

Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre

Supporting Innovative Research and Evaluation



FOOD SECURITY & WELLBEING PROGRAM PROJECT EVALUATION 2022 - 2023 SUMMARY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre (CERC) Federation University Gippsland, acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners and custodians of the land, sea and nations and pay our respect to elders, past, present and emerging. The CERC further acknowledges our commitment to working respectfully to honour their ongoing cultural and spiritual connections to this country.

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SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF FOOD SECURITY & WELLBEING PROGRAM PROJECT EVALUATION 2022 – 2023

This report presents a summary of the evaluation of the Food Security & Wellbeing Program evaluation which aimed to understand the establishment a whole of person food security, health and wellbeing program at Morwell Neighbourhood House (MNH). Findings from this evaluation may assist in understanding the impact of an organisation led food security and wellbeing program, such as that being implemented by the MNH, which are facilitating the provision of nutritious meals, providing a safe space and sense of community within the organisation and assisting in the development of cooking skills in the My People's Kitchen.

INTRODUCTION

Although the country is transitioning out of COVID-19 lockdowns and easing restrictions, Australians are now facing increased costs of living. Global political unrest, interest rate rises, and inflation have seen prices of fuel, food and household bills surge, increasing the strain on individuals and families. Fruit and vegetables have seen cost increases by almost 7% from last year, with this figure only estimated to rise. During the same period however, takeaway food prices increased marginally by 0.7%, potentially due to government subsidy and voucher systems introduced post COVID-19 lockdowns. The strain of food prices is felt even more greatly by those living in regional, rural and remote Australia, with prices increasing due to freight costs.

The MNH Food Bank provides emergency relief without requiring an appointment and is unrestricted by postcode or healthcare card status. The Food Bank is supported by St Vinnies Morwell, which provides \$12,000 annually towards the cost of food, and by numerous community organisations, individuals and businesses. Demand for the Food Bank has increased steadily particularly so during the COVID-19 pandemic. The immediate precursor to the People's Kitchen was a 2019 project named Cooking for a Purpose. That involved GippsTAFE VCAL students preparing nutritious frozen meals using ingredients provided by MNH. The availability of frozen home-cooked meals has ensured that Food Bank clients have at least one nutritious hot meal per day.

The CERC was commissioned to explore the activities of the MNH, gaining an insight into how the whole of person approach to food security was being implemented. This understanding was gained through the perspective of those who were paid employees, Volunteers or those who accessed the MNH services, outlining the benefits, barriers and future suggestions for the MNH operations when addressing food security in the Latrobe Valley.

Data were collected between 2022 - 2023 using a mixed methods approach to understand the impact of the MNH services on participants. In addition to this, a comprehensive literature review was performed to understand the global landscape of food insecurity, exploring how people access Food Banks, the opportunities that arise from engaging with food security service activities and the perspectives of employees who ran these services.

Morwell Neighbourhood House



65 Church Street Morwell

8-50 Beattie Crescent Morwell



The People's Kitchen



A Kinder Cup



Volunteers



Cooking



Frozen Meals



Food Bank



Free Morwell Store



Shower Facilities



Repair Cafe



Portable Tag and Test



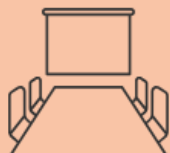
Lawn Mower Bank



Social Activities



Free Hair Cuts



Conference Room for Hire



Recharge Point



Community Garden



Shared Kitchen



Internet Access

Figure 1: Morwell Neighbourhood House Service Map

DATA COLLECTION

The evaluation of the project utilised a variety of data collection tools in a mixed methods approach which provided information about process, outcomes and impact.

