Mrs R M J Clarke MLA
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People
Legislative Assembly of Western Australia
Parliament House
4 Harvest Terrace
WEST PERTH WA 6000

INQUIRY INTO THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AFFECTED BY POVERTY

Reference: A951786

Dear Mrs Clarke

Thank you for the invitation to Centrecare Inc (**Centrecare**) and the Valuing Children Initiative (**VCI**) to provide a submission into the above-named inquiry. For context, VCI was established by Centrecare in January 2016 to create greater societal awareness of children's issues, needs and views. VCI recognises that children have no choice about the circumstances of their birth, or their childhood, and promotes the idea that child wellbeing is a collective responsibility.

For the estimated 103,700 children in Western Australian affected by poverty this inquiry is both necessary and urgent. On May 12th, the Western Australian State Government announced its 2022/23 budget, highlighting, 'an operating surplus of \$5.7 billion is expected in 2021-22 and \$1.6 billion in 2022/23'. Given the economic prosperity of our state it is difficult to reconcile that 17% of children in Western Australia² are growing up in poverty with many of these children experiencing food insecurity. There are solutions and a clear moral imperative to act. Western Australia's extremely healthy financial position is an opportunity for the State Government to invest in these solutions. Doing so sends a clear signal that all children in Western Australia are important and that the government is committed to prioritising children and future generations. Identifying and investing in solutions that result in significant and measurable improvements is also an opportunity for Western Australia to lead other states and territories and to set a higher national standard. This is important because of course all children are valuable and worthy of the best start to life, not just those in Western Australia.

Centrecare understands that the inquiry is focused on food insecurity for children and young people impacted by poverty and appreciates that the Committee is seeking submissions specifically related to food insecurity. We also note the briefing information provided which states, 'The Committee recognises that poverty impacts on more than just access to food. We also acknowledge that food insecurity could be solved by tackling the drivers of poverty, such as low pay, unemployment, and lack of housing. Reducing poverty is a long-term proposition that relies primarily on federal government



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action. This is important. But as a state-based committee, we are particularly interested in what can be done at the state level to help children who are going without nutritious food now.' As such, Centrecare's submission has been limited to ensure it is relevant to the scope of the inquiry.

However, it is important to state that it is impossible to resolve the issue of food insecurity for children impacted by poverty without addressing what drives child poverty in Australia in the first place. Additionally, reducing poverty does not need to be a *'long term proposition'*. This is evidenced by the fact that the extra income provided to low-income families during 2020 (Coronavirus Supplement) made an immediate and measurable difference. When this support was available, poverty rates for the poorest families, sole parents, and their children more than halved from 39 to 17 percent³. Raising the rate of income support so that people can meet their day-to-day expenses substantially and immediately addressed poverty for many Australians. This is well expressed by Kim, a West Australian mother who was asked by the 100 Families research project about the impact of the Coronavirus Support payment.

"It made a big difference in my life, in my kids' lives. I bought the kids a computer...I put money towards buying a car for myself. Eventually I got my licence. When things were going good, I was starting to get confidence in myself so got out there and got a job. Having that car helped me get a job."

Further, Centrecare disagrees with the statement that reducing poverty is a proposition that 'relies primarily on Federal government action'. It is Centrecare's view that poverty can, and should, be addressed at both federal and state levels. Advocacy and lobbying by states and territories can effect change at the federal level and this is an important function of state governments. Additionally, the states and territories can implement policies and supports to reduce poverty. Whilst the Coronavirus Supplement was a federal policy, there are lessons to be learned by state governments including logical policy responses. According to an Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey conducted in November 2020⁴, 'paying household bills' was reported to be the most common use of the Coronavirus Supplement (67%). With household bills paid by the supplement families had enough money to cover the costs of other basics like healthy food, warm clothes in winter and for children the ability to access after school activities like sport and music.

