

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

# Determining the reach and capacity of rural and regional Aboriginal community food programs in Victoria

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## Dear Editor

Access to affordable, nutritious food is essential to close the life expectancy gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people<sup>1,2</sup>. However, the Victorian Population Health Survey revealed that Aboriginal Victorians are four times more likely than non-Aboriginal Victorians to experience food insecurity<sup>3</sup>.

In recognition of the critical need to improve food security for Aboriginal people in Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) partnered with SecondBite, an Australian food rescue organisation. In 2013, the two organisations initiated a cross-sectional survey of community food programs (CFPs) targeting Victorian Aboriginal people. CFPs describe any

initiative that provides free or subsidised food to vulnerable people.

The 34-item online survey was distributed to all Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) in Victoria via email. Of the 27 ACCHOs, 12 indicated that they deliver a CFP in rural and regional Victoria; Table 1 summarises survey responses from the ACCHOs.

The survey results revealed that many rural and regional programs focus not only on the provision of food, but also nutrition knowledge and skills. For example, many organisations indicated that running a CFP was an opportunity to provide new recipes, healthy eating advice and budgeting skills. Survey respondents also indicated that CFPs provide an important social forum for the community and also play a role in attracting people to other health and family services provided by the organisation.



**Table 1: Community food programs targeting Victorian Aboriginal people – Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation survey responses**

ACCHO community food program details	Number
Location <sup>†</sup>	
Urban	2
Rural/regional	12
Type of program (rural/regional areas only) <sup>‡</sup>	
Community kitchen/cooking class	6
Food parcels	5
Food vouchers	6
Food bank	3
Hot meals	1
Garden	4
Fruit bowl	4
School breakfast/lunch	1
Snack program	1
Budget/shopping classes	3
Other	4
Recipients per week (rural/regional areas only)	
0–30	8
31–60	1
61–101	2
Not answered	1

<sup>†</sup> One organisation had both metropolitan and rural/regional reach.

<sup>‡</sup> Some organisations run more than one type of program.

ACCHO, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

Of note, eight rural/regional ACCHOs (67%) indicated they had a policy regarding the types of food that should and should not be provided to their community. This 'upstream' approach may have been influenced by the statewide nutrition policy training and support provided by VACCHO's nutrition team<sup>4</sup>.

These survey results may not provide a complete picture of Aboriginal CFPs run by ACCHOs in Victoria or represent all Aboriginal CFPs; however, they provide a useful snapshot of how some rural and regional ACCHOs are responding to the food and nutrition needs of their local Aboriginal communities. Such programs are deemed essential services by many Victorian ACCHOs and are often implemented without specific funding<sup>5</sup>.

Food insecurity is a complex issue which affects many Aboriginal people living in Victoria. The survey results suggest that CFPs are a central component of many rural and

regional Victorian ACCHOs. The strategic partnership between VACCHO and SecondBite provided an opportunity to identify and guide future work to support food security initiatives. Rigorous evaluation and capacity-building strategies are now required to support the staff and volunteers providing these essential programs for Aboriginal people throughout rural and regional Victoria.

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