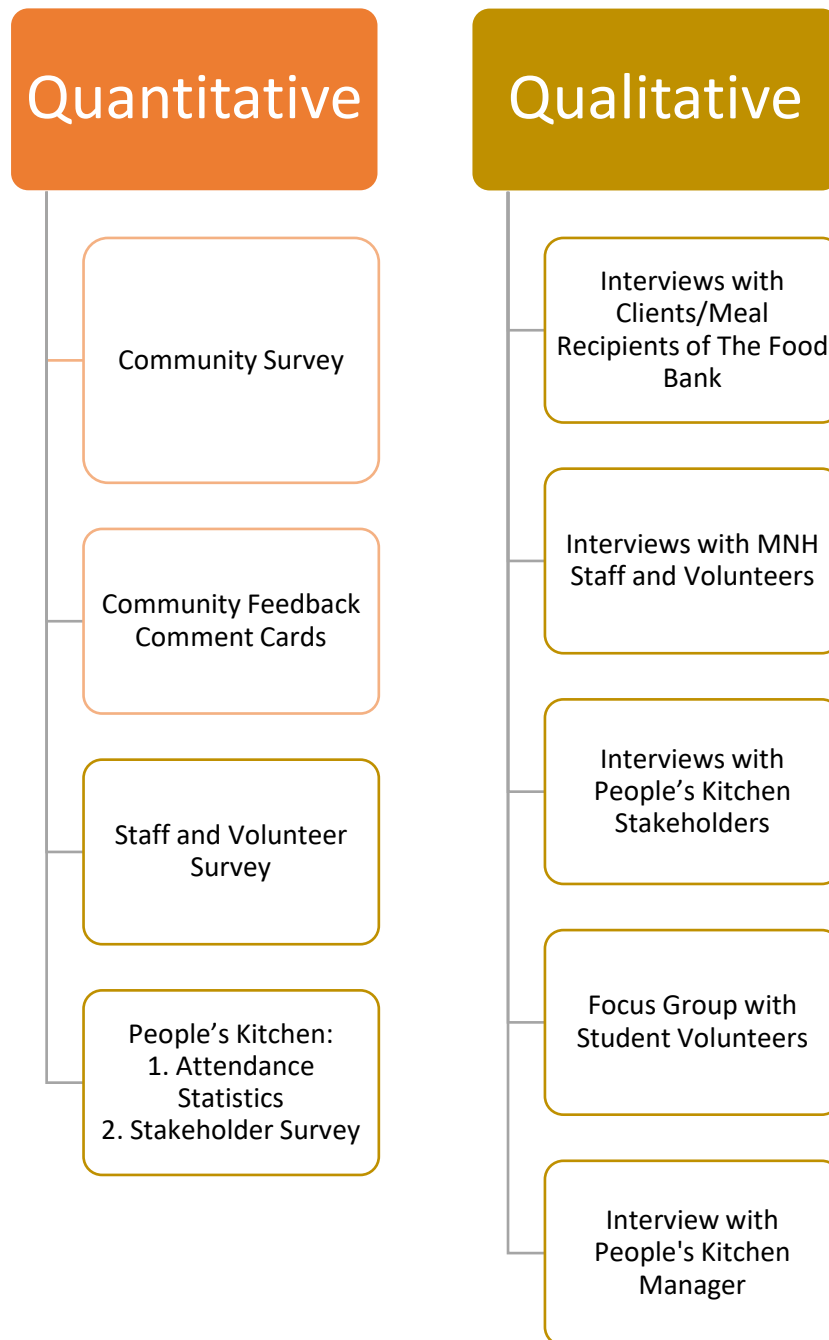


Figure 2: Data collected

FOOD SECURITY & WELLBEING PROJECT EVALUATION

FOOD BANK



2022

1882 transactions
12,859kg of food



5245 clients served

2023

2261 transactions
17,246kg of food



5905 clients served

“I can get the frozen meals and stuff... it really helps out on the weeks that I’m very short on money sometimes... If it wasn’t for them, I’d be bugged at times”.

Food Bank Client



PEOPLE’S KITCHEN

2604 Volunteer hours



7302 meals cooked



486 Volunteers



“I just think it is the community spirit that you feel when you are there working and the sense of achievement that you get as you walk away and feel like you’ve done something”.

People’s Kitchen Volunteer

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue the MNH program including Food Bank and People’s Kitchen
2. Provide stakeholders and Volunteers information on the outcomes of volunteering and cooking in the People’s Kitchen
3. Develop community gardens to aid in supply of food
4. Expand the network of People’s Kitchen cooks to include school groups and incorporate vocational training

KEY FINDINGS

Utilisation of, and a need for the MNH organisation is evident in their food and service distribution statistics gathered by Staff and Volunteers. In 2022, from January to December the Food Bank completed a total of 1882 transactions. These transactions were from a range of clients, including 2840 adults and 2402 children. A total of 12,859 kilograms of food products were distributed to clients in 2022; of this 2418 kilograms were fruit and vegetable produce. In 2023 from January to December, the Food Bank completed a total of 2261 transactions. Of these clients who received support, 3455 were adults and 2450 were children. A total of 17,246 kilograms of food were distributed, of which 3884 kilograms were fruit and vegetables. Statistical data to date in 2023 demonstrates that figures have greatly exceeded 2022 statistics. There was a 20% increase in total transactions and a 34% increase in the food weight distributed in 2023. There had also been a 60% increase in the amount of fruit and vegetable weight being distributed in 2023. These findings demonstrate an increased demand for the MNH Food Bank services in a 12-month period, and the ongoing impacts of increased cost of living and livelihood insecurity may still be increasing in the Latrobe Valley post the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 3).

