

Christmas From The Heart: 2023

FEBRUARY 2024



Visionwest
Waka Whakakitenga

Introduction

In the lead-up to Christmas each year, various food support initiatives are held throughout Tāmaki Makaurau with the aim of addressing Christmas hardship. In Te Uru o Tāmaki Makaurau (West Auckland) Visionwest Community Trust runs Christmas From The Heart. 2023 was our event's fifth year.

This report provides an overview of Christmas From The Heart 2023 and contains high-level data about the whānau receiving Christmas support. It also reveals some of the reasons this support remains an ongoing necessity within our local communities.

Also included are reflections relating to the current level of hardship faced by many in Aotearoa New Zealand today and what needs to change in order for food availability to improve so that events like Christmas From The Heart are no longer necessary.



Event Logistics

Christmas From The Heart 2023 was an eight day event running from Monday 11 December – Wednesday 20 December (excluding the weekend).

Going without a phone-in booking system, which we'd utilised in the past, a whānau selection process was required. This began with Support Workers from each of our services identifying and nominating whānau who they were already working with, and who they knew would require extra support over the Christmas period. Other whānau heard about the event through various organisations, social media, or word-of-mouth. These people were channelled through our Whānau Centre Social Workers to assess eligibility and level of need.

Whānau came to Visionwest at a pre-arranged time and were welcomed into a festive atmosphere that included music, a free café and sausage sizzle, free haircuts, and activities – such as face painting and a bouncy castle – to occupy the children while the adults “shopped.”

Adults were welcomed by a volunteer who became their guide as they made their way through the four phases of Christmas From The Heart:

- 1 First stop was the **Kai From The Heart** supermarket – our Manaaki Kai (social supermarket) that had been emptied and restocked with Christmas goods alongside the usual essential foods. Here whānau were able to self-select the items, up to a predetermined value, that they needed to carry them through the Christmas period and to create a special Christmas Day meal.
- 2 With their trolleys full of non-perishable food, whānau next went into our **fresh produce store** where perishable items were available to be selected.



- 3 From here, those with children were welcomed into **Gifts From The Heart** – our Whānau Centre which had been repurposed into a toy store. Gifts could be chosen from a wide variety of toys, depending on the number and ages of their children. (Gifts From the Heart was kindly supported by The Trusts).
- 4 The final stop was the **wrapping station** where the chosen gifts were wrapped, all ready to be placed under the tree for opening on Christmas Day.

While making their way through the event, whānau and their volunteer guide engaged in korero. In particular, whānau were able to share their story and were sensitively asked what other support they felt they needed. Some of these needs could be immediately responded to, others were recorded so that they could be followed up later.

In all 878 shoppers went through Kai From The Heart. This represented 4,094 people supported including 2,210 children who received Christmas gifts they might otherwise have missed out on. In-depth data relating to the event is included in the Statistical Information section of this report.



“ The gift store was a truly magical space. People came in and were often overwhelmed. At the beginning we were allowing every parent to shop for themselves ... we told our helpers not to take anything off the shelves for whānau but just to let them self-select. But there were many occasions when people were actually too emotional to do that. They needed help because they would walk in and dissolve into a flood of tears. It’s actually a really overwhelming experience when you’ve gone from, “I’m can’t afford to give my kids anything for Christmas,” to, “I can walk into a gift store and choose anything I want from what’s laid out in front of me.”
Sarah Van’t Hof – Visionwest Senior Events Manager ”

“ We were eager that no one would miss out. Those who turned up hoping for some help, even though we couldn’t fit into Christmas From The Heart, were given an emergency food parcel and they were really happy with that. *Nathan May – General Manager Visionwest Community Services.* ”

Aligning with Visionwest’s support philosophy

A fundamental strategy of Christmas From The Heart 2023 was that it should fit with the mission of Visionwest which is to journey alongside whānau who are in need of any sort of social support with the aim of helping them to a place where they move beyond these challenges to become self-sufficient. Establishing Manaaki Kai, our social supermarket, enabled us to realign our Christmas From The Heart support process by utilising a supermarket-style means of food distribution. In doing this we were able to give greater dignity and choice to whānau in the immediate and were also able to continue or initiate the depth of relationship that is integral to a journey towards life transformation.

