

# **Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operations (MEHKOs)**

**Providing Inclusion, Incubation, and Innovation**





# About COOK Alliance

Founded in 2018, the COOK Alliance championed AB 626, the law that created the MEHKO permit. We are dedicated to legitimizing and uplifting home-based food businesses through training, resources, and policy work

Our **ABCD model** guides our efforts to support the home cooking movement

**We work to:**

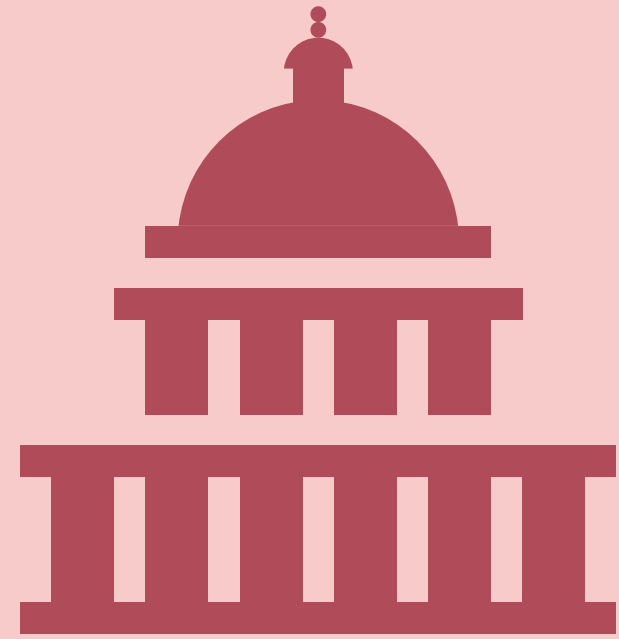
**Advance Advocacy**

**Build Business**

**Cultivate Community**

**Develop Data**





# **AB 626: The Homemade Food Operations Act**

**Passed into law by CA legislature in 2018**

**Created a new type of food facility in the CA Retail Food Code: Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operations ("MEHKO")**

**Allows cooks to obtain a MEHKO permit to legally sell most types of food directly to the public from a home kitchen**

**Builds upon the success of the Cottage Food Law, which enables home cooks to legally sell baked goods and shelf-stable items**

# Counties with MEHKO programs:



Riverside, San Diego, Alameda, San Mateo, Los Angeles, Imperial, Sierra, Solano, Monterey, San Benito, Amador, Santa Clara, Lake, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Sonoma, Contra Costa

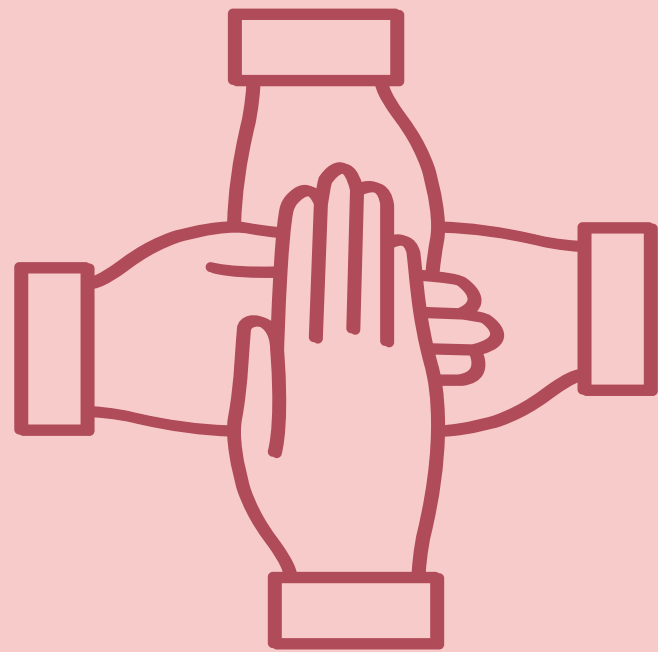
## Counties in Progress: Formal MEHKO Exploration or Advocacy-Led Efforts

Marin, San Francisco, Mendocino, Fresno, Sacramento, Orange, San Bernardino, El Dorado, San Joaquin, Trinity, Tehama, Humboldt

