding somewhere to live because the housing intake provider for the area don't even pick up the phone. They're also the government-funded emergency relief service – and most of our referrals come from them. They send people to us and we're not the government-funded service. Everything I'm saying here is going to go down as beyond emergency relief scope – overreach. I must hear that a million times a day. But I don't know what else to do. These people are falling through the gaps. These people don't get the help they need – and we are on the frontline. I don't know what I'm expected to do as a worker in this space other than do everything I can to help the people to get where they need to be.' (Regional 2)

Services were commonly agreed about the need for funding for a 'gap' worker given the complexity of people's needs. An additional paid staff member would increase service capacity as well as share the burden that currently falls to the sole paid staff member within each emergency relief service. One site that has managed such a role faces the precarity of securing ongoing funding to maintain the role.

'We tend to often do those cold referrals just word-of-mouth. We only have 15-minute timeslots, and if someone does present with more complex needs and needs that extra support, we would try and see if our mental health duty worker is free. And she would then spend that time with them and make a lot of those more in-depth referrals to other service providers. But there has been a number of funding challenges with that role.' (Metro 1)

'I would very much like – and I have campaigned long and hard – having a "fall-through-the-gaps" worker.' (Regional 2)

'Someone that's going through real complexity – it's the coordinator who's able to step in, have some conversations, talk about getting them referred. But that gap worker is like someone that makes sure that they're getting the support and it's happening – like holding their hand until they're locked into these programs and fully supported. Because we just don't have the resources to be that way.' (Metro/Regional)

Discussion: Stabilising and scaling relief

'There's not enough money to meet the need, and having more people come in, it's a bit disheartening when you have to start saying, "We give everyone a little bit less to make it spread out more and go round a little bit more". And you don't want to be doing that.' (Metro 2)

Emergency relief services are a critical part of the food relief 'infrastructure' in Australia (Williams et al., 2024) and were described as a foundational service by service providers. They provide the most fundamental aid for those experiencing crisis, food insecurity, financial hardship and other forms of need. Service providers report a significant increase and unmet demand for emergency relief services. Those seeking aid often present with highly complex and multiple needs. Despite acting as a 'front door' to other services, emergency relief services are frequently unable to respond to this need and find themselves in the role of providing band-aid support while consumers wait to access more specialist services. In these roles, emergency relief services are the absolute frontline or first responder to a population of Australians in dire need.

Despite this, emergency relief services receive only a small proportion of service delivery costs from government. Previous research has identified that only 27 per cent of providers were receiving Commonwealth funding, 30 per cent state Government funding, and 47 per cent local government funding (Williams et al., 2024).

The financial analysis from this current study reveals that more than 60 per cent of the costs of emergency relief services is covered through in-kind sources of aid, infrastructure and labour. This cost model has significant consequences. Without sufficient direct funding, services may or may not be able to open, be staffed, or have sufficient or appropriate food and aid to distribute. Consumers are likely to have to wait for their opportunity to access the service due to high demand, but there is no guarantee that material aid will be available to them when their turn comes. The current cost model increases service precarity undermining the service's ability to operate and to have sufficient food and aid resources to distribute.

In turn, paid and unpaid staff work in difficult conditions, doing the best they can to stretch already stretched human capital, food and material aid as far as possible. The cost model affects the workload and working conditions of staff, creating environments where they are working in complex and traumatic environments. They frequently cannot take leave due to a lack of sufficient staff to cover absences.

Critically, reliance on in-kind resources adds a substantial, perpetual workload in sourcing and mobilising these resources, while simultaneously having to accept the vagaries of levels and types of goods and labour available. Such inefficiencies are consistent with previous research about the consequences of the 'non-profit starvation cycle' (Bridgespan cited in Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact, 2022).

Despite this precarity, Uniting's emergency relief services reflect elements of endorsed models of good practice from the research literature. They are heavily collaborative and place-based and take a person-centred approach to providing dignified access to food and material aid (Bogomolova et al., 2024). They seek to offer the critical first point of entry to the service system, while themselves using innovative methods to expand supports offered via elements of service integration and connection beyond emergency relief (Sharma & Middlebrook, 2023; Bogomolova et al., 2024; Hall & Partners, 2023).

From a cost perspective, this is a highly efficient program – it has managed to mobilise more than 60 per cent of the cost-of-service delivery and material aid provision from in-kind sources. This has the added environmental benefit of contributing to food reclamation and reduction of waste. However, this results in a highly unstable delivery model with significant limitations on scale.

