

**Katoomba
Food
Project:
Emergency
Food Relief
Report**

The Katoomba Food Project started in October 2005 and aimed to provide an opportunity for local residents to talk about and take action on local food security issues. Food security can be defined as “access at all times to sufficient food for an active and healthy life”.¹ (See Appendix 1 for demographic data on Katoomba).

Four services formed a resource committee to support the Katoomba Food Project: Blue Mountains Family Support Services, Katoomba Salvation Army, Katoomba St Vincent De Paul and Katoomba Uniting Church. All these services provide emergency food relief in the form of free meals, food parcels and/ or food vouchers/ cheques.

In late 2005, the Public Health Nutritionist of Blue Mountains Hospital conducted verbal interviews with these services. The interviews were conducted to: increase understanding of the extent of emergency food relief usage and elicit service perspectives on the causes and potential solutions to local food security issues. It should be noted that this report is not inclusive of all emergency food relief available in Katoomba.

The interview consisted of seven questions. In brief the interviews found:

- The demand for emergency food relief in Katoomba is relatively high.
- People who live alone, receive Centrelink benefits or have mental health problems commonly access emergency food relief services in Katoomba.
- People need to use emergency food relief in Katoomba for a variety of reasons, some common reasons include; low income, mental health problems, addictions and lack of cooking and/ or budgeting skills.
- Strategies to engage people experiencing food insecurity should be skills based.
- Services that provide emergency food relief desire mental health training.

Reference

1. Kendall A, Kennedy E. Position of the American Dietetics Association: domestic food and nutrition security. *Journal of the American dietetics Association*, 1998, 98:337- 342.

Interview questions and summarised responses.

1. What food relief does your service provide?

The services interviewed provided a range of emergency food relief services including; food parcels, free meals and vouchers or cheques for food shops. Vouchers or cheques provided can be used at; supermarkets, a butchery, a grocery shop and a fruit and vegetable shop. One service stated that they did not offer food vouchers in Katoomba because “there would be too much demand”.

Three services provided food parcels on a regular basis. Services allow people to choose the food items they want and two services operate a ‘self-select’ system. One service provided bread and food parcels upon request, mainly to homeless people.

Services provided a range of staple foods and stocked items with a long shelf life. Examples of the foods available for selection include; rice, pasta, breakfast cereal, bread, tea, coffee, canned fish, baked beans, spaghetti, soup and canned vegetables. There are some differences in the way services operate; one provided frozen meals (including vegetarian options) another provided meat occasionally and the third provided toiletries and some ‘treat’ foods, e.g. chocolate biscuits.

Free meals are provided at breakfast (on weekdays), lunch (on Tuesdays and Fridays) and a monthly dinner. Two services also provided a meal at Christmas.

One service provided food vouchers and another cheques. One service disclosed that the vouchers ranged in value from \$25- \$50, the amount issued was dependent on family size.

Two services provided Christmas Hampers, which contained items such as tinned ham, canned vegetables, cordial and sweets.

2. Approximately how many people use your service each week/ month?

One service reported that 1000 people have used their emergency food relief services in the past year. Another service recorded over 3300 visits from over 1000 people in the previous financial year. The 3300 visits included people accessing both food relief and other types of emergency relief, e.g. electricity vouchers.

Meals

Breakfast: 55 people/ week

Lunches: 15- 20 people/ week

Dinner: 15- 20 people/ week

Christmas lunch: 40- 50 people attended in 2005

Food vouchers

Use of food vouchers ranged from approximately 20- 40 people per week.

Food Parcels

The use of food parcels ranged from 80 people per month to 60 people per week. It should be noted that individuals accessing food parcels often share the food with family members, therefore the figure of 60 people per week increases to around 150 people per week.

One service purchases food for food parcels from a local supermarket. The supermarket is aware that the food purchased is being donated, however it does not provide a discount to the service.

It should be noted that use of emergency food relief services does not accurately reflect need for such services. Services are limited in what they can provide, this is discussed further within responses to question four.

3. Who is using your emergency food relief services?

One service explained that there was no 'typical client' and that some people experience food insecurity as a chronic problem whereas others experience it only once, often when life circumstances change, e.g. unexpected loss of employment.

Another service stated that most users of emergency food relief were aged between 40 and 60 years. This service explained that many users of emergency food relief were separated or divorced and that men tended to use the services more than women.

Three of the four services identified people living alone and those with mental health problems as users of emergency food relief. Two of four services specified people on Centrelink benefits, families (including families with young children) and homeless people, as users of emergency food relief. One service suggested that only one employed person accessed their emergency food relief each month. This service also stated; "The poorest people are those living alone that are on a disability support pension or Newstart Allowance".

Another service commented that it had noticed an increase in the number of working people using emergency food relief since the government introduced the goods and services tax (GST).

Self-funded retirees, people with drug and alcohol problems, those living in boarding houses, those "looking for companionship", the "socially isolated" and people "from out of the area" were also identified as users of emergency food relief.

One service was able to provide a breakdown of percentages of people using emergency relief services, including food relief:

36% Sole parents.