The fact that 67% of recipients of the Coronavirus Supplement spent the extra money on household bills is an important statistic for state and territory governments to remember. It tells us that any state-based policy or initiative that assists families with cost-of-living expenses will help to ameliorate child poverty, for example, rebates on utility bills, reduction of vehicle licencing fees, cheaper public transport, and support to access to affordable housing. Families should not have to choose between putting food on the table or paying household bills. To successfully address food insecurity in Western Australia we need to tackle poverty. Centrecare urges the Committee to not lose sight of the broader context as it considers submissions to this inquiry.

RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND OBLIGATIONS

When considering food insecurity in Australia (and Western Australia) it is important to view the issue through a human rights lens.⁵ As stated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 'everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and his family, including food...'. Although not legally binding, this Declaration prompted the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which was ratified by many countries, including Australia in 1975. The major content of the human right to adequate food is set out in Article 11 of the ICESCR which 'requires, first, that all state parties take immediate steps to guarantee the right to freedom from hunger for all persons in their jurisdiction; and secondly, that all state parties take appropriate steps towards the "progressive realization" of the right to adequate food."

Also relevant is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which was ratified by Australia in 1990. Several of the CRC's 54 Articles are relevant to this discussion. In child-friendly language⁷ these include the following.

Article 2: All children have these rights, no matter who they are, where they live, what their parents do, what language they speak, what their religion is, whether they are a boy or a girl, what their culture is, whether they have a disability, whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis.

Article 3: All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions affect children.

Article 4: The government has a responsibility to make sure that your rights are protected. They must help your family to protect your rights and create an environment where you can grow and reach your potential.

Article 24: You have the right to the best health care possible, safe water to drink, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment and information to help you stay well.

Article 26: You have the right to help from the government if you are poor or in need.

Article 27: You have the right to food, clothing, a safe place to live and to have your basis needs met. You should not be disadvantaged so that you can't do many of the things other kids can do.

Additionally, Australia is committed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations members in 2015. This includes a commitment to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The SDG's can be summarised as a 'universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity' There are 17 SDG's which are interconnected. All SDGs are relevant to the issue of food security but in particular the following goals are critical.

Goal 1: No poverty

Goal 2: Zero hunger

Goal 3: Good health and wellbeing

Goal 10: Reduced inequalities

It is clear that Australian governments, whether state or federal, have an *obligation* and *responsibility* to ensure adequate food for all people, including children. However, despite Western Australia's growing prosperity we continue to see increasing numbers of children and adults in our state experience food insecurity. Our failure to view food security through a human rights lens is perhaps explained by the fact that, 'Australia has no clear mechanism for ensuring the human right to food for all of its citizens; no systematic monitoring of food insecurity; and no recognised and current national food and/or nutrition policy'.9

A consequence of not viewing food through a human rights lens is that our society frequently considers food security to be the individual's sole responsibility. Therefore, food insecure individuals often experience stigma and shame associated with their situation. This can have devastating consequences for children, who of course have no control over their family's access to food. This concept is captured well by a quote from a single mother of six children.

"Sometimes I don't seek food relief even if we've run out because it's kind of embarrassing. I feel embarrassed and like I'm not a good enough parent because I can't afford food." 10

EXTENT OF PROBLEM IN WA

Food security occurs when people 'can get enough food to eat that is safe, that they like to eat, and that helps them to be healthy. They must be able to get this food in ways that make them feel good about themselves and their families' 11

In Australia, food security 'is not measured at a population level regularly or consistently. However, estimates suggest that between 4% and 13% of the general population are food insecure; and 22% to 32% of the Indigenous population, depending on location.'12

Foodbank Australia reports that the problem is even greater than this. Foodbank Australia is considered a key source of information on food insecurity and food relief services in Australia and the organisation maintains comprehensive statistics on their operations including detailed data on the food and groceries they collect and distribute. They also conduct regular surveys including with individuals experiencing food insecurity, charities providing food relief and organisations donating food and groceries. Data collected is used to inform an annual report on food insecurity in Australia called The Hunger Report. According to the 2021 report, 'One in six Australians (17%) can be categorised as severely food insecure and a further 11% categorised as moderately food insecure. Combined these two categories represent a quarter of Australian adults (28%) who are categorised as food insecure'. The report goes on to state, 'In addition to the adults who are severely food insecure, 1.3 million children are living in food insecure households. More than two in five severely food insecure parents (45%) say their children go an entire day without eating fresh food and vegetables at least once a week. A similar proportion (43%) of severely food insecure parents say their children go a whole day without eating at least once a week.