This research has identified a set of common factors that affect the stability of the service

and its ability to provide consistent relief for people in need. To increase the stability, reach and efficiency of emergency relief services, there is a need for a change in investment design. Similar calls for changes in investment design of social services have resulted from economic analysis by other researchers (Gilchrist & Perks, 2025) who have called for comprehensive changes in allocation, contracting and indexing of funding based on 'empirical evidence of cost and Service Mix requirements' and encompassing 'appropriate infrastructure, capital investment and ongoing funding.' (p.5).

While appreciating that emergency relief services are reliant on – and benefit from – in-kind resources, there is a need for a new investment model based on a modest increase in additional funding that would increase the stability, efficiency and reach of services. Two key investment changes would address two key elements of emergency relief precarity:

1. Shift to higher ratios of paid to unpaid actual staff – this would stabilise service delivery and reduce occupational risk. In addition, in the context of filling the short term 'gap' between crisis emergency relief and access to specialist services, higher ratios of paid staff are able to provide limited term intensive support, alongside expert triage and connection to identified services.
2. Targeted, one-off capital investment in appropriate infrastructure including:
   - food and goods storage facilities
   - service delivery space (including space to manage multiple consumers simultaneously)
   - food preservation facilities such as kitchen space to cook and repackage food.

Ensuring this investment is built into each emergency relief service would increase the impact of services, resulting in an increase to consumer throughput and the per consumer value of material aid.

The following expands on these recommendations by outlining three key ingredients in the current investment design that are insufficient and make services highly precarious.

1. Financial capital
2. Human capital
3. Physical infrastructure.

These are necessary to make the complex system of voluntary aid, reclaimed food and donated goods function reliably so that services remain open and can maximise their capacity to meet demand.

1. Financial capital

With the 'true cost' of emergency relief services being constructed of 61 per cent in-kind contribution in the form of labour and material goods, the financial underpinning of emergency relief services is highly precarious. In-kind resources are unstable and frequently altered or withdrawn altogether with drastic effects on both food supply and availability of services. Simply put, if in-kind resources are not provided, emergency relief services cease to operate.

Using a different lens, emergency relief services have been remarkably effective at mobilising and maximising in-kind capital. From a government funding perspective, the contribution of Commonwealth funding affords some stabilising and cementing effect to this high level of volunteered or donated resource. Government and other funding enables the provision of a small level of both paid direct service staff as well as 'backbone' personnel to mobilise and coordinate the in-kind resource base, alongside the ability to supplement food supplies with purchased goods when in-kind supply is inadequate.

However, the level of cash contribution is drastically inadequate. While some other funding is provided from diverse sources, the Commonwealth Government Emergency Relief services grant contributes just 26 per cent of the true cost of delivering services. In this context, rationing of services, including food provision, occurs so that both the amount of aid provided to individuals and families, and the number of people who receive it are heavily limited.

The evidence suggests that emergency relief services have been as effective as possible in accessing in-kind resources (human and material), and that this cannot be further expanded without an increased level of cash investment. Maintaining current levels of reach and service is at significant risk where reliance is so heavy on in-kind provision. Increased direct cash investment in paid staffing and

infrastructure will in turn unlock service reach and impact. Both are dealt with below.

2. Human capital

Human capital is critical to the provision of emergency relief and the types of outcomes it can achieve. In this study, emergency relief services repeatedly highlighted the importance of empathetic and skilled staff in consumer-facing roles. This is clearly not a transactional 'moment' of aid provision, but a skilled assessment of need, identification of targeted service and support options, and an often repeated or extended provision of personalised support in the context of ongoing or repeated crisis and absence of access to other services. The complexity of need requires staff with well-developed skills and emotional competency such as those with backgrounds (or future careers) in teaching, healthcare and social work. Insufficient staffing leads to longer wait times for consumers on-site, which can lead to heightened emotions among already stressed or anxious consumers, and further complexities for the limited personnel available.

Beyond consumer-facing roles, personnel are needed to support the transportation, storage and packaging of goods; undertake administrative roles; recruit, train and support volunteers and students; access, manage and acquit multiple funding sources; and build and maintain diverse networks and relationships in order to mobilise the high levels of volunteers and material aid needed. Emergency relief services rely on extensive networks and relationships (i.e. social capital) to locate and access in-kind resources. In this context, human capital yields the necessary social capital required to unlock the very high levels of unpaid labour and in-kind aid needed for service operation.