In the recent past, the delivery of Christmas From The Heart had focused on a drive-through model where whānau preregistered using an 0800 phone number and drove into the Visionwest carpark at a predetermined time. Once in the carpark, a pre-selected and pre-packed food parcel and gifts were loaded into the boot of their vehicle, and they drove off.

This model was developed during the time of Covid restrictions to ensure contactless food delivery and was effective in that it enabled us to supply bulk food quickly to a significant number of individuals and families. It did not, however, allow for the type of connection that can lead to relationship, hope building and life transformation. It is this dynamic based on trust and relationship that sits at the heart of Visionwest’s support philosophy.

By meeting face-to-face with whānau in a welcoming and mana-empowering way, we were able to korero with them. We were able to hear whānau stories and, most importantly, they were able to share about where they were at, what their needs were, and talk about the next step in their transformational journey.



This connection was facilitated in two ways. First, around 50% of the families coming through Christmas From The Heart 2023 already had a relationship with a Visionwest keyworker who was working with them and supporting them in some way, for instance, their Mātanga Oranga Counsellor or their Financial Mentor or one of the other service kaimahi. These whānau were invited to Christmas From The Heart by their keyworker who accompanied them through the event.

For people who are on a journey of transformation out of poverty, this invitation and chance to korero and receive relevant practical support was a powerful way of showing compassion and watered the seeds of hope that had already been planted by their support person.



Second, there were many whānau who heard about the event through other means. These whānau connected with Christmas From The Heart in a way that enabled them to share their stories and hear about the other supports Visionwest could provide to them. Our Community Connectors were on hand to respond to any urgent needs and several whānau were referred to other kaimahi for immediate additional support. Others will be followed up later.

This process and these deeper conversations are vital if we are to walk alongside whānau who are experiencing tough times. This wasn't possible with previous events when whānau remained in their cars with minimal personal contact.

The realignment of strategy was key in achieving the event's overall goal which is not simply to get whānau through Christmas. The overall goal is to provide hope and an introduction to services that could ultimately shift individuals and whānau away from a life marked by poverty.


“

Making room for conversation was really important for us; to make room for mums and dads and kids to come and hang out with us and simply talk about what they felt they needed to talk about. That connection in many ways is as important as the distribution of food and gifts because isolation is a major social issue for people who go without, whether it's someone on the pension, or the young solo mum, or the person who's just got out of prison and just got back together with their kids ... they need community and so we wanted to do more than simply distribute goods. We wanted to build community because community building is a transformative agent in and of itself.

Brook Turner – Visionwest Head of Service Development and Partnerships.

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Support overview

4,094  **TOTAL PEOPLE SUPPORTED**

 **2,210** **CHILDREN FED AND PROVIDED WITH GIFTS**

 **878**
TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE SHOPPED

1,815 
TOTAL NUMBER OF ADULTS REACHED

 **2,210**
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN REACHED

69 
TOTAL NUMBER OF SENIORS REACHED



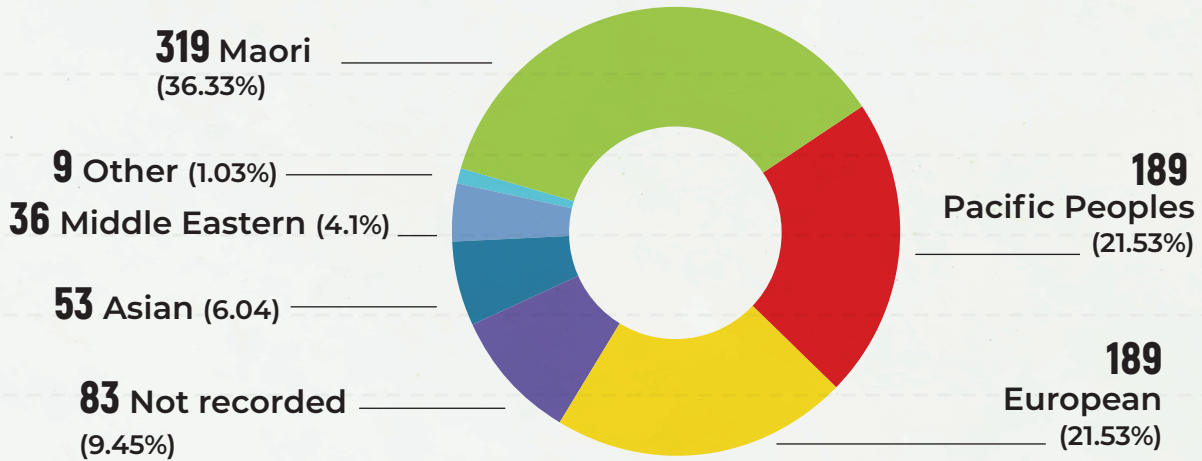
Total value of food provided **\$237,060**