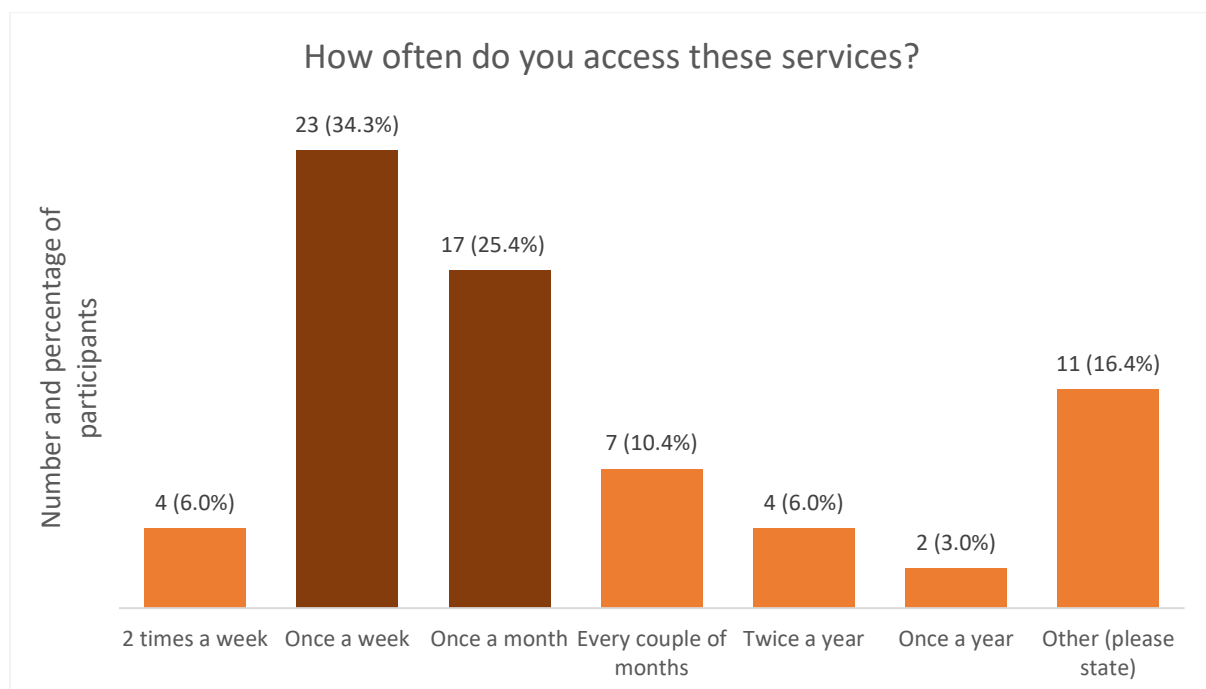


Figure 3: Frequency of MNH services accessed by community

There was a strong theme identified from the interviewed clients utilising MNH services around the feeling of acceptance and lack of judgment regarding their need to access the Food Bank. Inclusiveness also extended to children, and this was appreciated by a participant when they stated, “My children are very loud, but they’re very accepting of my children”. Being treated “just like anybody else” reflected a lack of judgment and was expressed in a similar way by another participant:

“It’s friendly. They don’t judge anybody. Everybody’s the same. I just feel really comfortable when I go in there. I don’t know how to say it, you don’t feel like you’re a scammer”.

When exploring the impact of Volunteering within the MNH, results were overwhelmingly positive and demand for service expanded greatly in 12 months. Findings from this evaluation suggest that this

expansion may have been due to the positive responses from Volunteers who worked in the People’s Kitchen and the increased demand for the meals cooked by members of the local community. In 2022, there was a total of 182 Volunteers that attended the People’s Kitchen, completing a total of 1004.5 hours. Volunteers made a total of 2819 meals, weighing over 1409 kilograms, and included groups from business and industry, community volunteers, clients accessing MNH services and high school students assisting the People’s Kitchen. In 2023, Volunteer numbers attending the People’s Kitchen had grown, with a total of 304 Volunteers doing 1600 hours within the Kitchen. A total of 4483 meals were made in 2023 at the time of reporting, weighing a total of 2241.50 kilograms. This demonstrated a 59% increase in the number of meals cooked and total weight of food produced from 2022 to 2023.