Despite the importance of human capital, overwhelmingly, emergency relief services are highly reliant on unpaid staff with more than 60 per cent of staff costs[5] being provided in-kind. Despite the success in recruiting substantial numbers of volunteers, this kind of reliance puts service operation in jeopardy given services cannot open without them. Not only is this in-kind resource input inherently insecure, but there are also key risks of current volunteer personnel withdrawing their labour due to high levels of stress and emotional trauma from the type of work required, and a diminishing pool of volunteers from which to replenish personnel loss. Lack of an adequate ratio of paid to volunteer personnel also directly affects the wellbeing of paid staff who are unable to utilise their entitlements for leave in a context where this requires temporary service closure or an unsustainable burden for remaining volunteers.

The high reliance on unpaid labour, in turn, creates an ongoing and additional workload for emergency relief personnel. This includes the workload of recruiting and onboarding volunteers, with the attendant tasks of managing recruitment activities, police checks, interviewing, and providing induction and training. The workload is heightened when relying on a revolving workforce of short-term volunteers such as students. In the context of scarce resources, this is an inefficient use of human capital.

The study highlights that somewhat higher ratios of paid to volunteer staffing was associated with increased consumer throughput, lower labour costs per consumer visit and increased value of material aid provided. A range of paid staffing models might be utilised through increased investment in staffing:

- Increased paid staffing on-site in each emergency relief service
- Paid locum staff to replace paid staff on leave or absent for training etc.
- Increased paid staffing support off-site or in 'backbone' functions directly supporting the emergency relief service such as recruitment, onboarding and training of volunteers and students; grant acquisition, management, acquittal and relationships; administrative support; staff and volunteer debriefing and support; coordination of donated food and material aid access and delivery
- Paid staffing for 'gap' roles to provide intensive and gap support until consumers can access the next service point.

It is important to note that this is not advocating the 'full' funding of staffing for

[5] Median calculation across eight sites.

emergency relief services, but a slight increase in paid to volunteer staffing ratios.

3. Physical infrastructure

Emergency relief services are heavily focused on providing material aid with a particular emphasis on direct access to food. Not only does a direct aid approach have benefits for consumers in the form of immediate access to material goods, alongside triage and support, but also has benefits more broadly in terms of providing outlets for food reclamation and re-use. In this context, physical infrastructure is a necessary requirement to underpin this service model.

The amount and nature of material aid provided through emergency relief services is influenced by a range of factors, however, both the financial and qualitative data aligned to suggest that infrastructure - particularly the nature and size of physical space along with food storage equipment - emerged as a determinant of service provision and impact.

Sites with access to large storage space and equipped with advanced storage facilities, such as a walk-in coolroom and freezers, can take delivery of and store large amounts of material goods, enabling the stockpiling of food and other goods. Large storage capacity also mitigates the precarity associated with the unreliability of food supply as well as increasing capacity to offer diverse food options to meet cultural and dietary needs. Conversely, inadequate storage capacity results in relinquished opportunities for food and aid acquisition. Where storage capacity is high, consumers appear to receive a higher value (and amount) of material aid, including food, while sites with limited storage capacity offer less material assistance per consumer, sometimes running out of food to provide to consumers. The capacity to both stockpile food and undertake meal provision reduces the need to supplement food supplies with commercially purchased items, and means the service is more likely to have sufficient food to distribute.

The appropriateness and design of the physical building space used for emergency relief service delivery is also an important factor in service scale. Space to interview and support consumers impacts the level of consumer throughput and influences the cost-of-service delivery per consumer visit. Increasing the capacity to interview or provide aid to more than one consumer at a time lowers consumer costs which, coupled with increased storage space, results in lower costs of assistance.

Investment in infrastructure is therefore investment in efficiency and scale. Without it, there is an inevitable handbrake on the quantum of service delivery possible. In many cases, such investment will be one-off or cyclical (i.e. for replacement of equipment at points in time), rather than ongoing.

Investment is needed in:

- Physical facilities such as storage space (such as transportables or storage facilities) and office space for private service-delivery work. This might also include delivery areas and equipment for larger scale deliveries
- Refrigeration and freezer equipment
- Stock management equipment including shelving
- Kitchen facilities enabling personnel to turn food reclamation into full meals that can be immediately available or packaged.