Average value of food provided per shopper **\$270**

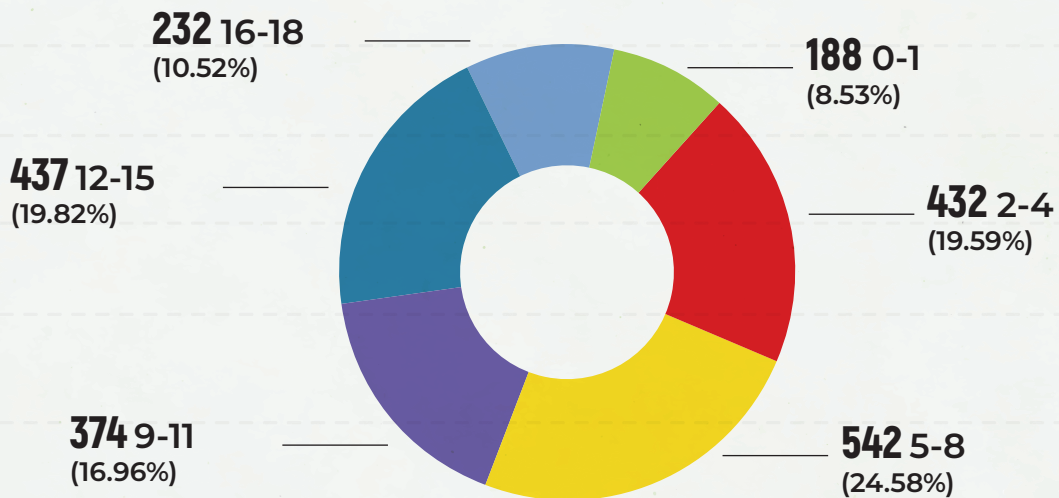


Demographic information

Total Number of People Shopped by Ethnicity

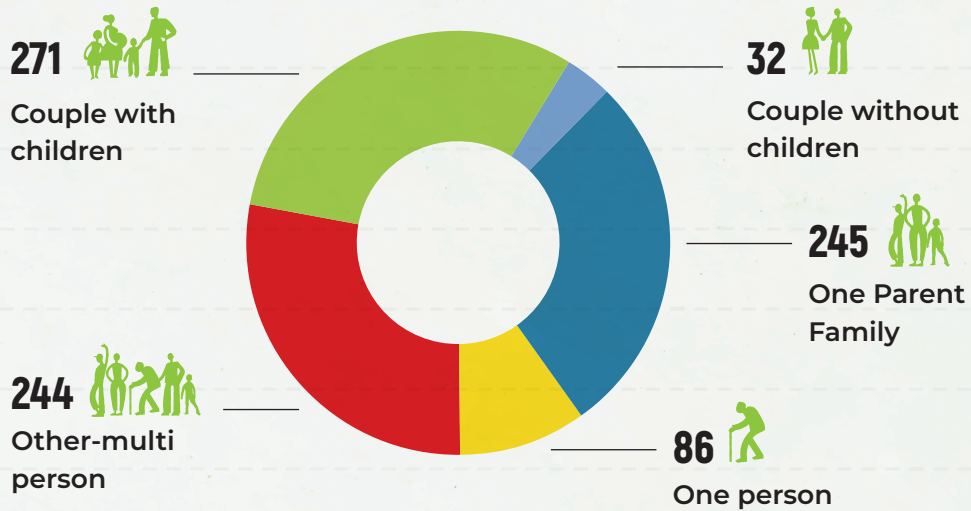


Age group of children reached

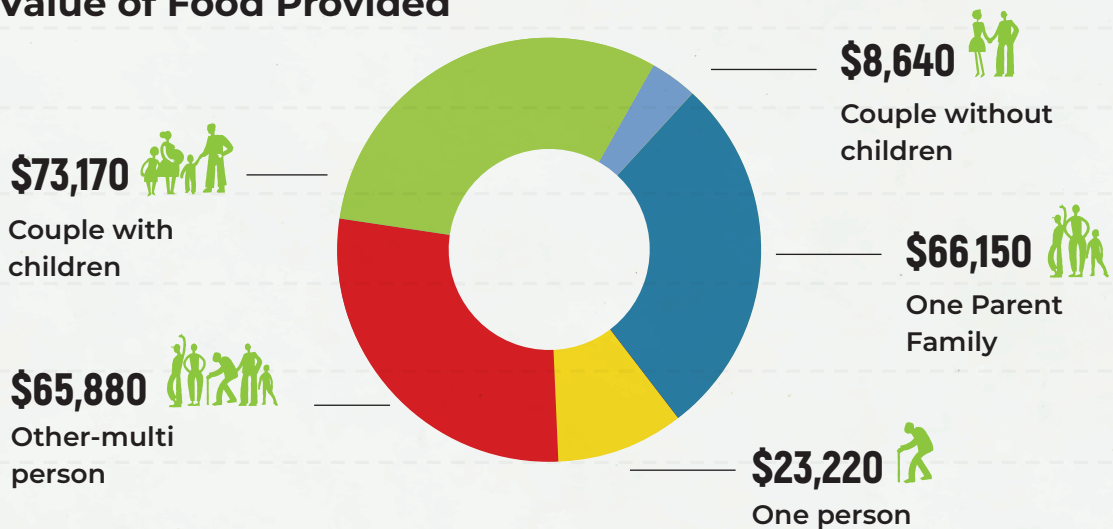


