

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL FOR THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO INCOME INEQUALITY

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From: UnitingCare Australia

How is demand for emergency relief services tracking among UnitingCare agencies?

UnitingCare agencies provide emergency relief services across the country. The nature of these services varies depending on their location, the needs in communities, and the allied services that are available.

Due to the diversity of services and different ways in which provision is given, it is impossible to provide aggregated statistics across the country. It can also be difficult to determine the relationship between the number of clients a service works with and the demand for emergency relief more broadly in a community as there are often multiple emergency relief services operating in the one jurisdiction. Nonetheless, the information sampled from our services does give some indication of the pressure many individuals and families are facing financially and where some of that financial pressure is coming from. The experience across our network is patchy. In some places demand for our services has sharply risen, while in other places it has remained stable or eased slightly.

Of the 14 agencies surveyed, 8 have seen a noticeable increase in demand for their services over the past three years; 4 have served a fairly stable number of people; 1 has had a minor decrease in demand and 1 agency has seen a sharp decrease in the number of people accessing their service.

The agencies who are seeing a growth in demand for their services are in a range of locations, with the largest increases occurring in Tasmania. Our agencies who are experiencing increased demand are responding to that increase in a range of ways. Some are having to turn away clients, some are pouring additional effort into fundraising, at least one agency has drawn from their reserves to top up the support they can deliver, and others are spreading their supports across a wider range of people—offering less to greater numbers.

The majority of services surveyed receive Commonwealth funding as well as donations and grants that allow them to run their services. The majority of agencies also use a significant number of volunteers for their emergency relief services.

The most common pressures that agencies report service users are experiencing are: rising housing costs, debt, mental health issues, addictions, utility bills and long term unemployment.

Agency Profiles

Lifeline Hunter and Central Coast, NSW

Lifeline Hunter and Central Coast is partially Commonwealth funded and provides Financial Counselling support for people in financial need. From the 2012/13 to the 2013/14 financial year the number of new clients accessing their service increased by approximately 35 percent.

Unmanageable debt, utilities bills, unemployment and bankruptcy were the main reasons cited for clients accessing their services.

Lifeline Macarthur, NSW

Lifeline Macarthur provides Financial Counselling for people in financial need and is reliant on Commonwealth funding to do so. Over the past three years the number of clients they have served has decreased substantially as they lost a staff member who provided approximately half of the financial counselling. In 2011/12 Lifeline Macarthur supported 711 people through this service and in 2013/14 they supported 242 people.

Kogarah Storehouse, NSW

Based on current projections of the number of clients visiting their service per month, Kogarah Storehouse expects to see about a 19% increase in demand for their food parcels in the 2014 calendar year (compared to 2013). The main requests for support are in relation to food and utility bills. The service is operated by 4 part time staff and 21 volunteers.

Pivot Point, NSW

Pivot Point has seen a relatively stable number of clients accessing their services over the past three years. This has fluctuated between about 1680 and 1800 people per annum. They are struggling to move people towards greater independence as they find there is a lack of other services to refer people to for affordable accommodation etc.

UnitingCare Port Macquarie, NSW

In Port Macquarie, UnitingCare emergency relief services are operated entirely by volunteers with the service funded through Commonwealth funds. UnitingCare Port Macquarie has seen a small but steady rise in the number of people accessing their service. In 2011/12 they served 2261 clients, in 2012/13 they served 2395 people in in 2013/14 they saw 2462 clients. The agency performs a thorough needs assessment of clients when they first meet with them, and the number of times they will support someone within a year is limited. They will also refer to other services if there are complicating factors that the client needs help with.

UnitingCare Port Macquarie is finding that low payment levels are a major cause of financial distress for some of the people they work with. For example, a single mother arrived with two dependent children. She was on Parenting Payment Single and Family Tax Benefits. Her primary payment, PPS was \$638 per fortnight. Her rent was \$325 per week which used all of her primary payment. The FTB payment then had to cover everything else. She sat with our staff and wept because her Dad is dying (he is in Broken Hill) and she doesn't know how to get to see him within the next week.

UnitingCare Kippax, ACT

UnitingCare Kippax provides emergency relief services that are funded through the ACT Government and topped up through other sources including donations. Kippax has had relatively stable demand over the past 3 years, with a higher demand in 2013 and 2014 levels looking similar to 2012 levels of about 2086 households requiring their assistance.

