Date

The Honorable Anna Caballero

Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee

State Capital 412

Sacramento, CA 95814

**Re: AB 1961 (Wicks): End Hunger in California Act of 2024- SUPPORT**

Dear Chair Caballero:

The (insert organization) is proud to support and thank you for authoring AB 1961, the End Hunger in California Act of 2024. The Act requires the development of a strategic masterplan to end hunger in California by establishing a task force of food system stakeholders to collaborate at the local, regional, and state levels and in partnership with tribal governments on ways to remove barriers to access adequate, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for all communities in California.

California is the fifth largest food supplier, producing nearly half of the nation's fruits and vegetables[[1]](#footnote-1), 20% of the country’s rice harvest[[2]](#footnote-2), and is the second largest producer of cheese in the nation.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, more than 1 in 5 Californians, about 8.8 million people, currently struggles with food insecurity which is the limited or uncertain access to enough food to lead a healthy, active life.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Hunger and lack of access to nutritious food are exacerbated by racial and economic inequities, with 40% of Black households and 30% of Latino households being food insecure in California.[[5]](#footnote-5) Additionally, in Los Angeles County alone, 23% of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander residents live in food-insecure households. Furthermore, a staggering 92% of Native American households suffer from food insecurity, according to a study of four tribes across Northern California.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Sadly ironic, the workers who grow and deliver food face higher levels of food insecurity than the rest of the U.S. workforce[[7]](#footnote-7). Even though food surrounds grocery workers, over three-quarters of Kroger grocery workers are food insecure based on the U.S Department of Agriculture food security assessment tool, seven times higher than the US average. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 72% of agricultural workers reported trouble paying for food[[8]](#footnote-8). In a 2021 survey of almost 120 small farmers across the state, 49% of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color farmers experienced food insecurity, needing food from a food bank and/or needing or would have benefited from CalFresh benefits. The majority of these farmworkers, food industry workers, and food service providers are people of color, undocumented, or live in mixed immigration status families, with 1/5 of farmers in California identifying as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

Commonly referred to as food deserts, these areas are regions of the country where at least one-third of the area’s population is living more than a half-mile away from the closest supermarket or large grocery store, and large proportions of households are low-income, have inadequate access to transportation, and a limited number of food retailers providing fresh produce and healthy groceries for affordable prices.[[9]](#footnote-9) In 2021, 65% of neighborhoods in the San Francisco and San Jose metro areas were considered food deserts, meaning 600 neighborhoods in the San Francisco metro area and 289 neighborhoods in the San Jose metro area have low food access.[[10]](#footnote-10) In Fresno, where there is an abundance of fresh produce growing at local farms, over 20% of residents live in food deserts and travel long distances to find a grocery store that offers fresh fruits and vegetables.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Food desert communities lack the resources to attract large grocery store chains, leaving residents with convenience stores and fast-food restaurants as their primary food sources. According to the Human League, grocery store owners avoid opening shop in food deserts because market research suggests more affluent areas are more profitable. Some common characteristics across food deserts- smaller populations, lower rates of employment, higher rates of poverty- are the same characteristics that scare off retailers.[[12]](#footnote-12) Limited transportation options further compound the problem, making it difficult for residents to access healthier foods. However, it is not just lack of access to food that is driving families to experience hunger. The cost of food has significantly increased – it has been over 30 years since food was this expensive, and consumers now spend over 11.3% of their disposable income on food.[[13]](#footnote-13) In 2022, food prices increased by 9.9%, faster than any year since 1979. In 2023, food prices increased by 5.8%.[[14]](#footnote-14) Today, food prices remain 19% more expensive than before the pandemic.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Meanwhile, California continues to lag in maximizing participation in many federal nutrition programs. Most notably, California ranks nearly last in enrolling likely eligible families into CalFresh at 71%, the nation’s largest and best anti-hunger program, including for key populations like older adults and working families.[[16]](#footnote-16) This not only sets back efforts to end hunger, but is a significant loss for California’s vital food economy – every $1 in federally-funded CalFresh benefits generates as much as $1.80 in economic activity as benefits are spent in stores, and every $1 billion in benefits creates more than 10,000 jobs for farm workers, transportation, retail, and throughout the sector.[[17]](#footnote-17) Participation in WIC is even lower, estimated to be at 65%.[[18]](#footnote-18) The opposite is the case for school meals for all, which by law must maximize federal provisions and resources. California is one of the few states that has seen increases in school meal participation because of the 2-meal guarantee of a school breakfast and lunch for any student.[[19]](#footnote-19) The Summer EBT program coming online for summer 2024 is the first new federal entitlement in a generation, with more than 5 million children estimated to be eligible, yes some 30% will need to apply to receive their $120 in federally funded summer food aid. Any plan to end hunger must maximize all available federal resources.