Household Analysis

Type of Household Supported

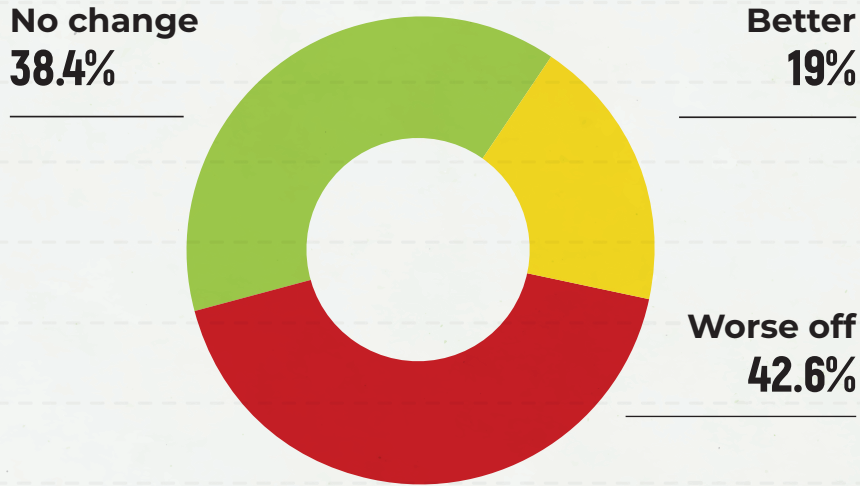


Value of Food Provided

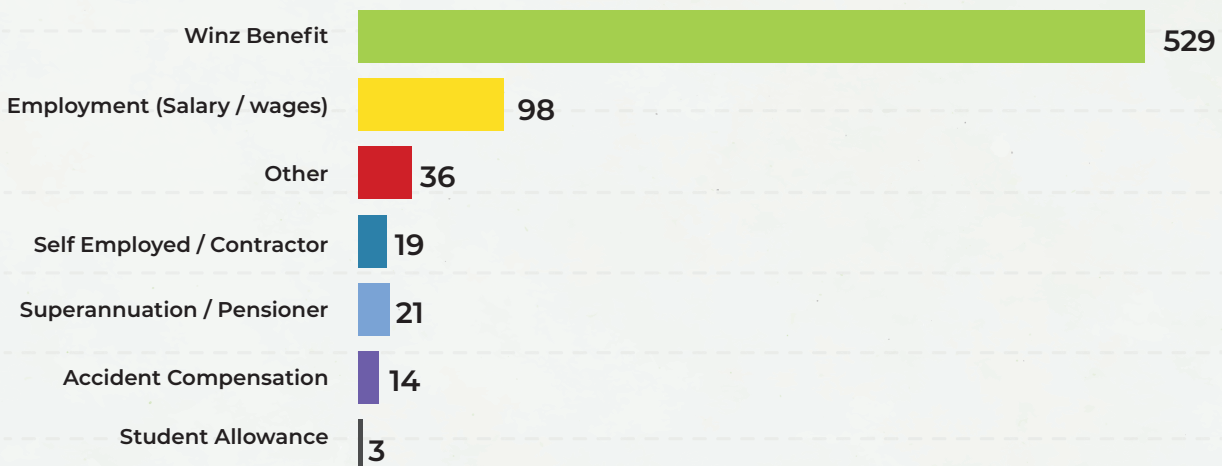


Note: The average value provided to whānau was \$270 per register / shopper, according to Finance.

