

# TOGETHER

## Feeding people, fighting food waste

### Food security in the Illawarra during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 outbreak Healthy Cities Illawarra (HCI) and Food Fairness Illawarra (FFI) brought together local food relief stakeholders to enable a coordinated response to the significant increased demand for food relief within an already overwhelmed food relief system.

This collaborative response was underpinned by the six conditions for effective intersectoral action, which is defined as a recognised relationship between part of the health sector and parts of other sectors, that has been formed to act on an issue in a way that is more effective, efficient, and sustainable than could be achieved by one of the sectors working alone (Harris et al., 1995). The proposed conditions for successful intersectoral action are: necessity, opportunity, capacity, relationships, planned outcomes and sustained outcomes. This case study will detail how each of these conditions were employed in combating food insecurity in the Illawarra during COVID-19, where our capacity to lead and respond to this community crisis was enhanced thanks to the NSW Government Waste Less Recycle More initiative funded by the waste levy.

## Intersectoral action

### Necessity

An ongoing worldwide pandemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus has been caused by a coronavirus virus known as COVID-19. The rapid rate at which the pandemic hit Australia resulted in a major swell of panic-buying in March 2020, which overwhelmed normal business functions, and consequently impeded peoples' ability to access food. Besides leaving the supermarket shelves empty, this also significantly impacted the volume of donated food from supermarkets to food rescue organisations. Meanwhile loss and/or reduction in income and increased isolation were just some of the factors affecting, not only traditionally vulnerable (food insecure) populations, but also those who had found themselves in this position for the first time, finding it new and unfamiliar.

## Case study - COVID-19

The initial outbreak of COVID-19 in our community brought many challenges about how we could continue to service the local area as well as respond to the increased demand for food relief. It was particularly challenging to determine exact solutions in a very unfamiliar working environment constrained by restrictions like social distancing, closure of “non-essential” services and lock down. A “Food security in the Illawarra during COVID” teleconference was initiated in early April 2020, to gain an overview of the food relief/rescue situation, identify areas most in need and ensure clear pathways were available for the community to access food during the outbreak. The teleconference created a space for different stakeholders who recognised a need for collaboration to respond effectively to the crisis.

### Opportunity for action

Opportunity for action is achieved by two components: an environment in which the need for action arises (COVID-19); and triggers for action (teleconference). A total of 26 stakeholders came together, made up of representative from the three local councils, the Local Health District, several non-government organisations (NGOs), a food rescue organisation, and several food relief organisations.

#### Three main themes were identified:

- Lack of up-to-date information on the current food relief environment, including and understanding of which services were still operating and in what capacity.
- Traditional vulnerable (food insecure) communities were under increased stress due to existing services closing, no longer accessible or only providing limited services such as sandwiches, takeaway meals.
- Anticipated further increases in food insecurity within our community due to physical isolation or changed financial situations (including international students).

#### Three priority actions were identified:

- Establishment of a “Food Relief and Rescue” Working Group to further these actions and explore additional opportunities to increase the food relief capacity across the region.
- Creation of a “Food security in the Illawarra” email network to share current information about food rescue and relief.
- Creation of an online COVID version of the “Low Cost & Free Meals” directory, that is updated fortnightly and shared far and wide using traditional media outlets.

The outcomes reinforced the necessity for intersectoral action and acknowledged the individual actions required for effective and targeted action.



## Capacity for Action

The capacity for action is dependent on the capacity of the organisations involved and the interactions between them. The established working group provided a platform for the stakeholders to describe their available resources and develop a collaborative plan of action to increase the food relief capacity across the region.

First, to combat the lack of up-to-date information as well as the need to identify services still in operation, an online “Low Cost and Free Meals” directory was created and updated each fortnight. It conveyed the most up-to-date information and directed those in need to available local services, utilising the "Food security in the Illawarra" email network. This was made possible due to the existing networks of HCI and FFI and their increased capacity as part of the EPA Food Donations Education grant to work in this space.

Secondly, to increase the food relief capacity across the region, COVID-19 provided a unique opportunity where a shift in resources meant that OzHarvest, food rescue organisation, was able to access an additional van to increase food rescue in the Illawarra. The working group identified the potential of temporary central hubs to support OzHarvest's transition period to build their capacity to deliver additional rescued produce. Two hubs located in neighbouring communities (at Shellharbour Civic Centre and Warrawong Community Centre) were established as the changed circumstances meant these locations were closed to the public. They were supported by council employees who were redirected from their usual work due to COVID-19 restrictions. The hubs acted as central drop points, where food was sorted and then distributed to community organisations who prepared, cooked, and delivered the food directly to those in need. The central hubs meant OzHarvest was able to spend more time collecting donations. Over this period OzHarvest increased its food donors from 19 to 24, which increased food rescued from 13,078 kg in April to 19,239 kg in May 2020.