**~60% of all Californians now have access to a MEHKO program**

# MEHKO Benefits

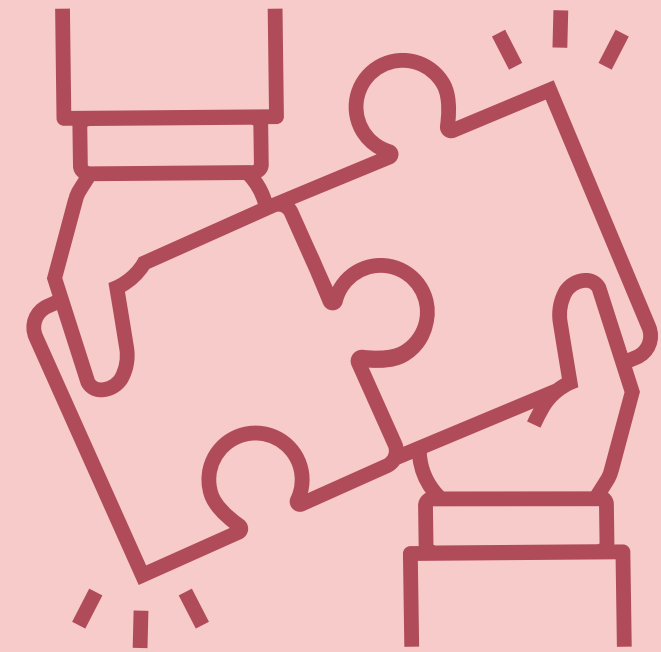
## Inclusion



## Incubation



## Innovation



# Inclusion



Creates a more affordable entry into the culinary industry for low income folks and historically marginalized groups into the culinary industry



Supports immigrant communities by creating opportunities to share culturally appropriate foods that may not otherwise be available



Empowers caretakers, those with disabilities, and others who need to work from home to set their own schedule and earn extra income on their own terms



Allows those that are already cooking illegally to come out from the shadows and access small business resources and food safety training

# Incubation

MEHKO allows entrepreneurs to start their food businesses with **minimal overhead expenses**, as they can utilize their home kitchens instead of investing in commercial spaces



This provides entrepreneurs with the opportunity to **test out their business models at minimal cost**, allowing them to refine their offerings, build a loyal following, and generate income



MEHKO businesses that do well at home can use that success to **grow**, potentially scaling up to commercial kitchen space or a brick & mortar establishment



**\$400,000**

Average startup cost for a brick & mortar food establishment



**\$100,000**

Average startup cost for a food truck



**\$45,000**

Average annual rent for a commercial kitchen

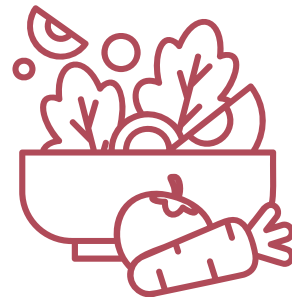
**~\$1,000**

All-in cost to launch a MEHKO

# Innovation

## MEHKOs Have the Potential to Transform Local Food Systems

### Improved Food Access



MEHKOs expand access to fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate meals by creating hyper-local food opportunities, especially in underserved areas like food deserts

### Sustainability in Action



By reducing food waste, supporting local producers, and fostering community-driven food systems, MEHKOs promote sustainable practices that benefit both the environment and the economy

### Building Resiliency



MEHKOs offer flexible and locally-rooted entrepreneurial opportunities, empowering communities to adapt and thrive during industry changes or unforeseen challenges

# MEHKO Businesses & The People Behind Them

- **Diverse Demographics:** The majority of operators are women, people of color, and immigrants
- **Culturally Rooted Businesses:** Many MEHKOs focus on traditional or regional dishes, offering meals that reflect the heritage of the operators and are otherwise unavailable in traditional brick and mortar restaurants
- **Specialized Offerings:** Some operators create meals for individuals with medically restrictive diets or focus on vegan and allergen-friendly options
- **Caregiver Entrepreneurs:** Caregivers are using MEHKOs as an opportunity to earn income while balancing responsibilities at home
- **Affordable Living:** MEHKOs are helping people in high cost of living areas generate income to stay in their communities





# MEHKOs Have Caps

**Caps are designed to protect food safety by ensuring that MEHKOs are only producing a safe amount of food for a home kitchen. They also reinforce that MEHKOs are micro-businesses, and make it easy for them to coexist with brick and mortar restaurants**