25% On a disability pension.

17.6% Aboriginal.

12% Unemployed.

4.2% Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD).

3.8% Elderly.

0.6% of people have "no income".

4. Is there a limit on what people can access?

There is no limit set by services on attending free meals. In regard to food vouchers or cheques, these can be accessed 3- 4 times in a year. Limitations on accessing food parcels ranged from once a month to two times a week. One service does not place a limit on accessing food parcels, however food runs out at times. Services stressed that the limits placed on accessing food relief were flexible and food relief was provided on a 'needs basis', as much as possible.

5. Why do people in Katoomba need to use emergency food relief services?

A diverse range of factors were identified by services. These are listed below:

Insufficient income from Centrelink payments.

Utility bills (particularly in winter time).

Insufficient income.

Unexpected costs.

High cost of food.

Hunger.

Mental health issues.

Addictions (gambling, alcohol and drugs).

Lack of cooking skills.

Lack of budgeting skills.

Advertising of unhealthy foods.

One service reported that, "About 90% of people attending the free meals do not eat properly, they don't have a healthy diet. People comment on how they like to eat the fruit and salad provided at the free meals"... "it is not always about food, loneliness is the basic problem".

6. What do you see as possible strategies to address these issues?

Services suggested a variety of potential strategies to address food insecurity, these have been grouped below. Services made the following observations; different strategies were needed for different people, it is sometimes more expensive to eat healthily, establishing food co-operatives requires a lot of work and that it is difficult for people to change their lifestyle and habits, especially after the age of 60 years.

Improving Budgeting/ Cooking Skills

Purchasing large boxes of cheap fruit and vegetables and dividing the cost and produce between families.

Practical things around managing money/ cooking.

Common sense budgeting.

Developing simple courses in living skills, e.g. basic cookery and basic budgeting.

High school education on budgeting as a preventative measure.

Specific Programs

One service was planning to offer the 'Back to Basics' cooking, nutrition and budgeting program.

Food Share or similar (Food Share was operating in the Blue Mountains previously, but is no longer operating in NSW. Participants purchased a box of food at a discounted rate in return for volunteer work).

An affordable café.

The strategies identified by Katoomba residents involved in the Katoomba Food Project (eg food survival guide, community transport and community soup kitchen).

Support

Co-ordinated services to adequately support people with mental health problems.

Provision of budgeting assistance services in Katoomba (some people have to travel to Parramatta to access such services).

Providing adequate support for people with addictions to cigarettes, alcohol and gambling.

Support/ friendship groups.

Supermarkets

Need more competition between supermarkets, Katoomba needs a Woolworths to create competition.

7. How can we involve people that are food insecure in these strategies?

Education was the key idea that services had for involving people experiencing food insecurity in the strategies described under question seven. Services stated that when offering programs with an educational component, peoples' existing knowledge should be respected. Functional literacy should also be considered when working with those that are food insecure. Services acknowledged that people often have many other issues that need to be addressed "before worrying about nutrition" and felt that people were "happy to eat whatever fills them up".

Ways to involve people experiencing food insecurity have been grouped below.

Voluntary Work

Getting people to help as volunteers in meal provision or in the Katoomba Food Project.

Support

Anger management and single parents support groups.

Budgeting

Get budget message across.

Education

Address literacy issues, as being unable to read and write compounds other problems.

Functional literacy is an issue.

“It would be beneficial if people were more reliant on home prepared food. If people don’t know how to use flour then they are missing out on a lot of cheap food that can be made at home”.

Education of people.

If people are going to benefit/ learn something- this is a great way to get people involved.

Knowledge of seasonal fruit and vegetables is a good way to save money.

Cooking Skills

People learning how to cook.

Cooking demonstrations.

Recommendations

- This report is made available to all services that participated in the interview process and other interested services.
- This report is used to inform future work in the area of food security in Katoomba.

Appendix 1: Katoomba Demographic Data

- Has the highest proportion of Blue Mountains families with children living off household incomes below \$399 per week (17.6%), the state average is 13.2%.³
- Has the largest Indigenous population in the Blue Mountains.³
- Unemployment 9.5% (NSW state average 5.3%).⁴
- Single parent families 24.3% (NSW state average 15%).⁵
- Non-car ownership 21.4% (NSW state average 13.5%).⁴
- Rental stress 60.9%, the highest in the Area Health Service. (Rental stress is defined as an outlay of 30% or more on rent of net household income).⁴
- A significantly higher rate of mental and behavioural disorders for 15-24 year olds than that of the state average.⁶

The demographics of the Katoomba population highlight that many people lack resources needed for overall health and food security. People on low incomes, the unemployed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and people with a mental illness have been identified as being more vulnerable to food insecurity.²

References

2. Eat Well NSW Strategic Directions for public health nutrition 2003 to 2007. NSW Health 2002.
3. Looking After People, 2004 Blue Mountains State of the Community Profile.
4. www.walkabout.com.au/locations/NSWKatoomba
5. 2001 ABS Census Data.
6. WAHS, Population Health Unit- Health and Equity Profiling.