An increase in financial and in-kind support was realised by the People’s Kitchen since its inception, with support being received from participating organisations in the form of sponsorship donations of items to assist in the preparation of food and safety of Volunteers attending the People’s Kitchen.

Type of support	Approximate value of support
Oven	\$12,000
Work bench 1	\$ 800
Work bench 2	\$ 800
Kitchen utensils (chopping boards, peelers etc.)	\$ 500
Kitchen knives	\$ 300
Food processor 1	\$ 250
Food processor 2	\$ 250
TOTAL	\$14,900

Table 1: In-kind support received for People’s Kitchen

When exploring the experiences of the People’s Kitchen Volunteers, being part of the program created such a strong impression that many respondents expressed a desire to *“help out again”*. Other comments included, *“I would love the opportunity to do this again!”* and *“I will definitely be back to help some more.”* The respondents commented that listening to the MNH staff talk about food insecurity at the beginning of the session provided a *“great background on why we are doing this”*, a *“greater outlook on the challenges facing our local communities”* and was *“very enlightening”*:

“I loved being a part of the program. It was fantastic to sit down at the start with [People’s Kitchen staff] and have a conversation around the program and why it is so important. This opened up conversation that I had with people throughout the day around food security and supporting community which was great.”

Local high-school students in the Latrobe Valley were also connected to the People’s Kitchen, preparing meals in their school cafeteria which would be delivered to the MNH People’s Kitchen. As part of the Flexible Learning Option curriculum, students who engaged in cooking classes gained skills in safe food handling and preparation. Whilst undertaking this course, students learnt how to prepare nutritionally complete meals for the People’s Kitchen, being required to recognise ingredients, prepare the meal, cook the food and label the meals with their nutritional information. Between May – August 2023, high school students cooked a total of 456 meals for the People’s Kitchen.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS WITH CLIENTS OF THE FOOD BANK

A thematic analysis was conducted of interviews with 10 clients who attended the MNH Food Bank. Two major themes were extracted from the data with seven minor themes as shown below.

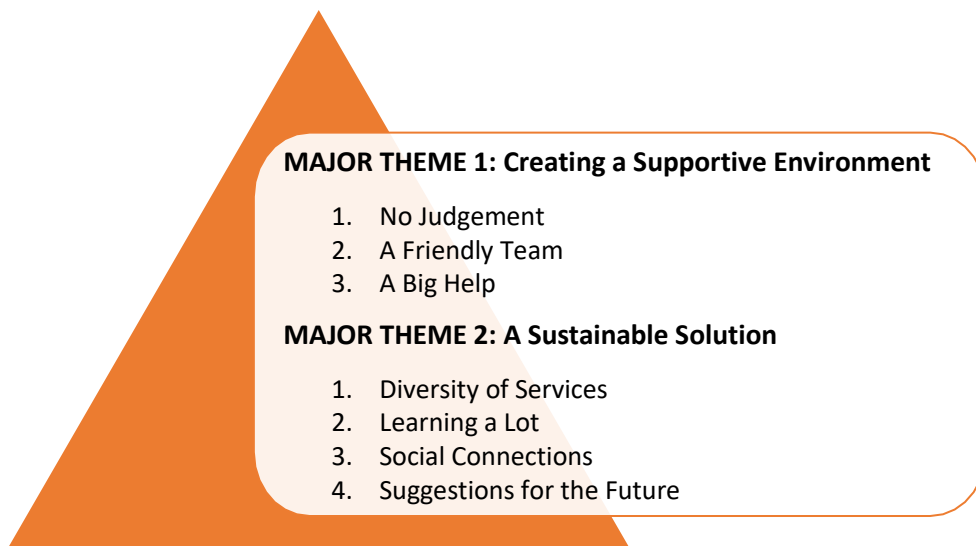


Figure 4. Thematic analysis themes – Clients of the food bank

Below is a selection of comments from participants.

