

WA CHILDHOOD FOOD INSECURITY - Submission

'From a distance, we all have enough. And no one is in need... No hungry mouths to feed.' If we believe the lyrics from Bette Midler's song, From A Distance, there would be NO food insecurity amongst children in Western Australia.

I am an educator, who works in a catholic, primary school in a Low Socio-Economic Area. Daily, I am aware of a discrete number of students attending our school, coming from food insecure homes. I am passionate about ensuring that all our students' needs are met, so they can grow, learn, and flourish. This paper explores recommendations that need to be implemented, to ensure that Childhood Food Insecurity in WA no longer exists.

FOOD INSECURITY

In Western Australia, 17% of children suffer from severe food insecurity, going whole days without food due to lack of money. Food insecurity is the inability of people to avail themselves to nutritionally, affordable food, so they can maintain a healthy lifestyle. Experiencing food insecurity results in health, social and economic consequences.

FACTORS THAT CAUSE FOOD INSECURITY

People who suffer food insecurity, are more likely to be the disadvantaged in society. The highest predictor of those susceptible to food insecurity are people living in poverty. This demographic is more likely to be homeless, predisposed to crime, drug users, victims of trauma, have limited incomes, lower levels of education, limited access to appropriate healthcare, and reside in remote areas. Statistics show this encompasses the young, elderly, immigrants, disabled, Indigenous Australians and single mothers.

Thus, it is impossible to solve childhood food insecurity without tackling the drivers of poverty. Therefore, families, should not have to choose between putting food on the table for their children, paying household bills, or acquiring affordable housing to live in.

EFFECTS OF FOODS INSECURITY

Due to limited funds, food insecure people consume low-cost, high-energy foods, with poor nutritional value, leading to higher levels of obesity. They're more likely to purchase unhealthy food because healthy food is too expensive. Additionally, when urgent expenses arise, the most elastic component of a household budget; namely food, is sacrificed. Children from these families are more likely to have parents who are welfare dependent, and experience social, physical, and mental health problems.

SOLUTIONS TO FOOD INSECURITY

Should government policies only tackle adequate access to good quality food, without addressing the drivers of poverty; these initiatives will be fruitless. Some suggested initiatives that address food insecurity and reduce poverty are explored below

ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE NUTRITIONAL FOOD

It is important for people to have access to healthy food. With the rising costs of energy, fuel, groceries, rent, mortgages... the need to access to low cost, nutritious food is beyond the reach of too many West Australians. Low-income families and single parent household are the worst hit. Therefore, to supplement their meals, a third of these households' resort to receiving food from external services.

Unfortunately, food insecurity recipients find these aspects of food assistance disempowering. It can result in stigma, embarrassment, and negative feelings, by having to prove their eligibility for assistance. Disempowering forms of food assistance can also trap recipients into a cycle of food charity. Inadvertently, impacting the emotional wellbeing of recipients knowing that one cannot provide food for oneself. Food assist recipients desire that their experience of accessing food is humanised, returning the power back to them.

It is recommended that Food service organisations adopt models that empower recipients, not provide 'left over food for left over people'. It is the recipient's desire access to appropriate food in socially acceptable ways.

One suggested solution to food insecurity is through social supermarkets (SSMs). SSMs-outlet receives free surplus food, not left-over goods, from partner companies, and then sell them at symbolic prices to people living in poverty. SSMs not only provides affordable nutritious food for those in poverty but reduces the stigma attached to receiving low-cost food. SSMs are widespread in Europe, and a few examples can be found in the Kimberley of WA.

Another suggestion is for recipients to be given vouchers, to use at regular shops, such Coles, Woolworths... which cannot be exchanged for alcohol or cigarettes. This voucher allowance is additional to the welfare payments and is means tested. So that those living in extreme poverty can afford healthy, nutritious food.

ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Low-income earners are unable to acquire suitable accommodation. Families trying to secure social housing, live in despair where the waitlist for this type of housing is as critical as private rentals.

With the price of living rising, increased rental fees and Government support not keeping up with inflation, it is impossible, for poverty-stricken families to afford housing costs as well as their weekly bills and food. For families to gain access to secure affordable housing, the WA and Federal Government must implement, innovative schemes, with the goal, where low-income earners are not locked into the rental market.

An innovative solution is duplicating Singapore's Housing Ownership Scheme. One third of Western Australian's own their dwellings outright. In stark contrast eighty percent Singaporeans own their homes. Singapore has one of the highest rates of home ownership in the world. Low-income earners live in heavily subsidised, modest, high-rise, apartments. These housing estates do not reflect low-income, urban ghettos. These basic, apartments are built and well-maintained by the government.

A scheme like this would be life changing for poverty stricken West Australians, making home ownership within their reach. These community housing estates would be linked to an extensive network of public transport so that residents can quickly move around the city at reduced or no cost. Additionally, within these estates, the government could provide free electricity to low-income earners. Duplicating the energy scheme of Turkmenistan, where it is free. Due to Western Australia's sunny climate, availability to solar energy is huge. Initiatives such as community solar batteries, coupled with community solar farms, would result in these residents receiving free power.

Each community housing estates would also be equipped with a community service hub. Each hub would provide access to high quality health and social services at no cost to the residents. Inclusive, with high quality medical practitioners, psychologists, social workers, financial planners, and job support workers. With an emphasis on reducing the effects of clients influenced by trauma, domestic violence, drug dependency, alcoholism, gambling ...

CONCLUSION

The impetus for changes in policy and practice for food insecure children and their families is clear. Food insecurity leads to poor physical and mental health outcomes; and one's ability to equitably participate in society.

This urgent matter requires the not only the Federal, and State Government to invest in proposed solutions, but also inviting philanthropists like Twiggy Forest and Gina Rinehart to co-contribute. Doing so, sends a clear signal that all children in Western Australia are important, and that the government is committed in prioritising for their children's welfare.

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