

Christmas From The Heart: 2024

FEBRUARY 2025



Visionwest
Waka Whakakitenga

Introduction

Christmas can be a tough time. Societal expectations and the desire to provide the type of joyful family occasion that is experienced by most New Zealanders at Christmas time is huge. However, when it's been a difficult year and finances are tight, making Christmas happen can be stressful and, for some households, impossible to achieve. In response to this reality, Visionwest Community Trust organises *Christmas From The Heart*, an event that has become a recognised part of the West Auckland Christmas calendar and seeks to support whānau to create the type of joyous Christmas Day that their families would otherwise miss out on.



This report is prepared as an encouragement and inspiration for those involved in *Christmas From The Heart* 2024, and to highlight the impact a connected community can have in supporting others during challenging times. It provides an overview of *Christmas From The Heart* 2024 and contains high-level data about whānau receiving Christmas support.

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 to improve food availability and other social services so that events like *Christmas From The Heart* are no longer necessary.

Bookings and Transformational Support

2024 was Visionwest's sixth *Christmas From The Heart* event. Held over five days – between Thursday 12 December and Wednesday 18 December (excluding the weekend) – whānau were given a specific timeslot between 10am and 3.30pm each day. The number of days and the opening hours per day were fewer than last year's eight-day event, but strategic planning and an increased number of participants booked in for each hour meant we were able to cater for a larger number of whānau – 1,118 shoppers in all, a 27.33% increase on last year.

Underlying the *Christmas From The Heart* booking procedure is Visionwest's philosophy of engaging whānau in a transformational support relationship, rather than inviting them to one-off events that could be labelled, "transactional support".

Transactional support – support that is provided as a one-off occurrence or event – is a totally valid means of providing immediate relief, especially in response to crisis situations. The results are, however, usually short-term. In contrast, transformational support involves journeying alongside whānau who are in need, with the aim of providing whatever ongoing support they require to accompany them to a place where they move beyond their challenges to a place of self-sufficiency and life-transformation.

At Visionwest, we intentionally include *Christmas From The Heart* as a key part of the transformational journey we share with our client whānau. By embedding the Christmas event within a trusted relationship and support network built over time, we believe it can become another meaningful step within whānau pathways and enable growth and positive change to occur.

With this in mind, whānau participating in *Christmas From The Heart* 2024 came mainly from four sources:

1. Primarily they were whānau currently journeying with one or more Visionwest service. Therefore, Visionwest keyworkers from each of our services were asked to identify and nominate whānau with whom they already had a support relationship and were walking alongside, and who they knew would require extra support over the Christmas period. The keyworkers were encouraged to meet their whānau at the *Christmas From The Heart* event and walk with them through the event, further strengthening their relationship.
2. Local support organisations, agencies and schools were allocated a set number of spaces for their contacts. Having completed forms with details of those contacts, the school passed them onto Visionwest staff who contacted the whānau to book them in. This inclusion of other support organisations and schools demonstrates Visionwest's ongoing commitment to collaboration and wraparound support structures beyond our own service offerings.
3. A number of whānau contacted Visionwest direct. These tended to be whānau who had been supported by Visionwest in the past or who had participated in previous *Christmas From The Heart* events. Their need was sensitively assessed by our Whānau Centre Social Workers and Community Connectors, and those with pressing needs were welcomed to the event.
4. A few whānau heard about the event through social media or word-of-mouth. These people were channelled through our Whānau Centre Social Workers and Community Connectors to assess eligibility and level of need.

Event Logistics

Whānau arrived at Visionwest at their pre-arranged time. They were welcomed into a festive atmosphere that included music, a free café, and a sausage sizzle. Supervised children's activities were offered to keep the young ones engaged while adults chose toys. These included craft activities, giant games, face painting, and a candy floss machine.

For the second year in a row, we had a barber onsite who provided free haircuts. This once again proved popular. The cost of a professional haircut is prohibitive for many whānau, and some had not been inside a hair salon for a long time. One mother had been cutting the hair of her three sons for the past couple of years and confessed to feeling a degree of guilt that her boys never looked as smart as their school classmates. Mother and sons were beaming as they left *Christmas From The Heart* with the boys all sporting trendy fade cuts.

As they made their way through the four phases of *Christmas From The Heart*, the adults were accompanied by either their Visionwest keyworker or were introduced to a volunteer who became their guide. The four event phases were:

everyday essentials. Here whānau were able to self-select, up to a predetermined value, the items that they needed to carry them through the Christmas period and to create a special Christmas Day meal.