Activating an enhanced investment design

An increase in the proportion of cash investment is clearly necessary in order to create a stable 'essential' service offering in order to adequately meet community need. This will require investment from multiple sources. However, it is not efficient, or fair in the context of extreme workload and under-funding, for each emergency relief service to respond to this need created by poor investment design to date. Nor is this viable in the context of multiple funding sources across jurisdictions and organisations.

Rather, the emergency relief services sector needs targeted, strategic and coordinated attention from governments (at all levels) and philanthropy. This requires a centralised role to design and drive coordinated and adequate investment to Australia's emergency relief system within a new logic of investment design. This logic needs to be focused on how to leverage and maximise the substantial in-kind investment in the sector through the use of targeted cash investment to drive increased

reach, stability and effectiveness of emergency relief services.

Importantly, attending to improved investment design has benefits, both for target beneficiaries but also for Australian governments, as it prevents costs being transferred to more expensive parts of the service delivery system (Gilchrist & Perks, 2025).

Overall, this logic of change echoes and adds detail to the vision for substantial reform to funding articulated in the *Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint* (Blueprint Expert Reference Group, 2024).

Conclusion

The level of food insecurity in Australia and financial hardship warrants a close examination of emergency relief service investment and its impact. Our findings mirror previous work highlighting the value of emergency relief services while revealing the significant precarity of service provision, especially with growing numbers of people utilising the services, increased complexity of need and an extremely high level of service reliance on in-kind sources – both material and labour.

Emergency relief is, therefore, a critical service area with substantial impact on the health and safety of individuals, families and children, but is one where the points of access to help are precarious. This research highlights the need for a different model of investment in emergency relief services to complement the substantial in-kind resources that the Australian community contributes to it. This would ensure a more stable and efficient service offering to address the needs of citizens undergoing immediate crisis, ensuring adequate support at critical times in their lives. Overall, these findings highlight a way to change service investment to better meet this demand.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, ABS Website, accessed 22 August 2025.

Bazerghi, C., McKay, F. H., & Dunn, M. (2016). The role of food banks in addressing food insecurity: a systematic review. *Journal of Community Health*, *41*(4), 732-740. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-015-0147-5

Belton, S., Jamieson, M., & Lawlis, T. (2020). Despite challenges food relief is a conduit to developing relationships, trust and enabling client food security and specialized support: A case study. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, *15*(3), 311-326. https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2019.1578319

Blueprint Expert Reference Group. (2024). *Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint*. https://www.dss.gov.au/system/files/documents/2024-11/d24-1528640-not-profit-sector-development-blueprint-web-accessible.pdf

Bogomolova, S., Pettman, T., Hutchinson, C., Buckley, J., Coveney, J., Williams, C., Pattinson, G., Golding, E., Christophers, S., Fleetwood, A., Chapman, J., Gillespie, J., Horne, S., Schranz, N., Faghidno, S., Eyers-White, D., & Goodwin-Smith, I. (2024). *Food Relief Good Practice Guide*. Centre for Social Impact, Flinders University, Adelaide. https://researchnow-admin.flinders.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/144088927/Published_version.pdf

Botha, F., & Payne, A. (2022). *High rates of food insecurity, but few Australians getting help – Taking the Pulse of the Nation*. Melbourne Institute.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, *21*(1), 37-47. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360

Campain, R., Wilson, E., Brown, C. & Kelly, J. (2023). *Emergency Relief Services: Barwon Region Consumer Benefits (Outcomes) Report*, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, Australia.

Department of Social Services, (2023). *Review of Financial Wellbeing and Capability programs: Consultation Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia. https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/review-financial-wellbeing-and-capability-programs-consultation-paper.pdf

Dubois, A., & Gadde, L. E. (2002). Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, *55*(7), 553-560. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(00)00195-8

Frederick, J., & Goddard, C. (2008). Sweet and sour charity: Experiences of receiving emergency relief in Australia. *Australian Social Work*, *61*(3), 269-284. https://doi.org/10.1080/03124070802229763

Gilchrist, D., & Perks, B. (2025). *Real Costs, Real Impact: A Path to Social Services Sustainability. A report developed by the Centre for Public Value.* UWA Business School, for Catholic Social Services (Australia) Ltd, Canberra, Australia.

