

Dignity, connection and community: inside the work of CS1

Walk into Community Services 1's food pantry in Canberra and you might notice something unusual. It looks like a shop.

That's quite deliberate. CS1 provides the pantry for people who may be struggling to afford everyday essentials. But rather than simply handing out food parcels, the organisation has created a shop with heavily discounted prices. CS1 shoppers can choose what they need and pay for it themselves.

'We want people to accept our services and have dignity,' says Shaun Travis, Operations Director – Community Services at CS1. 'We made a conscious decision to make the pantry look like a shop.'

Around 40–60 people shop at the pantry each week, choosing from a range that includes fresh produce, baby products and feminine hygiene products as well as everyday food and household essentials. And unlike many food relief services, the pantry isn't means tested.

Customers can pay for their shopping with cash, or with CS1 points. Points can be earned by helping in CS1's community garden, where produce is grown for the pantry. It's a small detail that says a great deal about the philosophy behind CS1. The aim isn't simply to provide assistance. It's to support people in a way that preserves choice, participation and dignity.

Supporting people at every stage of life

The pantry is just one part of CS1's work across the Canberra community. In 2025 alone, CS1 supported more than 5,000 clients through services spanning early childhood education and care, out-of-school-hours and holiday programs, aged care, community transport and social support.

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It also provides out-of-hospital care, supporting people after they leave hospital and helping them manage the transition back into everyday life. While the services are diverse, they share a common purpose: providing practical support to people when they need it. And there are still plenty of people who need that support.

At the same time, sustaining that work brings its own challenges. Traditional 'mum and dad' donations have declined, so CS1 is increasingly looking to businesses, charitable organisations and other supporters to help make its work sustainable over the longer term.

That has led CS1 to think differently about another kind of relationship – the relationships it has with its commercial suppliers.



From suppliers to partners

CS1 works with an extraordinarily wide range of suppliers and organisations. They include providers of food, childcare resources, furniture, recruitment and transport services, as well as sporting clubs, community farms, Rotary groups and other community organisations.

But CS1 doesn't want those organisations simply to supply a product or service and send an invoice. It wants them to understand what they're helping make possible.

'Connecting our suppliers with our mission enhances the relationship,' says Karen Pollard, Head of Operations at CS1. 'We have a profound impact on people's lives, and that comes alive when people see it.'

That's why CS1 actively invites suppliers, politicians, philanthropists and other supporters into its operations to see the work firsthand. The benefits go well beyond fundraising. The visits build understanding, suppliers talk about CS1 within their own networks and communities, and commercial relationships can develop into partnerships based on shared values and mutual respect.

'That's what we're trying to do – convert commercial relationships into partnerships,' Karen says.

For an organisation increasingly looking to work with suppliers whose values align with its own, that connection matters.

Seeing the difference firsthand

Recently, members of the Toshiba team visited CS1 to learn more about the organisation they support. They toured the operation, saw the pantry and gained a much deeper understanding of the people and purpose behind CS1's work.

For Karen, that's exactly what CS1 hopes can happen when suppliers take the time to understand its mission. 'They came in, did a tour, saw the pantry and understood the difference we make in people's lives', she says. 'That led to them making a sizeable donation. They are no longer just a supplier, they are a partner.'

Toshiba's relationship with CS1 began as a commercial one. Toshiba provides a full suite of managed technology services, supporting the IT environment behind CS1's day-to-day operations. For Karen, one of the practical benefits is having expertise available without CS1 needing to maintain the same level of resource internally.

'If I can't figure something out, they jump in and fix it,' she says. 'It's a great service.'

But the visit gave the Toshiba team a different perspective on that relationship. CS1 was no longer simply an organisation whose technology they managed; they could see firsthand what their work was helping CS1 deliver to the community.

Building a community around the community

CS1's approach recognises something important about community organisations. Their impact isn't created by employees and volunteers alone. It also depends on a much wider network of businesses, community groups, donors, supporters and partners who contribute in different ways.

Sometimes that contribution is food for a pantry. Sometimes it's time, expertise, funding or technology. Sometimes it's simply telling someone else about the work CS1 does. For an organisation working to make its services sustainable from year to year, every one of those connections matters.

And for the businesses that support CS1, seeing the work firsthand can transform their understanding of what they're part of. Because behind the technology, supplies and services is something much more human: people in the Canberra community getting practical support when they need it – delivered with dignity.

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