There are demographic groups more at risk of experiencing food insecurity. Risk factors include social isolation, lower education levels and unemployment. The issue is more prevalent in households outside capital cities, within single parent households, younger parent households, amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and within culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Children living in these households are more likely to experience food insecurity too.¹⁴

In preparing this submission it was difficult to find publicly available data regarding the extent of food insecurity Western Australia. The fact that this information is not easily accessible, and the fact that data on food security is not measured consistently or regularly is clearly problematic and an issue that should be addressed. However, as a large community service provider in Western Australia, Centrecare is cognisant that there are many people in our community in need of support. We consistently provide supermarket vouchers and financial counselling to a significant number of individuals and families in need.

Foodbank Australia (or Foodbank WA) does not publish statistics regarding food insecurity specific to Western Australia, however it is reasonable to assume that the national statistics they report are broadly representative of the scale of the problem in this state. In relation to understanding the extent of the problem for children in Western Australia, there is research indicating 20.1% of children in regional and remote areas of our state are food insecure. Data pertaining to all children and young people in Western Australia was difficult to find, however, the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA's 2021 Speaking Out Survey the was a helpful source of information.

The Speaking Out Survey reported 8% of students said that there is 'only sometimes enough food' for them to eat and 1% said there is 'never enough food to eat'. The Speaking Out Survey captured the views and experiences of 16,532 children in Western Australia and if we extrapolate the results of this survey to all 610,000 children and young people in Western Australia it is evident that food insecurity is a problem experienced at least 54,900 West Australian children. If Foodbank Australia's statistics are applied, the figure is much higher.

The primary reason for food insecurity is material hardship and inadequate financial resources. While the relationship between low income and food insecurity is strong, 'the factors that lead to food insecurity in developed countries, particularly those with strong social safety nets, are more complex.'¹⁷ Higher income does not always equate to food security, 'people can also experience food insecurity due to: difficulty accessing affordable healthy food (e.g. financially or geographically), or limited food and nutrition literacy (e.g. knowing how to purchase and prepare ingredients to make a healthy meal).'¹⁸

Nutritional education is sometimes lacking amongst disadvantaged populations and even when the quantity of food supplies may be adequate in these households, the quality of food may be poor and fail to meet the nutritional needs of children. Lack of familiarity with food preparation and/or ingredients may be a deterrent to the preparation of fresh healthy meals leading to reliance on unhealthy food options. Ensuring families are provided with nutritional education and are supported to develop food preparation skills is therefore an important element to addressing food insecurity for children.18

The Australian Bureau of Statistics national health survey¹⁹ shows the vast majority of Australian children are eating far too few vegetables. The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that growing children eat five serves of vegetables, and two serves of fruit each day, to receive optimal nutritional benefits, however the ABS health survey revealed only four per cent of kids are eating five or more serves of veggies, with almost half consuming just one serve of vegetables or less a day. The same report also showed parents are failing to role model good eating habits, with only six per cent of adults meeting the daily fruit and vegetable requirements. The consequences of this are evident, with one in four children now classified overweight or obese. These statistics point to the importance of food literacy and education for all parents and children, including families not typically considered at risk of food insecurity.

