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Pictures by Ash Smith and Mark Jesser



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Staying in, not going out. Thinking twice about a purchase. And, for some, choosing between paying bills or putting food on the table. The amount of money needed just to live day to day is rising and few on the Border remain unaffected. Support services say they're getting more and more calls for help from families, the working poor, those experiencing homelessness or health issues. People on the street are also watching what they spend as belts tighten and priorities change.

BEAU GREENWAY reports: P4-5

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Extra help needed by even more

BY BEAU GREENWAY

THOUSANDS of Border families are seeking additional support to secure housing and put food on the table as they navigate the cost of living crisis.

While inflation growth has slowed, the pressure remains on stretched households.

Albury Wodonga Regional FoodShare's community pantry, a social supermarket to cater for those unable to put food on the table, has more than 1000 people through its doors each month.

Co-ordinator Nicole Eirth said she had noticed a steady increase in the service. One month in particular saw two extra people come in per day.

"It's not open for just anyone to use. They have to be in some sort of crisis," she said.

"That can be a really large range of people because you've got working poor, people that are on apprentice wages, got a mortgage, got family and still struggling to put food on the table.

"The other reason that I've found a lot of it is people having a health crisis. Someone in the family has been diagnosed with a terminal illness or they have an illness that they have to go to specialist for and that is taking a lot of money out of their budgets."

Ms Eirth said a voucher system used by the supermarket could be utilised until the individual or family was out of the crisis situation.

"It's a great way to help them to budget for food and to get a better control over their food insecurity," she said.

"Our focus is on fresh, healthy foods. We do have a full fruit and vegetable department and every voucher gets between three to five kilos of fresh fruit and vegetables, they get half a dozen eggs, they get a meat product, they get a couple of frozen products, they get dairy products and they also get pantry staples. Hygiene and cleaning is also very important to our people.

"It gives them back that independence to choose what they need, because they know what's in their cupboards, they know what people eat and they know what they can cook.

"It's about building a community, a village and everyone in the community working together with the end result of getting that person better equipped to deal with their food insecurity."

Meanwhile, Junction Support Services, a North East agency that assists people who are disadvantaged through poverty, homelessness,

family breakdown, social isolation, family violence, mental ill health and drug and alcohol addiction, has seen a jump in demand for support in the past two-and-a-half to three years.

Chief executive Megan Hanley said Junction Support Services had more than 130 families waiting for assistance, including housing and homelessness support, with cost of living pressures the major contributor.

"Our community is rebuilding after the pandemic, bushfires and floods. The rising costs of living really amplify the challenges so many families and individuals face," she said.

"A worrying concern is that Albury-Wodonga was among the top LGAs that people relocated to from metropolitan areas during COVID-19, and Wodonga is one of the fastest-growing regional cities in Victoria."

Ms Hanley said there was huge pressure on the agency's resources.

"We have a 12-month wait list for many of our support services, including people seeking homelessness support, to re-engage with education services, and also for therapeutic support for family violence," she said.

"That is a demand that we can't keep up with."



Albury Wodonga Regional FoodShare's community pantry co-ordinator Nicole Eirth has noticed a rise in people struggling to put food on the table. Picture by Mark Jesser



Junction Support Services chief executive Megan Hanley said there is a 12-month waiting list for many of its areas, including people seeking homelessness help.



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Money is tighter for many

Border residents have their say on the cost of living debate and outline lifestyle changes they've made to ensure they can continue to get by, despite a range of financial hurdles

BY BEAU GREENWAY

RISING interest rates, increasing prices of basic food products and a climb in energy bills are among concerns held by Border residents continuing to grapple with the cost of living.

The *Border Mail* hit the streets of Albury this week to find out some of the biggest challenges facing the community.

Albury mother-of-two Katie Trebley said interest rates rises were of particular concern to her household.

"It's making me think twice about larger purchases. It has also impacted the ability to save as a family as well. I've been really looking at reassessing things like schooling fees and things like that," she said.

"Things you might purchase with a disposable income for your children, you're now saving for things like Christmas and birthdays.

"I think paying bills off by the week is probably the best way to go and making sure that you've got different pockets of money for different things."

Albury's Aaron Bykerk doesn't have children, but believes the recent property boom has added pressure.



Albury friends Aaron Bykerk, 33, and Katie Trebley, 38, say rising interest rates brought about changes to their spending habits in recent months. Pictures by Ash Smith

"Trades have gone up because more people are trying to improve the homes that they have because they can't afford to upsize," he said.

"Wages aren't excessively rising as quickly as the cost of living, so it's finding that balance. We've been pulling in the strings with less nights out and more nights in.

"Therefore, the community struggles too, because when we're not going out and spending money at restaurants and shopping centres, all those local suppliers are struggling with their cost of living as well. It's a vicious cycle."

Wodonga retiree Roderick Allen said he was in a for-

tunate position to not have been seriously impacted, but felt for his children and others raising a family.

"I remember our first home loan, I think we had part of it at 16 per cent. It's been so easy for so long and I'm old enough to remember when it was not that easy, so it doesn't come as a complete surprise to me that the pendulum swings back," he said.

"If you keep your eye on the world picture, it's really not surprising and I do not blame the Australian government for it."

Students Kate Sinclair and Tom Wynd, both 17, said they have become more conscious of their own spending.

"Basic food like bread is getting more expensive. A lot of the necessities are going up and junk food is still the cheapest thing, which is annoying," Tom said.

Kate said: "Whenever I go out and buy for myself it's always cheaper items because I don't want to spend all my money at once."

Former Albury resident Amy Byrne, who now runs a dairy farm at Tinamba in Gippsland, said production costs had risen, while her grocery shop was up at least \$100 a week.

"The milk price is high at the moment, but the cost of electricity, fertilisers and feed evens it out," she said.



Wodonga retiree Roderick Allen says he has been lucky the cost of living crisis hasn't had much of an impact on his lifestyle, but feels for those raising families.



Dairy farmer Amy Byrne, 35, is fortunate the price of milk is high but said it was offset by the cost of requirements such as feed and fertilisers to produce it.



Albury students Kate Sinclair and Tom Wynd, both 17, are thinking more about how they choose to spend their money with a rise in the cost of basic food a concern.

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