2. From here, those with children were welcomed into **Gifts From The Heart** – our Whānau Centre which had been repurposed into a toy store. Adults could choose gifts from a wide variety of toys, depending on the number and ages of their children. The aim was to provide a main present and one or two “stocking-fillers” for each child.



1. **Kai From The Heart supermarket** – our Manaaki Kai (social supermarket) that had been emptied and restocked with Christmas goods alongside a range of



3. With their trolleys full of non-perishable food, whānau next went to our **fresh produce store** where a selection of perishable items was available for them to choose from.



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.

As hinted at above, an important part of *Christmas From The Heart* is that, while making their way through the event, all whānau had a guide – we called them Christmas Elves. In the case of whānau who attended with their Visionwest keyworker, that keyworker filled the role. For other whānau, members of our volunteer team accompanied them. As they walked together, the whānau and their guide naturally chatted. As part of this kōrero, 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 to be followed up later.

For people who are on a journey of transformation out of poverty, an invitation and the opportunity to korero and receive relevant practical support is a powerful and mana-enhancing way of showing compassion and watering the seeds of hope that have already been planted through the relationship with their support person.

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It's truly a privilege to stand alongside our whānau as they select Christmas kai and gifts for their tamariki. The generosity we've received from our funders, partners, volunteers, and the wider community makes it all possible, and being able to give back to our West Auckland whānau is a feeling that fills us with deep gratitude and joy.

Sarah Van't Hof – Visionwest Senior Events Manager



Christmas From The Heart 2024 was one of our best yet. I loved seeing our staff and volunteer teams working together to support whānau to get the most out of the day. For me, it's the little things that made the most difference, from the cups of coffee and hot chocolates given with smiles right through to the manaakitanga shown as people were offered free haircuts or the kindness that was received as gifts were being wrapped. This is an incredible and rewarding event to be part of; one that really showcases the heartbeat and values of Visionwest.


Nathan May – General Manager Visionwest Community Services.


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Support overview

4,320  **TOTAL PEOPLE SUPPORTED**


 **2,166** **CHILDREN SUPPORTED AND PROVIDED WITH GIFTS**


 **1,118** **TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE SHOPPED**

2,036  **TOTAL NUMBER OF ADULTS REACHED**

 **2,166** **TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN REACHED**

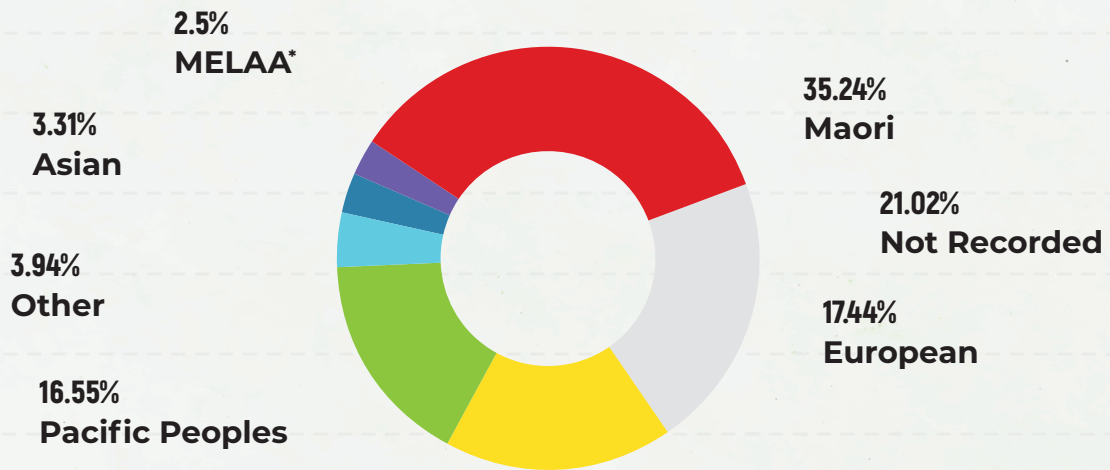
118  **TOTAL NUMBER OF SENIORS REACHED**

 Total value of food provided **\$208,887.78**
Value of full *Christmas From The Heart* food parcel **\$216.01**
(Some shoppers required only a partial parcel)