UnitingCare Wesley Country, SA

In Port Augusta, services have seen a very stable level of demand over the past couple of years. There has been an increased demand for medical support rather than food support in this service, with people needing assistance to pay for pharmaceutical costs.

Community Aid St Andrews by the Sea, SA

In 2014, Community Aid St Andrews by the Sea has seen a noticeable increase in demand with the number of clients increasing from 1358 to 1645 between 2012/13 and 2013/14.

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for social services in the Uniting Church in Australia, supporting service delivery and advocacy for children, young people, families, people with disabilities, and older people

UnitingCare Wesley Port Adelaide, SA

The number of people seeking UnitingCare Wesley Port Adelaide's emergency services over the past few years peaked in 2012/2013 with 11,538 clients. In 2013/14 it dropped back slightly, closer to 2011/12 levels with 10,465 people accessing their emergency relief. Donations make up a large proportion of the funding for UnitingCare Port Adelaide.

UnitingCare West, WA

UnitingCare West has seen significant increased demand, and they have had to turn away increasing numbers of people over the past 3 years as their services have reached capacity. In 2014 UnitingCare West has already had to turn away 3970 people seeking emergency relief services. This is a more than 50 percent increase on 2012 levels, during which they turned away 2548 people. UnitingCare West cites housing costs as one of the major challenges for their clients, along with high levels of unemployment. They also cater to a large number of migrants who may find themselves out of work but without any ability to access public funds through Centrelink.

UnitingCare Ballarat, VIC

UnitingCare Ballarat has had a small decrease in the number of people they are serving through emergency relief over the past three years. In 2011/12 they provided emergency relief to 3100 people, in 2012/13 they did the same for 2523 people and in 2013/14 the numbers have lowered again to 2465 people.

UnitingCare Tasmania, TAS

Tasmania is the place facing the sharpest increase in demand for emergency relief services. For example, in the past year, the emergency relief services in Hobart have increased by more than 50 percent, the service in Kingston has increased by approximately 11 percent and the service in Gagebrook has increased by approximately 16 percent. In Hobart, where the increased demand has been steepest, the service has had to spread the support it offers more widely so that more people receive less assistance. Workers say they are seeing a lot of clients with poor mental health, high utility bills and high housing costs that they cannot afford to cover.

Wesley Mission Brisbane, QLD

Over the past 3 years, demand for emergency relief services at Wesley Mission Brisbane has remained relatively stable. There is an expectation that during the 2014 calendar year they will see a slightly higher number of clients than in the last two, given their comparisons of similar months in other years. In 2012, Wesley Mission Brisbane provided emergency relief services to 2611 people and so far in 2014 they have delivered services to 2266 people. It is also important to recognise that the emergency relief services have changed shape in recent years. They have increased the number of loans that they provide and decreased the number of emergency relief support packages.

Lifeline Darling Downs and South West Queensland, QLD

Lifeline Darling Downs and South West Queensland is not a formal part of the UnitingCare network, however they work closely with UnitingCare services in the region. Although firm figures for the past three years have not been provided, the service reports that they are having an increase in demand with 870 new clients out of 1632 in the 2013/14 year. Demand continually outstrips their ability to meet it and there are particular populations in Toowoomba that are requiring their services regularly. For example, many migrant communities are relying on support from Lifeline Darling Downs and South West Queensland.

What reasons may there be for discrepancies between the understanding the Department of Social Services has and the experience of agencies?

It is difficult to know what the reasons are for differences between the DSS figures and the experience of some of our agencies. As explained above, experience across our agencies is patchy, with some facing significant increased demand for emergency relief services while others have had no increase in demand at all.

It may be that in particular places, need is concentrating. It may also be that individual services are feeling the pressure of other allied services closing. For example, Wesley Mission Brisbane have noted that some food vans previously funded by local and state government in the areas they work have shut down, leading to more people accessing their emergency relief services instead.

It is also possible that the data collected by DSS does not reflect the full extent of emergency relief services operating across Australia. While agencies receiving Commonwealth funds are reporting to the DSS, not all agencies are relying on Commonwealth funds, so it is possible that the work they are doing, and the demand they are seeing, is not reported at a Commonwealth level.

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