Give Where You Live (GWYL) Foundation and Feed Geelong (2023). *Food for thought. Research Report 2023. Exploring the demand and challenges facing the food relief sector in the G21 region.* https://www.givewhereyoulive.com.au/wp-content/uploads/files/GWYL23_FOODFORTHOUGHT_REASERCHDOC_DIGI.pdf

Hall & Partners (2023). *Emergency Relief in Australia: A review of the Commonwealth Funded Emergency Relief program*. Department of Social Services.

Ipsos Public Affairs. (2024). *Foodbank Hunger Report 2024*. Foodbank Australia. https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024_Foodbank_Hunger_Report_IPSOS-Report.pdf

Kleve, S., Greenslade, D., Farrington, M., Funston, S., David, B. S., Xi, J., Swiney, C., Clarke, E., Pollard, C. M., & Booth, S. (2023). Perspectives of food insecurity and service delivery amongst emergency food relief clients in a regional city in Victoria, Australia. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, *2023*(1). https://doi.org/10.1155/2023/8711041

McKay, F. H., Bastian, A., & Lindberg, R. (2021). Exploring the response of the Victorian emergency and community food sector to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, *16*(4), 447-461. https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2021.1900974

McKenna, P. (2025). The Complementarity of Programme Logic and Critical Systems Heuristics: Critical Systems Practice for the Evaluation of Emergency Relief in Australia. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, *42*(1), 111-122. https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.3114

Sharma, N., & Middlebrook, N. (2023). *Keeping up with the best: A review of emergency relief delivery practices in Australia*, Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2023-23. Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.

Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact. (2022). *Paying what it takes: funding indirect cost to create long-term impact*. Social Ventures Australia. https://assets.csi.edu.au/assets/research/Paying-What-it-Takes-Report.pdf

Turner, B. (2019). Playing with food waste: Experimenting with ethical entanglements in the Anthropocene. *Policy Futures in Education*, *17*(7), 770-784. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210318776851

Uniting Vic.Tas (2019). *Emergency Relief Review Report* (internal document).

Uniting Vic.Tas (2024). *Uniting emergency relief programs. Results from ER mapping survey 2024* (internal document).

Volunteering Australia. (2023). *Ongoing trends in volunteering in Australia. National Strategy for Volunteering Factsheet: Data from 2023.* https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Ongoing-trends-in-volunteering-in-Australia-November-2023.pdf

Williams, M. J., Pilkington, A., & Parker, C. (2024). Food relief providers as care infrastructures: Sydney during the pandemic. *Geographical Research*, *62*(2), 263-278. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12633

Appendix

Method for calculating 'true cost' of emergency relief services

A detailed method for identifying and calculating the costs of delivering emergency relief services was applied to this research as described below. It included three main phases:

1. Discussions with key staff
2. Quantitative financial data collection
3. Application of financial data assumptions and analysis.

Each is described below.

Discussions

To understand the cost dynamics of emergency relief service delivery, semi-structured discussions were conducted with identified staff. This included:

- Two with Uniting Vic.Tas head office staff from the Finance team
- One with staff from the Fundraising team
- One with staff from each of the eight emergency relief sites.

Discussions with emergency relief service staff

These discussions focused on the operational structure and activities, including but not limited to:

- Emergency relief service delivery model
- Paid staffing and volunteer structures
- Infrastructure utilised
- Sources of donated goods.

Discussions with Finance staff

The first Finance discussion focused on gathering an understanding of the following:

- The internal finance reporting structure, systems and data sources for emergency relief
- The availability of financial reporting and FY2025 forecasts for emergency relief service funding and incurred costs for each site
- The current emergency relief service funding model
- The key components of emergency relief service costs and how these are reported within Uniting Vic.Tas's current internal finance reports
- The internal overhead allocation process and impact on the selected emergency relief sites
- An overview of previously completed internal emergency relief costing analysis
- Establishing appropriate sources for quantitative data such as staffing details, emergency relief consumer volumes and consumer emergency relief session numbers.

A further discussion was conducted with a Finance staff member, focused on acquiring a more in-depth understanding of Uniting Vic.Tas's internal overheads allocation process, including:

- The specific departments or costs that are included and excluded in the overhead allocation process
- The total FY2025 forecast value of the costs included in the overhead allocation process

- The overhead allocation methodology.