IMPACT OF POOR NUTRITION AND FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity can have a major impact on both short-term and long-term physical and mental health and being food insecure increases the risk of several chronic diseases including obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease for all age groups. Additionally, food insecurity adversely impacts family relationships.²⁰ Further, food insecurity can lead to stress, cycles of fasting and bingeing, and the substitution of relatively higher cost, higher nutrition food with lower cost, higher energy food, resulting in nutrient deficiencies, metabolic changes, weight loss and obesity.17

Research shows that experiencing food insecurity in childhood can negatively impact children in both the short and long term. The impacts are physical, emotional, social, developmental, and academic. Children in food insecure households in Australia were more likely to miss days of school, miss out on school activities, and more likely to have emotional and behavioural issues. Furthermore, poor nutrition is associated with low birth weight and ill health in infancy and childhood.²¹

Adequate and nutritious food is crucial for children's healthy growth and development. Parents notice changes in their children's wellbeing if they do not have enough food. More than half of parents (54%) report changes in their child's emotions, such as more outbursts or tantrums (24%), or a decline in their child's happiness (24%). When it comes to physical changes, one in five parents (22%) indicate their children become agitated and irritable if they do not have enough to eat. Lack of food can also impact a child's sleeping patterns (17%) and they may become more tired and lethargic (16%). Going without food can influence a child's behaviour both at home and at school. One in six parents (17%) notice their children acting up at school or at home because of not having enough food. Food insecurity can also affect a child's ability to thrive at school and outside of school. Parents suggest their children have less energy for after school activities such as after-school sports (17%), struggle to concentrate at school

(16%), and might be embarrassed to invite friends over when there is no food in the house (13%).14

Children who experience food insecurity tell us that this causes them great stress as illustrated in the below quotes taken from the Speaking Out survey.

"It worries me because nearly 3 times a week I've heard my mum crying at night or afternoon and sometimes we've been running out of money and food." 16

(10-year-old)

"I have nothing else to say. Except that my family is low on money. And I'm suffering from not eating or sleeping much. And I'm extremely stressed about schoolwork." 16

(13-year-old)

Another potential consequence of food insecurity for children is that they will develop antisocial behaviours to resolve their situation, including stealing food. As such, by failing to ensure adequate support for all families who need it children are placed at risk of early entry into the criminal justice system. Studies show that the younger children are when they encounter the criminal justice system, the more likely they are to reoffend and in Australia children as young as ten are held criminally responsible for their actions. Commenting on this, the Australian Human Rights Commission noted, 'Many children involved in the criminal justice system come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have complex needs better addressed outside the criminal justice system...while offending by young children should not go unaddressed, criminalising children for their behaviour at such a young age is largely ineffective at preventing future offending behaviour while also running counter to human rights'.²² Complicating matters further, efforts to assist children and young people who have come to the attention of police can be hampered by food insecurity. Centrecare is a provider of youth justice programs, and it is not uncommon for young people to turn up to these programs hungry, an issue that needs to be resolved by workers before attempting therapeutic intervention.

WORKING WELL

There are many individuals and organisations working hard to address food insecurity for children in Western Australia. A full literature review would be required to comment fully on the effectiveness of specific interventions, however, in researching this submission three key responses stood out and are worthy of special mention.

1. Food Stress Index and 'food basket recommendations'

Food stress, a similar concept to housing stress, occurs when a household needs to spend more than 25% of their disposable income on food. Households most at risk of food stress are vulnerable to food insecurity because of inadequate income and factors related to financial hardship. A Food Stress Index (FSI) is a single index that encompasses socio-demographic, food costs and other determinants of food insecurity to provide information about the likelihood that households in a geographical area are suffering food stress. Specifically, the FSI's multi-dimensional framework consists of household demographics, household income, household expenses, financial stress indicators, food security, food affordability and food availability. A 'food basket recommendation' is a tool that quantifies the types and amounts of food required to meet dietary recommendations for different family types. Both the FSI and food basket recommendations are tools that can be used to make the distribution of food relief more efficient, targeted and locally appropriate. The coronavirus pandemic led to the application of the FSI and food basket recommendations in Western Australia by a small number of organisations providing food relief. A 2021 review²³ of these tools noted. 'The relief sector were keen supporters of the evidence-based practice tools to guide their work and felt a sense of relief and gratitude that they were now available. They reflected that the tools facilitated an operational shift away from "ad hoc" to "evidence based" actions.' There are many quotes from food relief service providers

in the same report which illustrate the usefulness of FSI and food basket recommendations including,