Major Theme 1 Quotes:

*"I just love going there because it's **no hassle**. I only go in there when I really need help. I don't go in there every week. I haven't been there for a while because I've been doing pretty well... **You don't feel judged** when you do go in when you do need it for that couple of weeks when you just can't manage without it".*

*"They seem to be professionally running it, but at ease, which also **puts the clients more at ease** when they're relaxed... They seem very **well organised** with how they do things, which is good".*

*"It's full of food and we just pulled out some food and we're able to **cook ourselves a meal**... It was fantastic just to get together with them. It was so good for me, particularly living alone and being by myself. I suffer from depression and anxiety and just **having that group each week just bolstered me**".*

Major Theme 2 Quotes:

*"We went bowling, we went to the museums, we did the art galleries. **We went here, there, and everywhere** and that was all organised by the Morwell Neighbourhood House".*

*"**You're not sitting at home** in the unit and fiddling with your fingers or anything like that or looking out the window and seeing who's out there and who's not. This way, we can get out and tell what's all around you, and **you're in the open air**".*

*"**They do a good job**, but I would like to see them get a lot **more funding** than the government does. The government should dig down in their pocket and fork out to these people because they need it. They really do need the money".*

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS WITH SCHOOL STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

A focus group interview was conducted in December 2023 with the year 11/12 students at a local high school in the Latrobe Valley. Students were part of cooking classes within the school, which received funding to cook for the People's Kitchen in 2023. Students prepared approximately 50 meals per week for the People's Kitchen and were involved in the cooking and packaging process. A total of 8 students and 2 program facilitators were invited to join a focus group discussion in the school cafeteria.

Quotes from student participants:

*"We're learning each skill, a new skill with each meal. For say, fried rice, we have to make sure that we're not burning the rice and we're cooking with big woks and then we might make curried sausages. So, we have to make sure we're not making the Curry too spicy. So, **it gives us life skills**. But then we also get to **give back** to the people that need it. And just to help out and then gain a skill with it, sort of like a win-win".*

*"We would work in different groups, so you'd be put with people that you knew, but people that you don't know as well. So, you would be put in situations where you gotta **help each other out**, but you don't know how to work with other people because they're different. So as a year [level], **we've all worked together**".*

*"When I started going to high school and started cooking, **I always thought everything was given to** you and I always thought, the right people get the right stuff. And then when I got into this more, I was like oh, nah some people actually don't have the money where they actually do have to get out and ask for help and a lot of times **people don't ask for help**. So that help comes to them. And so, it's pretty good. They may not know we're doing it for them. They may not know us personally, but they're probably thinking, oh, yeah, these kids are pretty good. Doing this for us just **helping out**".*

*"For me, it's **knowing that I had done something to help my community**, that most of it is going through rough patches and are struggling more than what I am and knowing that I've done something that can help them in so many different ways. And knowing that could have **changed their life** just by simply **making a meal**. Like, just knowing that **impact** that could have on some families is amazing".*

Image: Students and teachers of the high school cooking class (photo shared with permission)



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue operations of the Morwell Neighbourhood House with all current services available, including the Food Bank and People's Kitchen.
 - a) Sustaining current operations is vital to support those who rely on the services.
 - b) Continuing operations allows Morwell Neighbourhood House to be a pilot and learning opportunity for other localities considering implementing similar programs.
2. Provide information for stakeholders and Volunteers on where meals prepared in the People's Kitchen go.
 - a) Providing follow-up to stakeholders and Volunteers involved in the People's Kitchen ensures they understand the impact of their service.
 - b) Building relationships with stakeholders and recipients may create a stronger desire to Volunteer more regularly.
 - c) Demonstrating these outcomes may increase buy-in from other business and industry stakeholders.
3. Expand the opportunities for community gardens within Morwell Neighbourhood House.
 - a) The development of a working community garden can provide educational opportunities and foster a sense of achievement for workers/Volunteers.
 - b) Growth of the community garden may assist with reducing operating costs of the People's Kitchen by using produce grown in-house.
4. Expand Volunteer support for the People's Kitchen to local secondary schools to increase skills and confidence of local young people.
 - a) Invite additional secondary schools to participate in the People's Kitchen program to increase their food handling and nutritional understanding.
 - b) Expansion to additional secondary schools may increase output capacity for the People's Kitchen to provide meals for the Latrobe Valley.
5. Consider formal education opportunities within the People's Kitchen.
 - a) Leveraging the People's Kitchen cooking sessions as formal educational courses may provide Volunteers with greater confidence and vocational qualifications.



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