



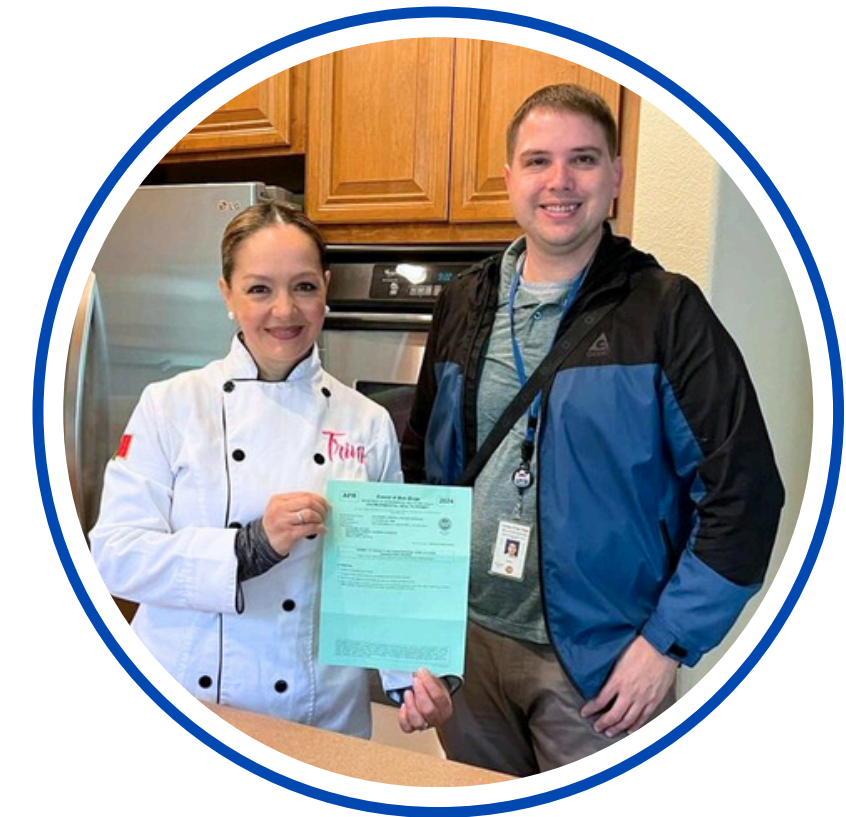
Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operations (MEHKOs)

Providing Inclusion, Incubation, and Innovation

MicroEnterprise Home Kitchen Operation (MEHKO) Program

MEHKOs were added as a type of food facility to the California Retail Food Code in 2019.

They allow permitted home cooks to prepare, sell, and serve perishable food directly to consumers from their home kitchen



MEHKOs build on California's Cottage Food Law, expanding home-based food entrepreneurship beyond baked goods and shelf-stable foods to include freshly prepared meals.



To obtain a permit, MEHKO operators must complete Food Safety Protection Manager Certification and pass a home kitchen inspection through their local Environmental Health agency



Each jurisdiction must opt in by passing a local ordinance (or resolution) to authorize MEHKOs, which are considered residential by use and regulated at the local level by Environmental Health

