Addressing Food Insecurity
A FOCUS OF CENTRAL CALIFORNIA ALLIANCE FOR HEALTH’S MEDI-CAL CAPACITY GRANT PROGRAM

Creating Local Health Care Solutions
Central California Alliance for Health (the Alliance) is an award-winning regional non-profit health plan that serves over one-third of the population in Merced, Monterey and Santa Cruz counties. The Alliance connects more than 360,000 Medi-Cal members to providers and programs in an effort to provide accessible, quality health care.

The Alliance’s Medi-Cal Capacity Grant Program (MCGP) provides grants to health care and community-based organizations to increase the availability, quality and access of health care and supportive services for Medi-Cal members in Merced, Monterey and Santa Cruz counties.

Food Insecurity Impacts Health, Medical Costs
Food insecurity is a lack of access to affordable, nutritious food. Many Alliance members experience this challenge, and it is directly tied to low-income status and economic instability. People with limited income often have to choose between paying for rent, food or medication.

The impact of food insecurity on health outcomes and quality of life is significant:
• Higher risk of chronic disease such as diabetes, obesity and hypertension.
• Impaired concentration and school performance in children, which is linked to higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems from preschool through adolescence.¹
• Physical and mental problems in pregnant women, as well as birth complications.²
• Slowed healing, increased health complications, lengthened hospital stays and increased admission to hospitals and long-term care facilities.

The impact is also costly. In 2014, national health-related expenses attributable to food insecurity were estimated at $160 billion, nearly equal to the direct medical costs from annual diabetes care.³

Health Care Sector’s Role
Food insecurity is a complex but preventable condition in need of innovative, multi-sector solutions among health care providers, community-based organizations, government agencies and the private sector. Health care providers are increasingly taking on a new role in addressing food insecurity. Health care settings are uniquely positioned as places where Medi-Cal members burdened by food insecurity can be identified and supported. Better physical and economic access to healthy food increases the likelihood that Medi-Cal members will eat healthier, maintain healthier weights and have positive health outcomes.

Fast Facts About Food Insecurity in the Alliance Membership

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adults experiencing food insecurity</th>
<th>Monterey County</th>
<th>Merced County</th>
<th>Santa Cruz County</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>49%</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Children experiencing food insecurity</th>
<th>Santa Cruz</th>
<th>Merced</th>
<th>Monterey</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<th>Percentage who report cost as a barrier to healthy eating</th>
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<tr>
<td>More than 75% in Merced</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nearly 50% in Monterey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nearly 50% in Santa Cruz</td>
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<tr>
<th>Percentage who report lack of healthy food knowledge and difficulties preparing healthy food</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nearly 50% of Hmong speakers</td>
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<td>More than 33% of Spanish speakers</td>
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*Data collected from the Alliance’s 2016 Member Group Needs Assessment (GNA) Survey and 2017 Member Focus Groups

According to a 2014 Hunger in America study, for those with food insecurity:

- **66%** Had to choose between food and medical care
- **57%** Had to choose between food and housing
- **79%** Purchase inexpensive, unhealthy food
- **40%** Water down food or drinks

09-2021
The Alliance Funds Efforts to Address Food Insecurity

To improve the health and overall wellness of Medi-Cal members in Merced, Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, the Alliance is funding efforts to increase access and availability to nutritious food through its Medi-Cal Capacity Grant Program (MCGP). The Alliance has launched two programs:

**Partners for Healthy Food Access Program** supports partnerships between health care providers, community-based organizations and/or government agencies to screen for food insecurity and connect Medi-Cal members with easily accessible, nutritious food and healthy food resources. As of January 2021, the MCGP has awarded over $1.8M to Partners for Healthy Food Access projects. Examples of projects include:

- Food prescription program with mobile market for locally gardened fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Youth-focused sustainable produce program with referral to farm stand and nutrition/cooking education.
- Accessible, nutritious food distribution sites and nutrition/cooking classes for individuals, families and In-Home Support Services workers.

**Post-Discharge Meal Delivery Program (PDMDP)** launched as a two-year pilot in November 2018 and proved to be an effective intervention to keep members healthy. PDMDP provides Medi-Cal members with serious illness with 14 ready-made, medically tailored nutritious meals each week for 12 weeks after hospital discharge. Eligible members have a diagnosis of diabetes, congestive heart failure and/or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and are identified as at high-risk for hospital readmission. Over the course of the two-year pilot, the Alliance invested $650,000 to provide 494 Medi-Cal members with over 70,200 home-delivered meals.

The evaluation conducted at the conclusion of the two-year pilot showed that post-discharge meal delivery was an effective intervention that improved member health outcomes, reduced hospital admissions and lowered health care costs. The pilot had a positive return on investment of 360%, generating a return of $3.60 for every dollar invested. Due to the success of the pilot, the Alliance Board approved PDMDP as an Alliance-only benefit starting in 2021.

A “Food Is Medicine” Approach to Improve Health Outcomes

The “food is medicine” approach views nutritious food as a critical component of healing and improved quality of life. Access to nutritious food sources leads to greater health and wellness. By embracing the “food is medicine” approach, the Alliance hopes to increase food security among its members and engage them in managing their own health. The Alliance achieved a return on its investment in the meal delivery pilot and anticipates further positive outcomes of funding in food security strategies, including a reduction in preventable chronic disease diagnoses and further decrease in preventable hospitalizations and medical utilization.

Addressing food insecurity ties into the Alliance’s vision of “healthy people, healthy communities.” The Alliance has a long history of expanding support and resources to members and continues to look for innovative and effective ways to invest in member health and wellness.

For more information about the Medi-Cal Capacity Grant Program, please visit [https://thealliance.health/for-communities/community-grants/](https://thealliance.health/for-communities/community-grants/).

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