Total value of gifts provided **\$94,842** 

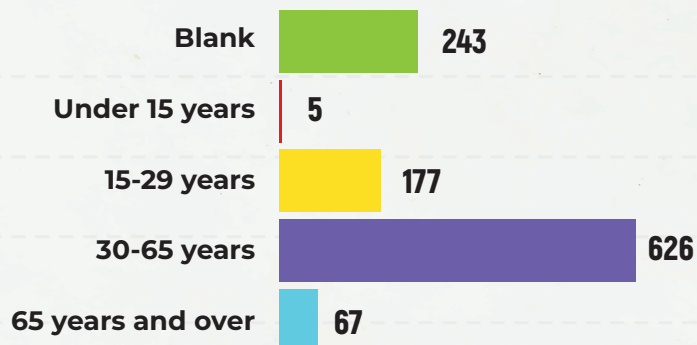
Demographic information

Number of People Shopped by Ethnicity

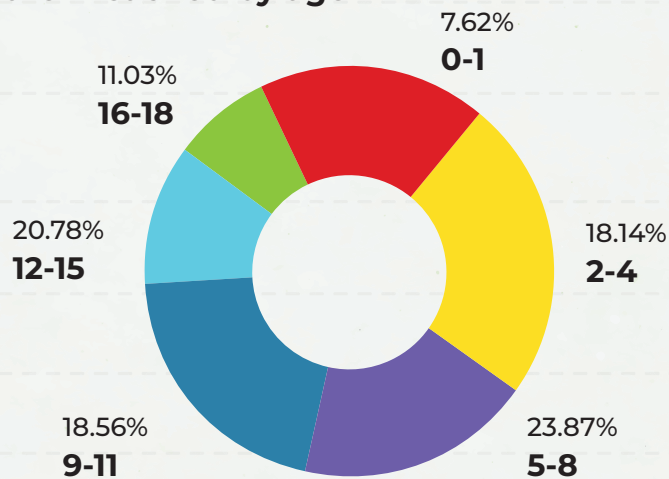


* Middle Eastern, Latin American, African.

Number of people shopped by age group

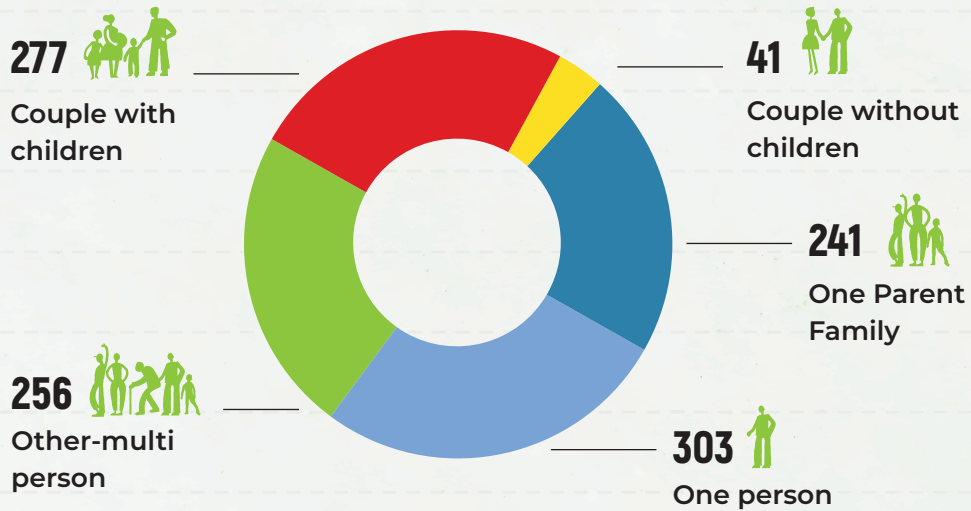


Number of children reached by age



Household Analysis

Total number of household shopped by household type



Notes on the Household types

There are five distinct household categories:

One-person: A household containing a single adult or senior usually living alone

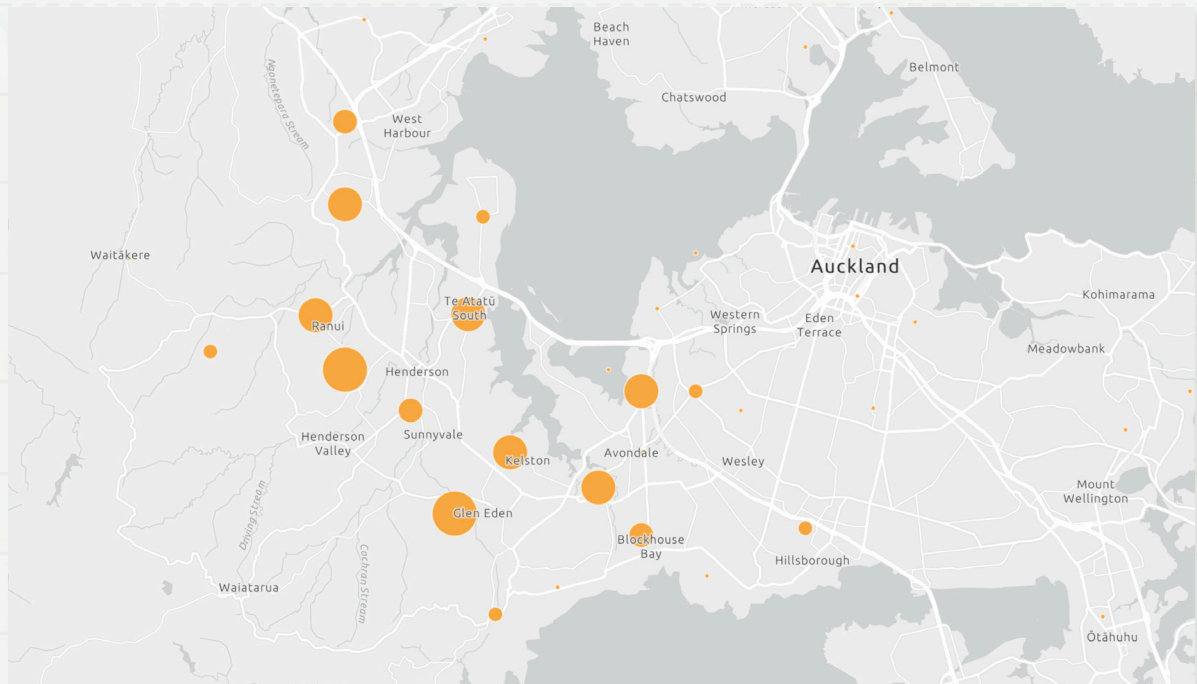
One parent family: A household containing either a single adult or senior, along with children

Couple without children: A household consisting of either two adults or two seniors, with no children

Couple with children: A household containing either two adults or two seniors, with children

Other-multi person: A household containing more than two people, with a possibility of individuals living independently within the same residence.