"It's changed the way we understand food insecurity. It's changed the way we think about responding to food insecurity. And it's changed the way we think about providing food. It's just changed everything. Before the Food Stress Index, ... I really didn't understand food stress and insecurity ..., and I don't think many of the providers did either. Now they understand, they understand what food stress is, they understand it's a pre-step to food insecurity. They understand more clearly that people experiencing food stress and insecurity need an appropriate response across nutrition, across chronicity. Yeah, I think it's just changed everything."23

and

"My contention is that the whole development of both of these instruments is not only the bedrock for resolving food relief; it is the potential keystone information for resolving a whole series of unrelated social issues, in terms of the amount of things that food relief and poverty inform."23

2. School breakfast programs

School breakfast programs have been used in Western Australian schools for many years with consistently positive outcomes reported.²⁴ As of 2020, Foodbank WA had 416 schools registered for the School Breakfast Program (SBP). Reported benefits of this and other school breakfast programs include:

- children are better able to engage in education due to increased energy and improved concentration;
- · improved overall classroom engagement;
- improved behaviour;
- increased school attendance:
- reduced stigma; and
- increased sense of community for children and parents.

The benefits of SBP's are illustrated in quotes captured in quotes published in Foodbank WA's fifteen-year school breakfast program evaluation report.

"Parents are more willing to send children to school when they have no food in the house, they know the school has a safety net for their kids and they know the school is non-judgemental about the issue. Teaching staff report that children arrive from Breakfast Club to class happier and ready to learn." 24

and

"The School Breakfast Program provides the opportunity for all students to start the day equal regardless of the issues at home...The program has allowed us to meet and talk to parents and students in a different environment than a classroom leading to stronger, more supportive, and more open relationships."24

3. 100 Families WA

100 Families WA is a collective action research project with a vision to address entrenched disadvantage experienced by families living in Western Australia. The project is unique in that it involves deep collaboration between not-for-profit organisations (including Centrecare), the University of Western Australia and families with lived experience to understand and find solutions to the complex problem of

entrenched disadvantage. Whilst the scope of 100 Families is broader than just food security the research findings are broadly applicable.

Families consistently reported that they often do not feel seen or heard in policy or practice settings and would like to add their voices and lived experience to the design, implementation and evaluation of policies, programs and social change that impacts them. They agreed that 'the system' and most services are not designed from the perspective of lived experience. Families participating in the research felt 'othered' and often excluded from mainstream society. They were very aware of public and political narratives and felt hurt by this.

Policies and programs have the potential to either heighten or lessen the shame that people feel as a result of living in disadvantage, including those experiencing food insecurity. 'From government speeches, reports and policy to mainstream media, education and everyday conversation, disempowering patterns of thought, language and practice continue to represent people living in hardship in terms of personal deficiencies and failures, perpetuating negative public narratives.' ²⁵

As one research participant noted:

"It wears you down after a while. When you are treated like you don't matter by so many people in so many ways it is hard to keep going and not give up. It sometimes seems better to withdraw into some corner somewhere with other people doing it tough like you and hide out from the world."25

A significant limitation of 100 Families WA is that it does not specifically seek to include the experiences and voices of children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Clear and accessible data and regular reporting

To understand and address the issue of food insecurity in Western Australian it is important that there are agreed ways of measuring the extent of the problem as well as consistent, regular, and publicly accessible reporting of the issues. This includes data specifically related to children and young people. Annual monitoring and reporting of food insecurity for children in Western Australia could occur via the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA's Wellbeing Monitoring Framework and/or included as part of a Child Wellbeing Strategy (discussed below).

2. Apply a human/child rights lens

Access to food is a basic human right and the government has a responsibility and obligation to ensure all children in Western Australia receive adequate and nutritious food. Viewing food security through a human/child rights lens 'brings about a 'root cause' approach, focusing primarily on matters of state policy and discrimination. The move from needs to rights, and from charity to duties, also implies an increased focus on accountability'.9 Whilst a rights-based framing of food insecurity is not a panacea, viewing the issue in this way is important because it demonstrates a genuine, long-term commitment by government to finding solutions for children and families in need. A rights-based framing of the issue would include the incorporation of human/child rights language into policy, reporting and legislation. Legislative change such as a 'Right to Food Act'26 could be considered.