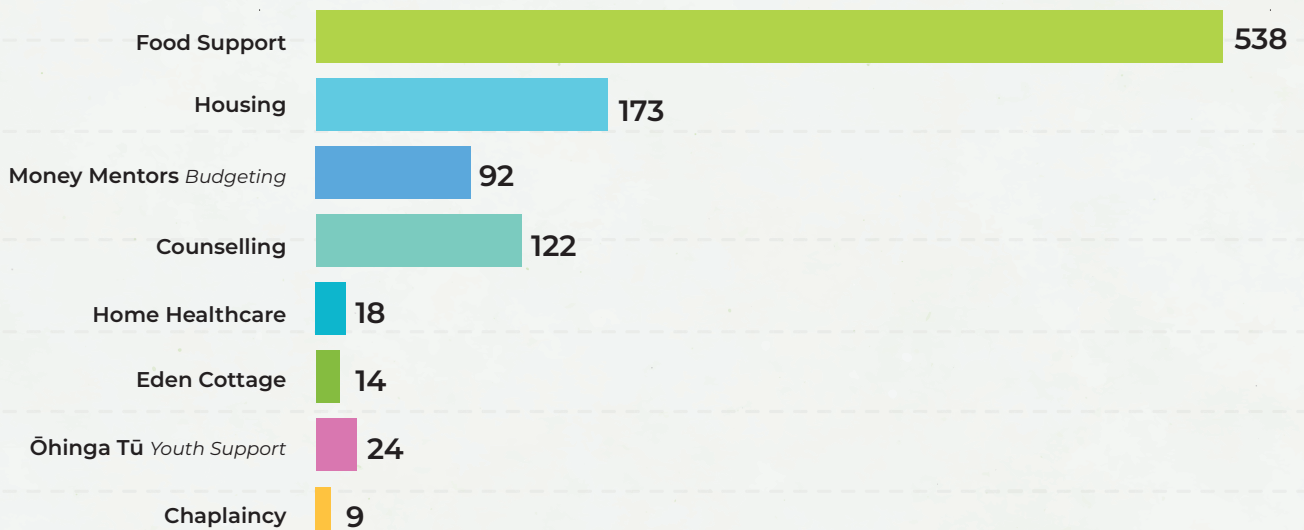
Is your financial situation better, the same, or worse than last year?



What is your main source of income?



What other Visionwest services have you used?



Food given out during
Christmas From The Heart 2023 included:


1 TONNE
OF MINCE 

750 PAVLOVAS 

 **900** PACKS OF
SAUSAGES


 **1200** BAGS
POTATO CHIPS

700 HAMS 

3500 BARS OF
CHOCOLATE 

 **200** CHICKENS


 **900** BOXES
CEREAL

650 KILOS OF
PORK BONES 

2000 PACKS
BISCUITS 

 **1** TONNE OF
POTATOES

 **900** PACKS
LOLLIES

1 TONNE OF
ONIONS 

1000 PACKS
TOILET PAPER 

 **750** SOAPS.

Insights

Data gathered from Christmas From The Heart provides a snapshot of the demographic of 878 West Auckland whānau who are finding life financially challenging right now.

Ethnicity, age, and income source

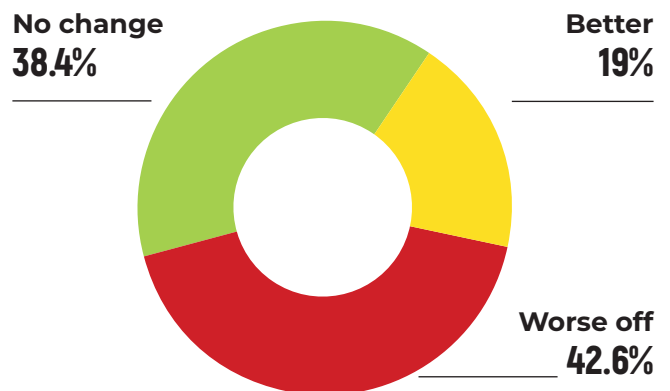
Māori and Pasifika whānau are overrepresented in the statistics making up 57.86% of those receiving support.¹ This reality is also observed on a daily basis by most of our support services.