**These caps were expanded with the passage of AB 1325 in 2023**

**\$100k** Annual gross revenue  
(Adjusted yearly for inflation)

**30** Meals per day

**90** Meals per week

# MEHKO Regulations



**MEHKO rules were co-designed with health regulators for oversight, like other retail food businesses**

**MEHKOs have three options for serving customers:**



**Dine in, take out, or delivery-dine-in is the least common**

**All food must be prepared, cooked, and served on the same day**



**And sold directly to the consumer**

**Food from a MEHKO cannot be sold at an event or farmers market**



**A MEHKO also cannot be used for catering**

**A MEHKO must operate from a primary residence, not a vacation home**



**Only one permit is allowed per household**

**The MEHKO operator must pass a food safety manager certification examination**



**MEHKOs are inspected annually and as needed in case of any food safety issues**

**Delivery to the customer must be done by the owner, a family or household member, or employee of the MEHKO**



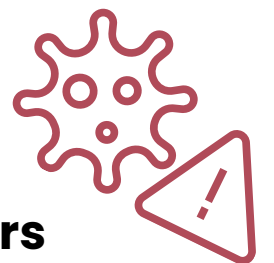
**Third party delivery apps (like DoorDash or Uber Eats) can't be used by a MEHKO**

**A 'meal' is defined as a quantity of food meant for one person in one sitting**



**MEHKOs can sell just items like drinks or desserts—they don't have to offer full meals**

**A MEHKO can serve all different types of hot and cold foods except:**



**Raw oysters  
THC or CBD  
Homemade ice cream  
Raw milk and raw milk products  
Foods that require a HACCP plan**

# How much does a MEHKO permit cost?

Total startup costs average around \$1,000, including (highly recommended) liability insurance. Permit costs vary by county, typically averaging around \$700

Some jurisdictions offer fee waivers to help reduce barriers for applicants.

In some counties, the fee remains the same each year, while others offer a discounted renewal rate. MEHKO programs all operate on a cost recovery basis



**Other MEHKO  
startup expenses  
include**



- **Business License: ~\$50**
- **Insurance: ~\$300**
- **Food Manager Certification: \$100 - \$200**
- **Food Safety Supplies: \$0 - \$100**

# Steps to getting a **MEHKO** permit:

**1**

**Pass Food  
Manager  
Certification  
Exam**

**2**

**Develop Menu  
and Standard  
Operating  
Procedures  
(SOP)**

**3**

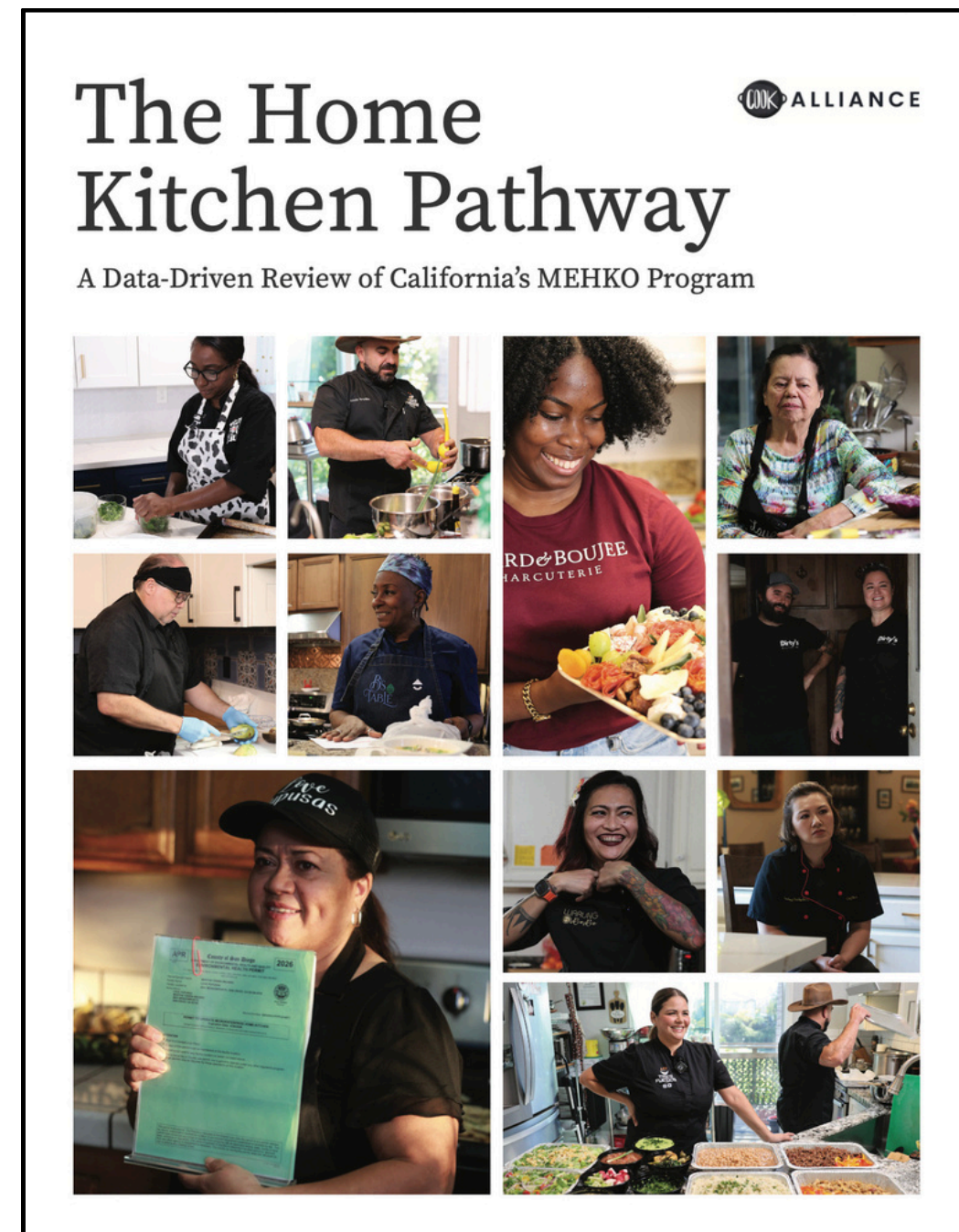
**Submit Health  
Department  
Application  
and SOP**