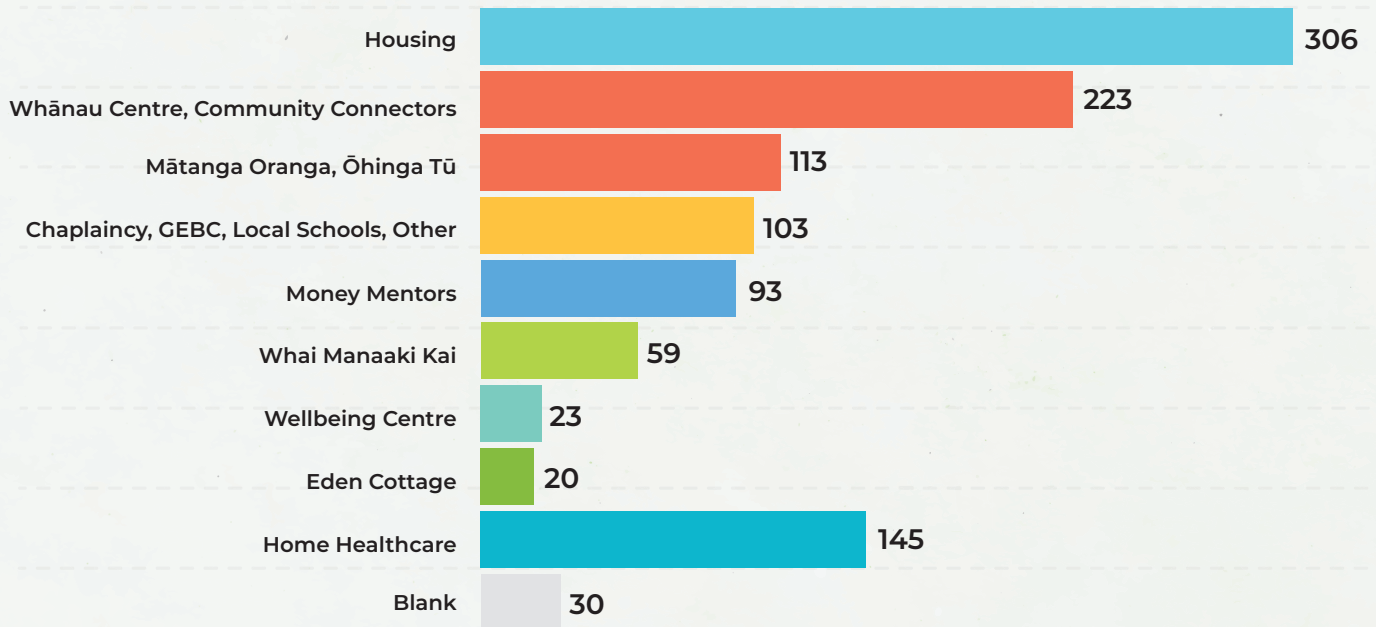
Geographical Analysis



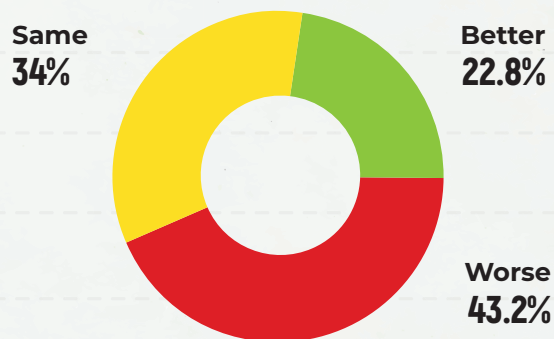
Service Analysis

Number of People Shopped by Service

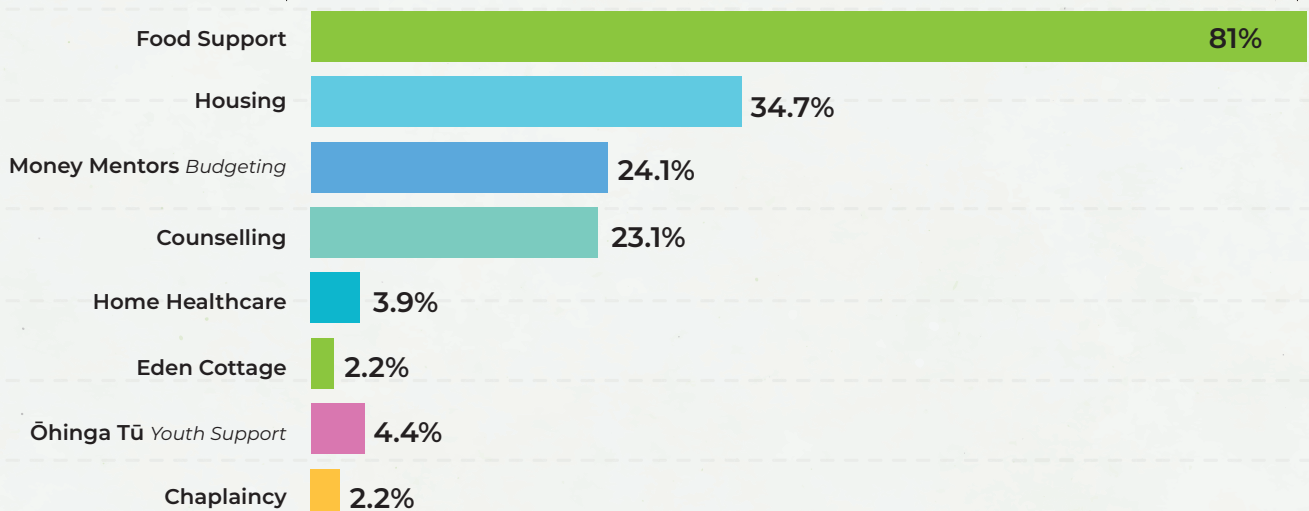
(This shows the service that whānau already journeying with Visionwest are primarily using).



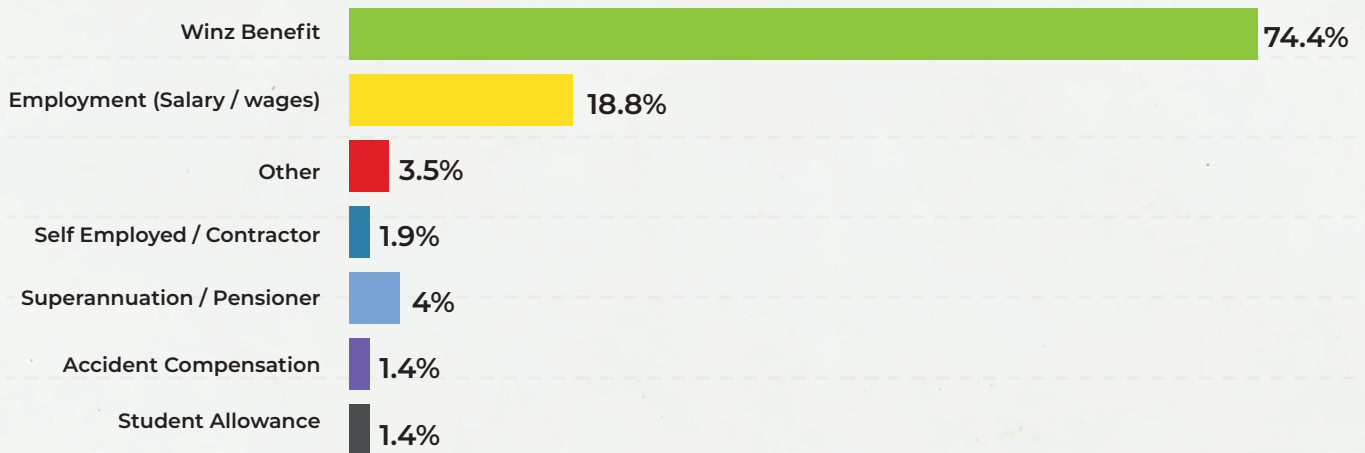
Is your financial situation better, the same, or worse than last year?