While we didn't gather in-depth data on individual ages, we do know that 3% of those attending the event were receiving government superannuation as their main form of income. This corresponds with the data for our Pātaka Kai food support service. Of the 10,219 emergency food parcels provided in 2023, 16% went to adults aged 56 or older, and 5.6% to adults aged 65 or older.

As expected, the main source of income for most whānau was a WINZ benefit, however, this wasn't exclusive. 17% (almost one in five) of participants were in fulltime employment, either as salaried workers or self-employed. As noted later in this report, wage earners frequenting Visionwest services is a growing trend, and not isolated to the Christmas period.

Are people better off than last year?

When asked whether their financial situation was better, the same, or worse than last year, only 19% responded, "better." It must be quickly noted that better does not necessarily mean "good" and the very fact that these whānau needed to take part in Christmas From The Heart points to personal finances that, while better than last year, are still tenuous. Also significant is the reality that 42.6% of event participants felt they were worse off than last year; 38.4% felt there had been no change.



Comparing the need to last year

We acknowledge that the event data on its own cannot point directly to an increase or decrease in need, especially because of the different support delivery process used this year. However, when combined with quantitative data and anecdotal evidence collected by our support services throughout the year, we can see some challenging trends within our local communities. These are discussed in the next section of this report.

“ It's the little things that made a big difference. The gift-wrapping station and offering people a coffee, or a free haircut from our barber One mum came in with seven or eight kids and they all got haircuts. It was awesome to see them all queued up here and then walking out with fresh cuts for Christmas. *Sarah Van't Hof – Visionwest Senior Events Manager* ”

¹ 2018 census results state ethnicities in West Auckland included 13.4% Māori and 16.6% Pasifika, a total of 30%.

What we do know

There is much quantitative data available that relates directly to the poverty experience and needs of whānau throughout West Auckland and wider Tāmaki Makaurau. Some of this is data gathered by Visionwest support services.

In addition, in October 2023, Kore Hiakai, the Zero Hunger Collective of which Visionwest is a founding member, published Ka Mākona 2023, their annual report relating to food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand. Together these reveal the extent of the dire financial straits faced by many. In the paragraphs that follow, we comment on:

- The increase in social support service demand.
- The overrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika whānau in Christmas From The Heart and other social support service data.
- The growing number of retirees who are requiring social service support.
- The rise of in-work poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- The rising number of whānau who are seeking help from social support services for the first time.
- The relationship between poverty and poor mental health.



Over Visionwest's last financial year, almost every core support service saw an increase in service demand. Of note are:

- Food parcels provided through Pātaka Kai = 19,691 (effectively a 60% increase).²
- Financial mentoring (budgeting) sessions = 1,900 (a 5% increase).
- Counselling sessions = 6,906 (a 61% increase).³

In relation to our financial mentoring service, of significant concern is that the combined debt of clients seen by our Financial Mentors over the last financial year was \$15,000,000 (\$25,423 per client). It must be recognised that, for whānau already experiencing financial struggles, this debt can be insurmountable and is a catalyst for anchoring a person to a life of poverty.

Admittedly, some of the increase reflected in these figures can be attributed to the severe weather events experienced by Tāmaki Makaurau in January and February 2023, however, we cannot ignore the significant negative impact recent cost-of-living increases have had on the financial situation of many.

- ² The overall number of food parcels provided through Pātaka Kai is less than the previous year when it was impacted by the huge need generated by Covid. However, it must be noted that prior to Covid around 250 emergency food parcels were given away each week; since Covid, that weekly average has remained at almost 400 indicating a dramatic 60% increase.
- ³ This figure represents the total sessions provided by our Wellbeing Centre and Mātanga Oranga counselling services. The increase in demand is a reminder of the link between poverty and mental health.

Ka Mākona 2023 states, “The Government continued to implement benefit and minimum wage increases in 2023. These have not kept pace with cost-of-living rises.”⁴

Ka Mākona 2023 goes onto say, “In our modelling, the food cost increases for two adult two child households averaged around \$40 - \$50 more each week. Sole parent households’ food costs increased by around \$30 each week ... These households also faced similar increases in fixed living cost expenses.”⁵ Three other aspects relating to the demographic of whānau participating in Christmas From The Heart 2023 must be commented on.