MEHKOs by the Numbers

20 Jurisdictions with MEHKO programs:

» **18 counties, 2 city jurisdictions**

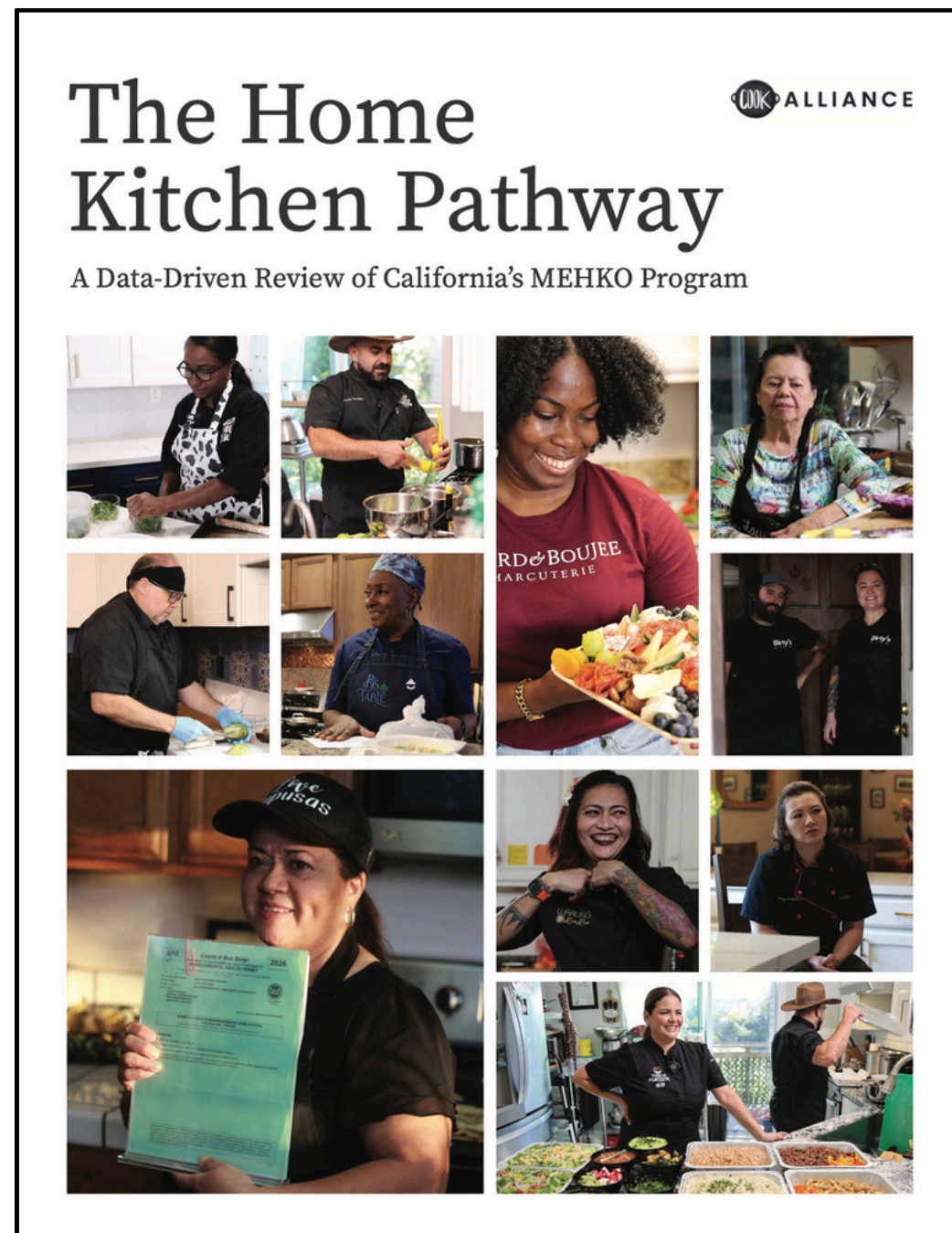
Alameda County, Amador County, Contra Costa County, Imperial County, Lake County, Los Angeles County, Marin County*, Monterey County, Riverside County, San Benito County, San Diego County, San Mateo County, Santa Barbara County, Santa Clara County, Santa Cruz County, Sierra County, Solano County, Sonoma County, City of Berkeley, City of Long Beach

Currently more than 1,300 active permits across the state

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



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 of operating a MEHKO.