**ABC coverage on Central Food Hubs > [link](#)**

Intersectoral action was crucial to increase the information provision and establish the temporary central food hubs within a two-week time period to respond to the need for additional food relief in the region.



## Relationships for Action

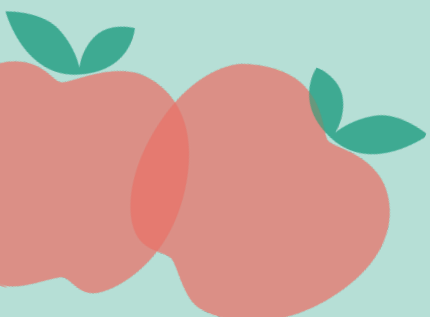
HCI and FFI have a long-standing collaborative approach towards making healthy and sustainable food affordable and accessible for the local community. This provided a trusted position to lead this crisis response and established networks to undertake the required action. The establishment of the "Food Relief and Rescue" Working Group strengthened the existing network and enabled additional relationships. The consistent communications provided via the "Food security in the Illawarra" email network and online "Low Cost & Free Meals" directory enhanced visibility within the food relief sector and simultaneously supported intersectoral connections.

**"We are in this together & proud to partner with organisations like OzHarvest, Food Fairness Illawarra and Healthy Cities, in distributing food to those in need."**

Shellharbour City Council Facebook

## Planned outcomes

The outcome of the teleconference and subsequent working group meetings was the development of a clear and targeted project plan. This was managed following the Pmbok project management principles (Project Management Institute, 2021), with clearly articulated, achievable goals and actions that reflected outcomes valued by all the stakeholders. There was dedicated commitment from stakeholders who fostered a sense of joint ownership, with those who had the resources to undertake identified actions, doing so collaboratively and within an agreed timeframe. Shared outcome measures were set for evaluation purposes. The planned actions were sustained through fortnightly meetings to foster the joint ownership and ensure smooth transition between organisations.



# Case study - COVID-19

## Sustained outcomes

To sustain the positive outcomes of our COVID-19 response post crisis, the following measures were taken:

- **Support for OzHarvest to find a location for a satellite warehouse**

Through the FFI network a suitable location was found for OzHarvest to establish their satellite warehouse. Having a permanent location and additional van in the Illawarra, enabled OzHarvest to maintain and expand their increased food rescue capacity that was achieved with the temporary food hubs.

- **Continuation of the “Food Relief and Rescue” Working Group**

The established relationships during this response will be sustained through quarterly working group meetings to share knowledge, information and learnings to ensure a coordinated response to immediate and future community needs.

- **Web-based "Low Cost & Free Meals" directory**

Fair food directory maintenance has been integrated into FFI's annual operational plan to ensure data is kept up-to-date and food relief organisations are able to update directory details themselves on the website to capture changes as they occur.

**“Because of the work of Food Fairness Illawarra and Healthy Cities Illawarra and other community groups that have all gotten together to help the Illawarra get the assistance of OzHarvest, we are able to give [our clients] much healthier meals, because we have access to much more food.”**

Donna Walsh - Lunch supervisor, Warrawong Community Lunch

## Conclusion

As well as increasing food security in the Illawarra during COVID-19, this response highlighted the critical conditions for successful intersectoral action. Established networks were able to very quickly organise a collective response to the need for urgent food relief brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating that a shared purpose, resources and expertise can provide meaningful community outcomes that are more effective, efficient, and sustainable than could be achieved by any of the stakeholders working alone.

For more information, feel free to connect with Berbel Franse (berbel@healthycities.org.au)

## References

Harris, E., Wise, M., Hawe, P., Finlay, P. and Nutbeam, D. (1995) Working together: Intersectoral action for health, Australia Department of Human Services and Health, University of Sydney, National Centre for Health Promotion, Canberra

Project Management Institute (2021) A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (Pmbok(r) Guide) - Seventh Edition and the Standard for Project Management, Project Management Institute, Philadelphia, USA