The first is the overrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika whānau. Much has been written about this previously and this is referred to in this report (above).

The second aspect worthy of note is age. As mentioned earlier, while specific age-group data was not collected, we do know that 3% of those attending the event were receiving government superannuation as their main form of income. This corresponds with the data for our Pātaka Kai food support service. Of the 10,219 emergency food parcels provided in 2023, 16% went to adults aged 56 or older, and 5.6% to adults aged 65 or older.

Over the past year or so, the news media has carried several stories relating to the increasing number of retirees who are experiencing poverty, many to the point of homelessness.⁶ The societal challenge we face going forward in an aging population is clear.

The third demographic aspect that warrants commentary is the rise of in-work poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand. Of those participating in Christmas From The Heart, 17% (almost one in five) were in fulltime employment, either as salaried workers or self-employment.

“ Society has widely believed that employment provides protection from poverty. However, that may not necessarily be the case: for example, from 2007 to 2018, about 40% of children in poverty were living in working households. The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) published in-work poverty rates ranging from 9%-12% for 2018.⁷ ”

The experience of living in poverty while in-work is a trend that is slowly creeping upwards and will continue to do so as the cost-of-living rises.

4 Kore Hiakai (The Zero Hunger Collective), Ka Mākona 2023, pg. 3.

5 Ibid.

6 A NZ Herald example of how poverty is being experienced by over 65s; <http://tinyurl.com/29ynfepv>.

7 AUT, New Zealand Work Research Institute, In-Work Poverty In New Zealand, 2019, Page 4.

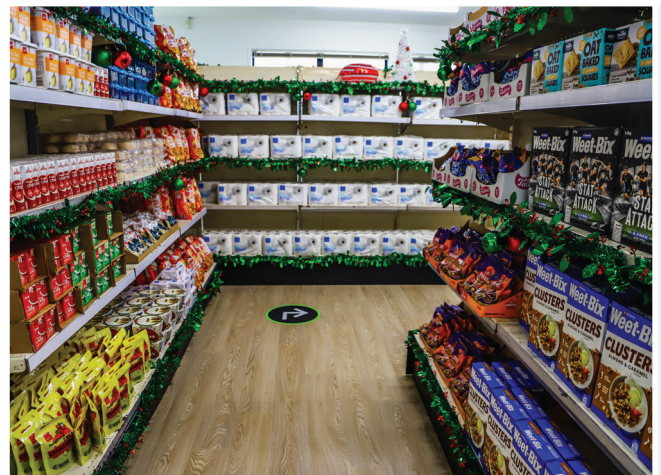
Furthermore, a continuing trend seen at Christmas From The Heart and Visionwest's daily work is the number of people who are being forced to seek help from social support services for the first time. The immediate challenge faced for these people who are new to financial insecurity and the effect of poverty is a lack of familiarity with the social welfare system and lack of knowledge relating to what help is available to them and where to access that help.⁸

As mentioned below, this is often accompanied by a deep sense of whakama (shame) that many working (and out of work) individuals feel at being unable to earn enough money to care for their whānau.

The final point of note mirrors last year's report. We need to again stress that the ramifications of food insecurity go beyond empty bellies. The financial hardship that accompanies food insecurity brings with it social, health and mental health issues. Not only are people with limited finances unable to afford necessary health and dental services, they often suffer mental health issues, many arising out of the shame and marginalisation they feel from being unable to survive financially.

Others live in a state of perpetual stress brought on by the anxiety of being unable to afford food.

This stress can manifest in a number of ways including mental health issues and even the extreme of physical violence in the home.



In Visionwest's **One Hundred Whānau Food and Financial Hardship Report**, 66% of respondents admitted to experiencing stress at least weekly brought about by their inability to afford food while 35% felt constantly stressed about their inability to afford food.⁹

It must be noted that the provision of food support (Christmas food and longer-term food parcels) is an enormous help to whānau, but it is not a panacea for the underlying issue of poverty in our communities. While providing emergency food frees money up to enable people to afford other necessities such as rent, utility bills and debt repayments, it does not alleviate the financial challenges they face.

