

Date of Hearing: July 1, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Alex Lee, Chair

SB 444 (Hurtado) – As Introduced February 18, 2025

SENATE VOTE: 38-0

SUBJECT: State Healthy Food Access Policy

SUMMARY: Revises state policy that declares every human being has the right to access sufficient, affordable, and healthy food to include locally grown and raised food.

EXISTING LAW:

State law:

- 1) Declares that every human being has the right to access sufficient affordable and healthy food. (Welfare and Institutions Code [WIC] § 18700(a)(1))
- 2) Defines food insecurity as the occasional or constant lack of access to the food one needs to live a healthy life and the uncertainty of being able to acquire enough food to meet the needs of an individual or household due to insufficient money or other resources. (WIC § 18700(a)(2))
- 3) Requires all relevant state agencies, including but not limited to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), the California Department of Education (CDE), and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) to consider the right to affordable and healthy food when creating policies or regulation related to the distribution of affordable food. (WIC § 18700(b))
- 4) Establishes the CalFresh program to administer the provision of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to families and individuals meeting certain criteria, as specified. (WIC 18900 § *et seq.*)

Federal law:

- 5) Establishes SNAP pursuant to the Food Stamp Act of 1964. (7 United States Code § 2011 *et seq.*)

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Senate Appropriations Committee on April 21, 2025:

- The California Department of Social Services (CDSS), the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), and the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) estimate no fiscal impact to state operations.
- Unknown, potential General Fund cost pressures to the extent that changes in department policies, regulations, and criteria related to supporting “locally grown and raised” affordable and healthy food access would result in increased costs for food programs.

COMMENTS:

Background: *Food Insecurity.* The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which monitors food insecurity and oversees the nation’s largest food aid programs, defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” It categorizes food security into four levels:

Ranges of Food Security

	LEVEL OF SECURITY	DEFINITION
Food Secure	High Food Security	Households had no problems, or anxiety about, consistently accessing adequate food
	Marginal Food Security	Households had problems or anxiety at times about accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety and quantity of food were not substantially reduced
Food Insecure	Low Food Security	Households reduced the quality, variety and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted
	Very Low Food Security	At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money or other resources for food

Sources: Feeding America, What is Food Insecurity? <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/> (Accessed March 1, 2020)

While California declared food as a human right in 2023 [SB 628 (Hurtado), Chapter 879, Statutes of 2023], and produces nearly half of the nation’s fruits and vegetables, data from the United States (U.S.) Census Household Pulse Survey shows that as of September 2024, 22% of California households are food insecure and 27% of households with children are food insecure, with deep disparities for Black (43%), Latino (33%), and Native (92%) households compared to White (15%) households. Factors contributing to food insecurity include socioeconomic disparities and geographic barriers, among other causes. For individuals who face food insecurity, the choice is often between nurturing their physical health or maintaining other aspects of their lives, such as purchasing necessary medications or paying rent to maintain housing.

A lack of adequate food can have long-term physical health consequences across the lifespan. During pregnancy, it can lead to poor birth outcomes, impacting a child’s physical and cognitive development. Young children with inadequate or interrupted food intake are at a higher risk of iron deficiency, respiratory illnesses, infections, and developmental delays. In school-aged children, food insecurity is associated with poor academic performance, attention difficulties, and behavioral issues. In adolescence, food insecurity is associated with drug and alcohol abuse, greater exposure to violence, high-risk pregnancy, and suicidal ideation, and may lead to risky sexual behavior, as food insecurity has a negative influence on the ability of young people to consider the long-term consequences of risky behaviors. Long-term, these disadvantages contribute to intergenerational cycles of poverty and food insecurity. In adulthood, food insecurity increases the risk of chronic, diet-related diseases such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers due to poor nutrition and limited access to healthcare. Beyond physical health, the emotional and psychological stress of uncertain food access causes anxiety, depression, and social isolation.

Food Assistance Programs. Various food assistance programs are operated across the state and administered by CDSS, CDFA, CDE, CDPH, DHCS, and the California Department of Aging (CDA).

Overseen by CDSS, CalFresh, California's version of SNAP (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) is the largest federal food safety-net program that serves as the first line of defense against hunger and food insecurity for low-income households. In California, \$12.6 billion of federal SNAP funds are administered through the CalFresh program, serving approximately 5.4 million CalFresh participants and covering 100% of the program's benefit costs.

Federally funded and overseen by CDSS, Summer (Electronic Benefits Transfer) EBT (SUN Bucks in California), offers a \$120 benefit for children from low-income families for food during the summer months when children are out of school. Eligibility is tied to free and reduced price meal eligibility, and children may be automatically eligible through participation in CalFresh or Medi-Cal. Children who are attending Head Start, experiencing homelessness, living in foster care, or part of a migrant family are also automatically eligible. California implemented the first year of SUN Bucks in Summer 2024, with 5.6 million children receiving \$672 million in benefits. In addition to CalFresh and SUN Bucks, CDSS oversees other nutrition programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which provides free meals at childcare centers, homeless shelters, adult daycare centers, and afterschool programs.