3. Establish an advisory committee

The establishment of a dedicated food security advisory committee would help to the State Government and Commissioner for Children and Young People better understand existing services and make evidence-based policy recommendations to best address food insecurity in Western Australia. The advisory committee should represent metropolitan, rural and regional areas and include people from a range of cultural and demographic

backgrounds. Ideally, people with lived experience of food insecurity, including young people would be included.

4. Address poverty

The primary reason for food insecurity is material hardship and inadequate financial resources. It is impossible to separate food insecurity from poverty. Therefore, every attempt must be made to address poverty and the drivers of poverty in Western Australia. This includes increased funding for prevention and early intervention programs to support children and families at risk of or experiencing poverty. It also includes advocacy from the state government to the federal government to raise the rate of support payments. Additionally, the state government can address poverty in Western Australia via policies that reduce the cost of living and make housing more affordable.

5. Listen to people with lived experience, including children

As clearly demonstrated by the 100 Families research project people experiencing disadvantage want to add their voices and lived experience in designing, implementing, and evaluating policies, programs and social change that impacts them. Consulting with, and listening to, people who experience food insecurity is crucial to finding effective, locally appropriate, and dignified long-term solutions. When considering solutions to the issue of food insecurity for Western Australian children then it is essential that children's voices are actively sought and included.

6. Whole of government Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

A whole of government Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy has long been recommended by key stakeholders as an important step towards improving outcomes on a range of issues, including food security, for all children in Western Australia. Centrecare strongly supports the development and implementation of a Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy which has also been publicly and repeatedly recommended by Colin Pettit, former Commissioner for Children and Young People, publicly endorsed by the current Commissioner for Children and Young People, Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, recommended by Western Australian Council for Social Services (WACOSS), the Valuing Children Initiative and other advocates for children. A whole of government Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (with appropriate budget support) sets out a shared understanding of what is important for child and youth wellbeing, what the government is doing, and how others can help. The strategy would set whole-of-government targets to improve wellbeing outcomes for children and young people. Targets should be long-term, extend beyond election cycles and span individual agency responsibilities. The strategy should include a resourced, implementation framework with clear outcomes and timelines. Progress on the outcomes should be measured through robust data and reported on regularly.

7. Food Stress Index and food basket recommendations

Tools such as the Food Stress Index and food basket recommendations have shown significant promise in helping to provide a coordinated and evidenced based response for food relief service providers. Funding to support the expansion and further development of these tools is strongly recommended.

8. Expand school breakfast programs

School breakfast programs and associated food education and literacy programs provide significant benefits to the school communities who use them. The benefits go beyond the simple provision of food; they build community, strengthen relationships, and reduce stigma. They also teach children about nutrition, can help them to understand why good food hygiene is important and can help children learn how to prepare food. Therefore, the expansion of school breakfast programs that include food education and literacy components has the potential to benefit all children and should be expanded in a

purposeful way. To ensure universal access for all children in need this could include expansion of similar programs to settings other than schools, for example childcare providers, community sports clubs and libraries.

9. Collaborative, community-led and place-based responses

Children and families experiencing food insecurity commonly experience a range of personal, organisational, and systemic barriers to accessing support. They tell us that local, informal, community centred, flexible, and well-resourced responses that are delivered with empathy and respect work best. An example of how this might be achieved in the context of food security is the introduction of Food Policy Councils (FPC). FPC's have been used internationally²⁷ to facilitate participation in food system decision-making. They are community coalitions that forms networks to work collaboratively to address challenges associated with local food systems to enhance the availability, accessibility, and affordability of healthy foods for local residents. It is a model that has the potential to include a diverse range of stakeholders such as public health practitioners, universities, primary producers, First Nations people, young people, community service organisations and local and state governments.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely

Adj. Prof. Tony Pietropiccolo AM

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