“ It's a real challenge for organisations like Visionwest. Throughout the sector, there's been a reduction of funding for food support, but the cost of living continues to increase. That means there's more and more people needing help and unfortunately, it's not sustainable to continue to meet growing need that exists within the community. That means making some hard decisions. And it means we're having to look at other creative ways to fund the community need. *Nathan May – General Manager Visionwest Community Services.* ”

8 Visionwest has been able to counter this challenge through the crucial work of our Community Connector Team.

9 Visionwest, One Hundred Whānau Food and Financial Hardship Report. April 2023. Page 3.

Where to from here?

Support services within Visionwest acknowledge the various Government initiatives instigated in the past year including increases to benefit and minimum wage payments. Unfortunately, these have not kept pace with the cost-of-living. The cost of rent, food, transport, and other essential items have all outstripped any income increases.

This means that, despite attempts to ease the long-term poverty that many Kiwi whānau are facing, the reality remains that a growing number of low-income New Zealanders continue to live with a daily financial struggle and all the challenges that come with it.

“ ...small tweaks are not enough to address the systemic issues that perpetuate the hardships embedded in our communities. Most households in our models continue to face a deficit each week after trying to meet their basic fixed expenses...¹⁰ ”

In the midst of this ongoing poverty, we must mention once again the disproportionate poverty that falls on Māori and Pasifika peoples, and the increasing number of both the elderly and employed people who are experiencing poverty, and the number who are encountering personal poverty for the first time and are grappling with the various challenges that it brings.

The challenge for support organisations throughout Aotearoa New Zealand is that food insecurity does not exist in isolation. Behind it is a plethora of issues that impact the lives of both individuals and family units. Issues such as education, housing, employment, and even cultural biases or social policies are part of the complex mix that can lead to a person being trapped in poverty.

This is what is being spoken about when organisations speak of the need for systemic changes when addressing community poverty. Until radical adjustments are made to these issues, it's unreasonable to expect the lives of individuals to change. For example, to insist that a person could escape poverty if they found a better paying job is illogical if that person has been denied access to an appropriate education system. Similarly, it's illogical to suggest there is housing available in a city when rental costs are escalating to a point where they are beyond the means of so many.

In short, it is not hungry people who have failed themselves, it is the systems around them that have let them down.

Christmas From The Heart 2023 was a miniature example of what an effective poverty-busting system could look like. The process of food delivery was proactively designed so that each person requiring support was at the centre of it. Once this happened, it was possible to ask of each participant, “What needs to happen for this person to thrive?” From there we can address the specific issues that are preventing them accessing food or any other essential entity they may be lacking.

It's a long-term project but life and community transformations are possible when effective wraparound resources are funded and provided in a proactive manner.

¹⁰ Kore Hiakai (The Zero Hunger Collective), Ka Mākona 2023, pg. 6.

As part of the data collection process, whānau were asked what Christmas From The Heart means to them. Here are some of the over 800 positive comments we received.

“

You brought a smile on my children's face. We got such beautiful presents from Visionwest today. Thank you so much.

This made a huge difference to me. I was struggling and a little concerned. Thank you for removing pressure.

You've made my whole Christmas. I've been in a women's refuge for the past three weeks and didn't have a clue how Christmas was going to be for us.



This time of year everyone struggles to budget the benefit but Visionwest helps for our family; especially the families with a lot of kids.

My children can have Christmas food and some presents under the tree. Thank you so much.

I received food for my children and gifts I wouldn't have been able to provide. It's great to be able to bring back some traditions from my childhood. Thank you so much I couldn't believe the help. It was overwhelming. You guys are amazing. Merry Christmas.



This has made a big difference. My kids' father is incarcerated and will be absent for Christmas.

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“

This has made a huge difference. I've just got out of hospital and have been really struggling this year.



This took a huge pressure off. Visionwest have been amazing in supporting me to rebuild my life since I moved to West Auckland four years ago.

My children and whānau got to experience the feeling of being loved. The smiles on everyone's faces means the world.

This means a lot. We're struggling and trying to meet bills isn't easy. We just got told our rent is going up and the water bill is going up. You're awesome and help us in so many ways.

This makes a huge difference. I can't afford to buy gifts for my four kids but the help and support from Christmas From The Heart makes this Christmas the best Christmas for my whānau.

This help means I can pay my power bills and Spark as well.

Honestly, my last six months have been horrible. Visionwest has made my kids' Christmas. This would not have happened otherwise.



Today was the first time in my life that I've felt special, I have no family in this world but now I feel there are people around me.

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