Recently, CDSS operated the CalFresh Fruit and Vegetable EBT Pilot Project, which provides a dollar-for-dollar match (up to \$60 per month) for purchases of fruits and vegetables at participating retailers. This match could then be used to buy other CalFresh-eligible foods, helping recipients stretch their benefits further. The program has proven to be more successful and popular than expected, with funds running out more quickly than anticipated in two separate instances: the program's pilot phase ran from February 2023 to April 2024, followed by a second phase from October 2024 to January 2025.

Similar to the CalFresh Fruit and Vegetable EBT Pilot Project, CDFA oversees the Market Match program, a healthy food incentive program funded by the California Nutrition Incentive Program. Farmers' markets can choose to participate by partnering with the state to provide monetary incentives for the purchase of California grown fruits and vegetables at certified farmers' markets and small businesses. Through this program, CalFresh recipients can receive up to \$15 in matching funds when purchasing fruits and vegetables at participating farmers' markets. Farmers are reimbursed by the state to ensure they are fully compensated. Programs like Market Match and the Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program encourage the purchase of healthy, affordable, locally grown food, aligning with the goals of this bill.

CDE administers two federally funded meal programs for school-age children, which include the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. Both programs provide free or reduced-priced healthy meals to income-eligible students. Starting in the 2022-23 school year, California became the first state to implement and fully fund a Universal Meals Program for students in Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12. This program ensures that all students, regardless of their eligibility for free or reduced-price meals, can receive a meal if requested. Students are eligible to receive up to two free meals during the school day.

CDPH administers the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), a federally funded program that provides supplemental foods, nutrition education, and healthcare referrals at no cost to low-income pregnant, breastfeeding and

postpartum women, as well as infants and children up to five years of age who are determined to be at nutritional risk. To qualify for WIC, applicants must be assessed by a health professional and determined to be at nutritional risk due to specific medical or diet-based conditions.

Additionally, the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) allows eligible households to receive \$30 in FMNP coupons in addition to their regular WIC benefits, which can be used to buy foods from authorized farmers, farmers' markets, and roadside stands.

DHCS administers several nutrition-related programs, including the Medically Tailored Meals Pilot Program that is integrated into California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM) reform. Launched on April 1, 2018, this pilot served three medically tailored meals per day for 12 weeks to 1,413 eligible beneficiaries with congestive heart failure over a four-year period.

CDA oversees nutrition programs that provide meals for adults 60 years of age or older, typically through congregate nutrition sites or home-delivered meals. These services are available to a broad range of older adults, with priority given to those facing the greatest economic or social need. Many older adults receive nutrition assistance in congregate settings, such as in senior centers, and through Area Agencies on Aging, Community-Based Adult Services, Adult Day Services, and the Multipurpose Senior Services Program. The federally funded Home-Delivered Nutrition Program, often known as Meals on Wheels, is a longstanding program that delivers healthy meals to older adults who are unable to go out to purchase food or prepare meals at home. The current federal budget reconciliation bill, H.R. 1, that was passed by the House on May 22, 2025, and is awaiting a vote of the Senate, could, if signed into law, trigger across-the-board cuts to mandatory spending programs like the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) which helps to fund Meals on Wheels. Because H.R.1 is projected to increase the federal deficit, funding for SSBG could be automatically eliminated unless Congress waives the rule that requires new spending to be offset by cuts to programs.

Current law requires these departments to consider the state policy that affordable and healthy food is a human right when creating revising, adopting, or establishing policies, regulations, and grant criteria related to the distribution of sufficient, affordable food. *This bill* expands that policy to include the right to access locally produced food.

Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program. The Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement (LFPA) Program is a federal initiative established through the American Rescue Plan in 2021 as a COVID-19 pandemic-era relief measure. Administered by the USDA, the program provides non-competitive cooperative agreements to state, tribal, and territorial governments, allowing them to purchase food from within the state or within a 400-mile radius to support regional and underrepresented farmers. This food is then distributed to food assistance programs such as food banks and other nonprofit organizations. Since 2022, California has utilized more than \$88.5 million in LFPA funding to support local farmers and has since purchased food from 315 local producers for distribution. Additionally, in 2024 alone, California's LFPA Program allocated the California Association of Food Banks over \$22.3 million to provide local healthy food and 18,647,546 meals to food-insecure Californians.

In December 2024, the USDA announced the availability of \$1.13 billion for LFPA and Local Food for Schools Program, which included California's approximately \$47 million. However, on March 7, 2025, the USDA announced the program's termination and the cancellation of additional funding rounds. The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Services determined that, "this agreement no longer effectuates agency priorities, and that termination of the award is

appropriate.” On April 4, 2025, CDSS appealed the decision by urging the USDA to reconsider and immediately reinstate the \$47,284,232 in Congressionally approved funding committed to California for 2025.

This bill seeks to encourage the California state government to continue supporting local farmers and food producers by considering them when developing regulations.