What other Visionwest services have you used?



What is your main source of income?



Items given out during Christmas From The Heart 2024 included:

 **1,130** CHRISTMAS BOXES
(CONTAINING ESSENTIAL FOOD ITEMS)

900 WHOLE CHICKENS 

1,800 PACKETS OF CHIPS 

900 PACKETS OF COOKIES 

1,500KG POTATOES 

900 PANCAKE MIX 

2,700 PACKETS OF LOLLIES 

1,000KG ONIONS 

900 GOLDEN SYRUP 

900 BOXES ICE CREAM CONES 

2,000KG ORANGES 

900 CHOCOLATE BARS (LARGE)

900 ICE CREAM (2 LI)

700KG PUMPKINS 

900 CHOCOLATE BARS (SMALL)

900 MAGNUM ICE CREAM PACKS 

1,000KG TOMATOES 

900 BOXES WEETBIX 

900 BOTTLES OF CREAM

900 TINS OF FRUIT SALAD 

900 MILK POWDER 400G 

2,700 MEAL KITS 

1,800 JELLY 

900 PAVLOVAS 

900 TOILET PAPER 12 PK 

Insights

Data gathered from *Christmas From The Heart* provides a snapshot of the demographic of 1,118 whānau, mostly from West Auckland, who are finding life financially challenging right now.

Attendance

At *Christmas From The Heart* 2024, 1,118 people shopped at Manaaki Kai – a 27.33% increase from last year – providing 4,320 adults and children with a Christmas they would otherwise have missed out on.

Ethnicity

Māori and Pasifika whānau combined are overrepresented in the statistics making up 51.79% (35.24% and 16.55% respectively) of those receiving support.¹ While the percentage of Pasifika whānau is very slightly lower than in the wider West Auckland population, the proportion of Māori is over 3.6 times higher than in the broader West Auckland population.

The large overrepresentation of Māori is consistent with what our support services observe on a daily basis while the slight underrepresentation of Pasifika appears to be an anomaly.

Age

The age of whānau participating in *Christmas From The Heart* largely correlated both with last year's statistics and with who we see utilising our food support services on a regular basis. The exception, however, is the number of older adults requiring Christmas support. Over the past year, staff have noticed an increase in the number of seniors accessing our services and this was reflected in *Christmas From The Heart* where 118 of those supported were over 65 years of age – an increase of 71% over last year.

Income source

As expected, the main source of income for the majority of *Christmas From The Heart* whānau was a WINZ benefit, however, this wasn't exclusive. 20.7% (one in five) of participants were in fulltime employment, either as salaried workers or self-employed – an increase of 3.7% on last year. In recent years, it has been noted that 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, 22.8% 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 43.2% (up very slightly on last year) of event participants felt they were worse off than last year; 34% felt there had been no change.

Comparing the need to last year

It must be acknowledged that the event data on its own cannot point directly to an increase or decrease in need. However, by combining quantitative data with anecdotal evidence collected by our support services throughout the year, we can see some challenging trends within our local communities. Looking at previous reports, these trends appear to be consistent and ongoing, they are discussed in the next section of this report.

¹ 2023 census results state ethnicities in West Auckland included 14.1% Māori and 17.3% Pasifika, a total of 31.4%.

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 including data gathered by Visionwest support services. In addition, in October 2024, Kore Hiakai, the Zero Hunger Collective of which Visionwest is a founding member, published Ka Mākona 2024, their annual report relating to food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand.² Together these reveal the extent of the dire financial straits faced by many in Tāmaki Makaurau and throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. Sadly, these issues are identical to those commented on in the *Christmas From The Heart* 2023 report this time last year.