Lack of access to nutritious food can have disastrous consequences for children and adults. Research shows an association between food insecurity and delayed development in young children, risk of chronic illnesses, and behavioral problems like hyperactivity, anxiety, and aggression in school-age children.[[20]](#footnote-20) Children can be affected by hunger even before they are born. Low prenatal iron levels have been linked to challenges with language comprehension, measurable development delays, and preventing children from succeeding in the classroom. Researchers have also found that childhood hunger is a predictor of depression in adolescence and young adulthood and may also play a part in contributing to mood, behavior, and substance abuse disorders. Hunger can lead to early life stress that can negatively impact health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, asthma, and autoimmune conditions, to name a few.[[21]](#footnote-21)Furthermore, limited access to fresh and nutritious foods can lead to an increased reliance on processed and unhealthy options, which in turn contributes to a higher prevalence of diet-related health issues such as \_ obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.[[22]](#footnote-22)

AB 1961 establishes a broadly inclusive task force that will work to develop statewide goals, strategies, and solutions to tackle the inequalities that exist in our current food system and improve access to nutritious and affordable food in all communities. We thank you for authoring this critical measure and urges your colleagues to support it.

Sincerely,

(Signature)

(Name, title, organization)

1. <https://californialocal.com/localnews/statewide/ca/article/show/36707-california-agriculture-dairy-wheat-fruit-vegetables/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.marinij.com/2020/11/27/garden-tip-californias-rice-growing-region-sacramento/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/195764/top-10-us-states-for-cheese-production-2008/#:~:text=producer%20of%20cheese.-,The,is%20the%20second%20largest%20producer> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.cafoodbanks.org/hunger-data-reports/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.cafoodbanks.org/hunger-data-reports/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://nature.berkeley.edu/news/2019/06/restoring-access-native-foods-can-reduce-food-insecurity> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://foodchainworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Hands-That-Feed-Us-Report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://covid19farmworkerstudy.org/survey/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CA-COFS-Phase-One-Final-Report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/45014/30940_err140.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://abc7news.com/food-desert-bay-area-deserts-pantry-near-me-alameda-bank/11254529/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://gvwire.com/2023/09/29/the-huge-battle-against-food-deserts-in-fresno/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://thehumaneleague.org/article/food-desert#:~:text=Grocery%20store%20owners%20avoid%20opening,characteristics%20that%20scare%20off%20retailers> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. https://www.wsj.com/economy/consumers/its-been-30-years-since-food-ate-up-this-much-of-your-income-2e3dd3ed [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20food%20prices%20increased,prices%20increased%20by%207.7%20percent> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://apnews.com/article/inflation-consumers-price-gouging-spending-economy-999e81e2f869a0151e2ee6bbb63370af> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/snap2019reaching.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/93529/err-265.pdf?v=6216.4>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/wic/eligibility-and-program-reach-estimates-2020>. While lower than CalFresh, 65% does rank California higher among the states for WIC participation. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. <https://frac.org/reach-report-2024>. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-ofhunger#:~:text=Hunger%20and%20child%20development&text=Research%20shows%20an%20association%20between,aggression%20in%20school%2Dage%20children> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://www.nokidhungry.org/blog/effects-of-hunger-on-the-body> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9182982/> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)