**4**

**Schedule and  
Pass a Home  
Inspection**



# MEHKO 5-Year Research Report



COOK Alliance and CAMEO Network partnered with a researcher from the University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy & Governance, and national research firm EMC Research

This research evaluates the impact and effectiveness of California's MEHKO program five years after its launch

The report analyzes permit data, public records from environmental health and code enforcement agencies, along with operator and consumer survey results and focus groups

## KEY FOCUS AREAS

- **Permit Trends:** Growth, location, and operator data
- **Community Impact:** Noise, traffic, waste, and other complaints
- **Food Safety:** Illness and violation reports
- **Operator Insights:** Who they are, why they start, and what drives success



# Major Research Findings

## **MEHKOs have an exceptional safety and community impact record**

97% of MEHKOs have never faced a single formal complaint of any kind, including concerns about noise, traffic, parking, nuisance, or food safety issues

## **Foodborne illness complaints are extremely rare**

Environmental health agencies identified only two (2) foodborne illness complaints across the 898 MEHKOs that received permits between 2019 and 2024.

## **MEHKOs are led by diverse entrepreneurs**

More than three-quarters (79%) of MEHKO operators are people of color, compared to a national entrepreneurial landscape that is majority white. About 70% of MEHKO operators are women, well above the overall share of female new U.S. entrepreneurs.

## **MEHKOs create meaningful economic benefits**

73% said their MEHKO helped them financially. Operators cited financial stability, work-life balance, and stronger community ties as the top benefits. Around a third have used the program as a stepping stone to scale into a larger food business.

## **Californians support MEHKOs and want to see the program grow**

Although general awareness of the program is low, nine-in-ten Californians said they would support their county implementing a system for legal, permitted MEHKOs.



# The Process for Establishing a MEHKO Program

## GRASSROOTS SUPPORT

The community supports the MEHKO program by contacting the Board of Supervisors and partnering with CBOs and stakeholders



## INTRODUCTION

A County Supervisor requests to include MEHKOs for discussion and potential voting on an upcoming Board of Supervisors agenda



## PRESENTATION

The Health Department presents information on MEHKOs to the Board of Supervisors for discussion. Members of the community voice their support

## SUPERVISORS VOTE

The Board of Supervisors vote on a proposed ordinance (a local law) to establish a MEHKO program



## SECOND READING

If the Board votes to approve MEHKOs, they will then vote again at the next meeting, known as the 'second reading' of the ordinance



## PERMITS

MEHKOs are now legal and the Department of Environmental Health will establish a program and after some time begin issuing permits



# Questions? Stay Connected!



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