Discussion with Fundraising staff

One discussion with staff from the Fundraising team was also conducted to:

- Establish the role of the fundraising team in providing fundraising support to the emergency relief service overall and any specific support provided to the sites included in the study
- Estimate a cost associated with the support provided and determine an appropriate allocation basis for this cost to the emergency relief sites
- Understand the specific process by Fundraising in estimating and recording the value of donated material goods.

Quantitative financial data collection

Quantitative data on staffing, incurred costs, in-kind contributions and consumer volumes were also collected and analysed to triangulate findings.

Key sources of quantitative data included:

- Financial reports from the organisation's finance general ledger system were used to source Financial Year 2025 forecast incurred costs and funding
- The organisation utilises a third-party case management system called Customer Data Solutions (CDS) to record emergency relief consumer and case data. This includes personal information and a history of interactions the consumer has with the emergency relief service. CDS allows emergency relief staff to open cases for new consumers, record each instance of emergency relief session attendance, document case notes and referrals, and close cases. CDS records information of assistance provided including assistance date, assistance type, value, voucher codes for any vouchers issued, funding source and any notes related to the assistance. CDS was used to source annual emergency relief consumer numbers and emergency relief consumer session data for seven of the eight sites, where:
  - » Annual consumer number is defined by the total number of individual consumers who accessed the emergency relief service during the period from 8 April 2024 to 7 April 2025
  - » Annual consumer session number is defined as those emergency relief records raised in CDS during the period from 8 April 2024 to 7 April 2025, which also have assistance recorded
  - » For one site not using CDS, emergency relief consumer and session data came from the Department of Social Service's Data Exchange (DEX), the system that allows organisations funded by DSS to report consumer, case, and session data related to their funding.

Financial data assumptions and analysis

Incurred and In-kind Cost Definitions

The true cost of emergency relief services across the eight sites was based on a calculation of incurred costs and in-kind costs at each site, where:

- Incurred costs represent the cost of goods and services purchased that are recorded in the site profit and loss per Uniting's internal financial reporting
- In-kind costs represent an estimated value for goods and services that were donated or provided in-kind, with no value recorded in the site's profit and loss.

Total Cost of Material Aid

Material aid forms a significant part of the emergency relief service and is comprised of both purchased and donated items. Estimating the cost of material aid is critical to calculating the total cost of delivering emergency relief.

- For seven of the eight sites, the value of material goods was aligned to the value of emergency relief assistance provided that is captured within Uniting Vic.Tas's case management system (CDS) for each emergency relief service session.
- The valuation of assistance provided is a decentralised process, with each site allocating a value for the material items provided at each emergency relief session. A significant proportion of the valuation is based on standard food parcels which vary in size and are periodically costed by the site emergency relief team based on market rates for the food parcel contents.
- For one site that does not utilise CDS, the value of assistance provided was calculated using the incurred cost of material goods purchased, per the FY2025 forecast cost from internal financial reporting, plus the value of donated goods per Uniting Vic.Tas's internal process to value donated goods. The donated goods valuation process is a centralised internal process whereby each site provides a detailed list of donated items received each month to Uniting Vic.Tas's Fundraising team. This team then estimates and records the value of the donated goods, based on current market values largely acquired via an internet search.

Value of volunteer time

The number of volunteer hours for each site was established through the site interview. Volunteer time was characterised into two categories:

1. Consumer facing activities, mainly consumer interviews and assessments
2. Support activities, such as stocking pantries, packing food parcels and driving.

The two volunteer categories were costed using hourly rates. Slightly different hourly rates were used to reflect the different experience or skills required, and ensuring close alignment with Uniting Vic.Tas's internal pay structure.

The volunteer consumer-facing activities were costed using an Australian Accounting Standard compliant volunteer replacement cost calculator. The hourly rate was adjusted to reflect a salary on-cost rate aligned to Uniting Vic.Tas's budgeted on-cost rate.

The volunteer support activities were costed using Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award, at level 2, pay point 1 plus on-costs.

Value of in-kind infrastructure

Emergency relief infrastructure includes buildings, vehicles and food storage equipment such as coolrooms, fridges and freezers.

Infrastructure costs include rent, occupancy costs such as rates, utilities, cleaning etc., vehicle related costs and depreciation.

For sites where there was known in-kind infrastructure, a commercial value for the use of the infrastructure was calculated. These included:

- one site that benefitted from a peppercorn lease arrangement.
- one site that utilised staff and volunteer vehicles for the collection and movement of goods.
- one regional site that received significant in-kind value related to the free delivery of goods from Melbourne.