In the paragraphs that follow, we comment on:

- Income inadequacy and high living costs, particularly housing, which are significant contributors to food insecurity and poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- The impact of debt on low-income households.
- The gender and racial inequalities revealed 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 growing number of whānau who are seeking help from social support services for the first time.
- The relationship between poverty and poor mental health.

Last year's *Christmas From The Heart* report highlighted an increased demand for almost every Visionwest core support service. This year, demand declined slightly. This was due to the easing of needs following COVID and the 2023 storms in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Despite this slight drop, demand remains higher than pre-COVID and pre-storm levels, indicating that, even without the recent crises, poverty continues to grow in our communities.

Evidence of this is seen in the work of Money Mentors, Visionwest's financial mentoring service where the number of whānau receiving support was up 17.5% on the previous financial year. Of significant concern is that the combined debt of whānau seen by our Financial Mentors over the last financial year was \$24,417,266 (\$41,738 per client) – an increase of 62% from the previous year. It must be recognised that, for whānau already experiencing financial struggles, even small levels of debt can be insurmountable and becomes the catalyst for anchoring a person to a life of poverty.

Gender and racial inequities can be seen throughout the social support sector. Poverty disproportionately affects Māori and Pasifika women, sole parents, and their children. It has been noted earlier in this report that the proportion of Pasifika whānau participating in *Christmas From The Heart* 2024 was very slightly below that of West Auckland residents as a whole. This is seen to be an anomaly and is not representative of what is observed by our support service teams daily.

² Kore Hiakai (The Zero Hunger Collective), Ka Mākona 2024. Downloadable from <https://www.zerohunger.org.nz/>.

Another demographic aspect worthy of note is age. While there were 67 seniors (65 years' old or over) who personally shopped at Christmas From The Heart, there were a total of 118 who participated in and benefited from the event. This is a 71% increase on last year's figure and corresponds with the data for our Pātaka Kai food support service which has, for some time, witnessed a slow but steady rise in the number of superannuitants accessing our emergency food services. Most of these seniors cite increasing rental costs as their main expense and the reason they struggle to make ends meet on a day-to-day basis.

For the past couple of years, the news media has carried several stories relating to the increasing number of retirees who are experiencing poverty, many to the point of homelessness.³ The challenges faced by a society with an aging population are clear.



The presence of poverty in the lives of many New Zealand children is impacting. The 2023 Stats NZ standard child material hardship rate is 12.5% (144,000), and the severe hardship rate is 5.5% (64,000). In terms of *Christmas From The Heart*, this need is seen in both the number of children receiving gifts from the event and the obvious appreciation and relief in the words, and on the faces, of adults who were despairing over the thought of having nothing to give their children on Christmas morning.

A final demographic aspect that warrants comment, is the consistent rise of in-work

poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand. Of those participating in *Christmas From The Heart* 2024, 20.7% (one in five) of participants were in fulltime employment, either as salaried workers or self-employed – an increase of 3.7% on last year.

“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.”⁴

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 increases with no rise in wages.

The final point of note mirrors that of our past *Christmas From The Heart* reports. We need to again stress the ramifications of food insecurity and the financial hardship that accompanies it has on social, physical, and mental health.

Not only are people with limited finances unable to afford necessary health and dental services, they often also suffer mental health issues, many arising out of the whakama (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, in extreme cases, physical violence in the home.

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 the payment of other necessities such as rent, utility bills and debt repayments, it does not alleviate the long-term financial challenges faced by so many.

³ A NZ Herald example of how poverty is being experienced by over 65s; <http://tinyurl.com/29ynfepv>.

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

Where to From Here?

Support services within Visionwest recognise the various government initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty; however, these efforts have not kept pace with the rising cost of living, which Visionwest client whānau consistently identify as the root cause of their poverty. The escalating costs of rent, food, transport, and other essentials have far outstripped any income increases, leaving many low-income New Zealanders struggling with daily financial hardships. Despite attempts to address long-term poverty, the economic adjustments within Aotearoa New Zealand have fallen short of resolving the systemic issues that perpetuate these challenges. As a result, numerous households, even after prioritising their basic fixed expenses, still face a weekly financial deficit.

In the midst of this ongoing poverty, we must mention once again the disproportionate poverty that falls on Māori and Pasifika peoples, 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.