California Grown. California is the largest producer and exporter of agricultural products in the U.S. According to CDFA, “over a third of the country's vegetables and over three-quarters of the country's fruits and nuts are grown in California,” encompassing over 400 different commodities. State law requires California state-owned or state-run institutions, excluding public postsecondary education and local educational agencies, to ensure that at least 60% of the agricultural food products they purchase are grown or produced in the state by December 31, 2025. While state law promotes local purchasing, several programs, including those that serve vulnerable populations, do not follow a bid process or are exempt from this law. *This bill* seeks to encourage local purchasing within social safety net programs as well.

Author’s Statement: According to the Author, “California operates several food assistance programs, including CalFresh, to help residents access food. While these programs have nourished millions, many still fall through the cracks. [This bill] addresses this persistent gap by prioritizing locally sourced foods in state policies—an essential step for strengthening food security and economic resilience. By reducing reliance on external food sources and investing in California farmers, this bill reinforces the state's commitment to a sustainable and self-reliant food system. [This bill] also formally declares the human right to access sufficient, locally grown, affordable, and nutritious food as state policy, requiring state agencies to reflect this priority in regulations and grants. This legislation is a bold step toward ensuring that all Californians, regardless of income, have access to fresh, local food.”

Equity Implications: *This bill* seeks to ensure that locally grown and produced food is accessible to all, particularly those in underserved and low-income communities. By prioritizing the purchase of locally produced food, particularly among departments that administer food assistance programs, *this bill* may enhance food security for vulnerable populations, including those who rely on programs like CalFresh, WIC, and school meal programs. These populations often face barriers to accessing fresh, healthy, and affordable food, particularly in areas with limited access to grocery stores or farmers’ markets.

By encouraging access to locally grown food, *this bill* could improve the nutritional quality of the food provided. *This bill* also supports regional farmers and food producers, particularly smaller, underrepresented farms that may not have the same market access as larger producers. This may promote economic equity within the state’s agricultural sector, providing opportunities for farmers from marginalized communities, such as small-scale or minority-owned farms, to participate in the supply chain for food assistance programs.

Policy Considerations: This bill prioritizes locally grown and raised food as a human right; however, there is currently no data on which policies, regulations, and grant criteria are being considered, revised, adopted, or established by the specified state agencies when those policies, regulations, and grant criteria are pertinent to the distribution of sufficient affordable food. This lack of data makes it difficult to evaluate the policy’s impact or identify areas for improvement.

Should this bill move forward, the Author may wish to consider ensuring the effectiveness of this policy by including a reporting requirement. Additionally, the Author may wish to include technical changes that amends pertinent sections of code to align with the bill's language.

Proposed Committee Amendments: The Committee proposes amendments to address policy considerations stated above to do the following:

- Makes technical changes clarifying that all relevant state agencies shall consider this state policy when revising, adopting, or establishing policies, regulations, and grant criteria when those policies, regulations, and criteria are pertinent to the distribution of sufficient **locally grown and raised**, affordable **and healthy** food.
- Requires all relevant state agencies to report to the Legislature by January 1, 2027, at a minimum, the progress on revising, adopting or establishing policies, regulations, and grant criteria when those policies, regulations, and criteria are pertinent to the distribution of sufficient locally grown and raised, affordable and healthy food.

RELATED AND PRIOR LEGISLATION:

AB 936 (Lee) of 2025, would have renamed the California Fruit and Vegetable EBT Pilot Project to be the CalFresh Fruit and Vegetable Supplemental Benefits Program and would have made the program permanent. *AB 936 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

SB 628 (Hurtado), Chapter 879, Statutes of 2023, declared that it is the established policy of the state that every human being has the right to access sufficient affordable and healthy food and require relevant state agencies to consider that right when making policies.

AB 778 (Garcia), Chapter 576, Statutes of 2022, required a California state-owned or state-run institution, excluding public postsecondary education or local educational agencies, that purchases agricultural food products to implement necessary practices to achieve a goal of ensuring that at least 60% of the agricultural food products that it purchases are grown or produced in the state by December 31, 2025.

AB 2153 (Arambula) of 2022, would have established the California Fruit and Vegetable Supplemental Benefits Expansion Program to enroll authorized retailers to enable those authorized retailers to provide supplemental benefits to CalFresh recipients who purchase California-grown fresh fruits and vegetables. *AB 2153 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

SB 108 (Hurtado) of 2021, was substantially similar to SB 628 (Hurtado) of 2023. *SB 108 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

AB 1811 (Committee on Budget), Chapter 35, Statutes of 2018, created the California Fruit and Vegetable EBT Pilot Project to increase the purchasing power of CalFresh recipients to buy California-grown fruits and vegetables.

AB 1661 (Bonta) of 2014, would have established the Healthy Options for Everyone (HOPE) Act of 2014, to authorize the creation of HOPE Incentive Zones designed to increase the

availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, and other grown foods. *AB 1661 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

AB 822 (Caballero), Chapter 785, Statutes of 2017, required all California state-owned or state-run institutions, except public universities and colleges and school districts, to purchase agricultural products grown in California when the bid or price of the California-grown agricultural product does not exceed by more than 5% the lowest bid or price for an agricultural product produced outside the state.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Farm Bureau Federation (Sponsor)
A Voice for Choice Advocacy
Roots of Change

Opposition

None on file.

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