In addition, the incurred infrastructure costs for each site were assessed against expected costs based on building size and location, known equipment and vehicle use. Where these costs were

deemed to be below market rates, an in-kind contribution was calculated to align the cost to expected market rates. This mainly manifested in low building rent costs for four sites, where the internal rent allocation for the emergency relief service's use of shared building space was deemed insufficient for the space occupied.

Overheads

Overhead costs comprise of three distinct components:

- An internal charge for divisional and regional staff, and administration costs relating to the management and oversight of programs. This cost was sourced directly from each ER site's internal financial reporting.
- A small allocation of fundraising support provided specifically to raise donations, both monetary and material aid, for emergency relief. The cost was based on the cost of support as estimated by the Uniting Fundraising team and allocated to each ER site based on their share of annual ER consumer volumes.
- A corporate overhead rate of 15.5 per cent, to represent emergency relief service's share of the ongoing costs of running the organisation. This rate was calculated as a flat percentage, based on Uniting's cost of shared central functions as a percentage of its total costs. This approach was chosen over two alternatives: 1) cost of shared central functions per full-time equivalent; and 2) cost of shared functions per headcount. It was chosen because it represented the mid-point rate of the three options and the simplest method to apply.

The divisional and regional management overhead, and the fundraising overhead were captured within incurred costs, while the corporate overhead was applied to both incurred and in-kind costs. By applying the corporate overhead rate to the in-kind costs, a truer representation of the cost of in-kind goods and services is achieved. This reflects support required from organisational departments and activities such as procurement, payroll, human resources etc., had the goods and services been provided in a paid, commercial situation.

Data Limitations

A key assumption in calculating the true cost of emergency relief for each site was aligning the cost of material goods and aid to the value of emergency relief assistance provided recorded in CDS. There are known limitations associated with this assumption, including:

- The value of the assistance provided is estimated by each site independently, usually by conducting an internet search for the market value of the item. The source and frequency of this valuation varies across sites, likely resulting in differences in the value applied to a common material item provided.
- The study did not verify the values applied to items by each site. However, comparisons of average values for key material items such as food parcels was undertaken and anomalies reviewed with the sites.
- Most sites stated they provide some items, particularly some fruit and vegetables, that they do not attach a value to within CDS. Therefore, these items are not included in the emergency relief assistance provided value. It was not possible in the interviews to estimate the volume or value of these items, so the study has not captured their value.
- The value of assistance provided is generally based on estimated market values, not wholesale prices that Uniting Vic.Tas may have access to if it was to purchase the in-kind items on mass.

To avoid any bias from outlier sites, medians, rather than averages, have often been used in the financial analysis. Table 2 shows the median cost per consumer visit ($) by key cost categories. Each cost component is based on the median cost across all sites divided by the median number of annual consumer visits, rather than calculating the cost component for each site and finding the median of these. This method helps avoid any potential distortion of the median total cost per

consumer visit caused by summing the individual medians of each cost component. As a result, there may be small differences when comparing medians in different tables and figures.

An overhead rate of 15.5 per cent has been applied to both incurred and in-kind costs. This may be seen as controversial as it could be argued that in-kind costs attract limited overhead related activities. However, by including overheads on in-kind costs the total costs reflect a more fair and accurate representation were in-kind goods and service required to be purchased. In this scenario, these goods and services would attract overhead activities including, but not limited to, those relating to human resource management, procurement and payroll.

For the one site where Department of Social Service's Data Exchange (DEX) reporting was used as the source of annual consumer volumes and consumer sessions, the date period of 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025 was used compared to 8 April 2024 to 7 April 2025 for the other seven sites.

It would have been beneficial to have captured specific data for the size of the building footprint used by each emergency relief site. This data would have enhanced the analysis of infrastructure and its effect on the scale and impact of emergency relief assistance at each site.

We work in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's First Peoples and as the traditional owners and custodians of this land.

We celebrate diversity and value the lived experience of people of every faith, ethnicity, age, disability, culture, language, gender identity, sex and sexual orientation. We welcome lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse and non-binary, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) people at our services. We pledge to provide inclusive and non-discriminatory services.

Learn more
unitingvictas.org.au

Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania) Limited
ABN 81 098 317 125