Christmas From The Heart, coupled with information and experience from the support services provided by Visionwest and allied organisations, highlights several systemic issues contributing to income inadequacy and food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand:

1. **Housing costs** that are disproportionate to incomes and an accommodation supplement scheme that is based on outdated rates is leading to unaffordable housing for a growing number of people.
2. **Pay gaps** relating to both gender and ethnicity, particularly affecting Māori and Pasifika women, (although all women are affected) are compounding financial hardship.



3. **High levels of debt**, including debt to the government, is crippling many whānau in Aotearoa New Zealand. Low-income households are often spending a significant portion of their income on debt repayments which, without support, they may never catch up on.
4. **The food system** is characterised by high food prices and limited access to affordable food, exacerbating food insecurity.

The challenge facing agencies and organisations working to reduce poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand is that poverty rarely exists in isolation. It is deeply interconnected with a wide range of factors that affect individuals and families, such as education, housing, employment, cultural biases, and social policies. These complex and interwoven issues often create barriers that trap people in cycles of poverty.

This interconnectedness is why organisations like Visionwest emphasise the need for systemic change when addressing community poverty. Without significant adjustments to these underlying issues, expecting individuals to break free from poverty is unrealistic. For instance, suggesting that someone could overcome poverty by simply securing a higher-paying job ignores the barriers posed by inadequate access to quality education. Similarly, it is unreasonable to claim housing is accessible in a city where skyrocketing rental costs place it far beyond the reach of many.

Ultimately, it is not the individuals experiencing poverty who have failed; it is the systems around them that have fallen short.

The *Christmas From The Heart* 2024 event offers a glimpse into what an effective system for addressing poverty could look like. The food delivery process was intentionally designed to prioritise the needs of each individual seeking support. This approach enabled Visionwest organisers to ask, “What does this person need to thrive beyond Christmas Day?” and then address the specific barriers preventing them from accessing food or other essential resources.

While achieving lasting change is a long-term endeavour, meaningful transformations in the lives of individuals and communities are possible when comprehensive, proactive, and well-funded support systems are implemented.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, addressing poverty calls for systemic changes. In the first instance, these could include a review of the accommodation supplement system, implementation of pay equity reporting, forgiving of no-fault benefit overpayment debt, and supporting co-op models for affordable food access.

As part of the data collection process, whānau were asked what *Christmas From The Heart* 2024 meant to them. Here are some of the hundreds of positive comments we received.

“

I'm already tearing up from the overwhelming support in food and gifts for my son. Huge, huge help. Thank you.

This is a huge help and it definitely removed a lot of stress from me as the situation for me has been difficult over the past year. Thank you.

We have just relocated to Auckland due to one of my children being diagnosed with end stage kidney disease. This extra support will bring so much joy to my family. Thank you.



“

What a huge difference this will make. I'm a non-custodial single mother with no additional income as I work to rebuild my education to improve my circumstances for my tamariki.

A huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders with not having to worry about all the extra costs that come with Christmas; this will definitely help with the mental health side of my life.

Christmas From The Heart is making a huge difference for my kids and I. I've been financially struggling most this year but now I'm able to be in control of picking my own items of food and select gifts for my children. The Visionwest people made me feel like I did it myself.



There's a smile on my children's faces and my heart is full. Christmas is meant to be an exciting and living time – Christmas from the Heart means I can make that happen.

This has made Christmas amazing. I haven't been able to afford food like this for a long time.

This has made a massive difference to our Christmas. Stress levels lower, financial help. All round wonderful.

It will make a huge difference as we have a new addition (baby) to the family and have spent the past eight weeks in hospital.



You have made a huge difference. No amount of words to show how truly thankful I am and my whānau are for this. Thank you for making this special for us!

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A huge difference. We had no idea what we were going to do for Christmas. We had no tree, presents or food. So this helps so much knowing that our kids will have a Christmas this year.



What you have given is just about all we are eating this Christmas Day and over the holidays because money is so tight.

I can sleep at night now knowing my kids have something just for them on Christmas Day. Such a huge help, thank you.

Heaps. We have no family at all. Its just me and my son. We feel lonely and have no one to get us gifts and no money to buy anything. But now we can celebrate and enjoy and play together.

This means we can celebrate Christmas as a family; it will alleviate some of the stress and troubles that we have.

Massive! We have been living day to day. This is a godsend and I have been treated with such dignity.

This makes a huge difference. I was worried I wouldn't be able to give to my kids this year due to the cost of moving rental houses.



This means I can pay off my outstanding water bill.

The cost of living and inflation has made things tough. This is a huge help. Everything costs so much now.

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Read the latest Visionwest impact reports:

visionwest.org.nz/impact-reports

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