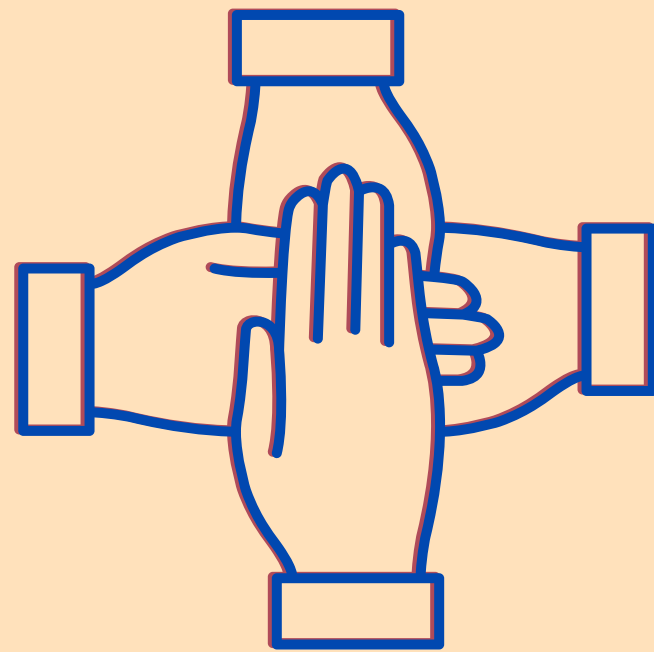
Californians support MEHKOs and want to see the program grow

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.



MEHKO Benefits

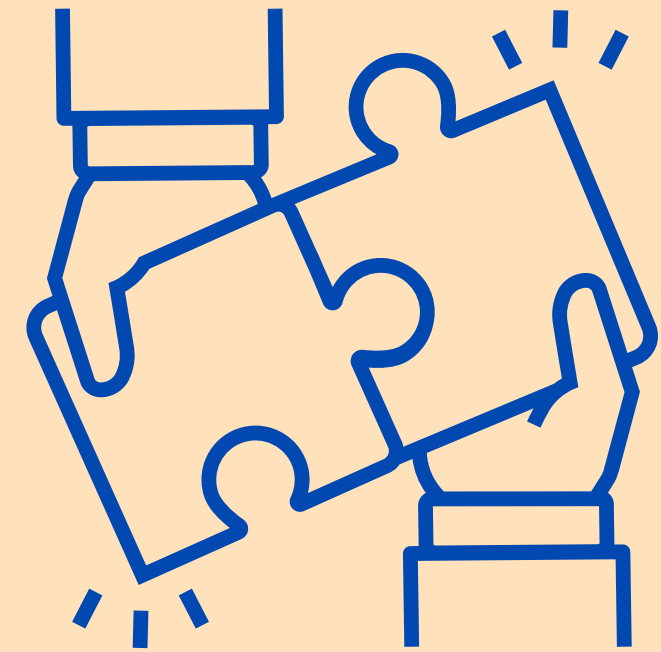
Inclusion



Incubation



Innovation



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



Research also shows that in the first five years of the program **one third of operators reported using the permit as a stepping stone** to scale into a larger food business, such as a catering operation, food truck, or brick and mortar business

MEHKO Benefits: Innovation

The MEHKO Program Is An Innovative Policy Tool to Strengthen Community Stability

Safe Work from Home



MEHKOs provide a legal and accessible way to earn income from home, offering a safer option for immigrants who face barriers working in public or informal settings

Support for Housing Stability



MEHKOs help families facing rising housing costs earn the extra income needed to stay in their homes and communities.

Better Food Access



MEHKOs strengthen the local food economy by providing fresh, affordable, and culturally meaningful meals in neighborhoods

Inclusion



Creates a more affordable pathway to entrepreneurship for low-income residents and historically marginalized communities



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



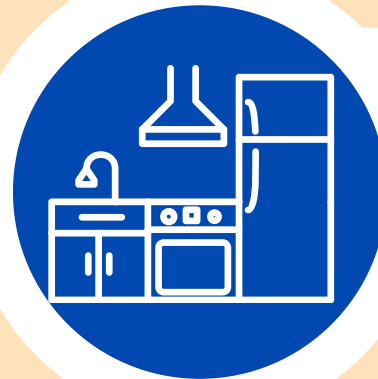
\$700,000–\$1.1M

Average startup cost for a brick & mortar food establishment



\$75k–\$100k

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



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



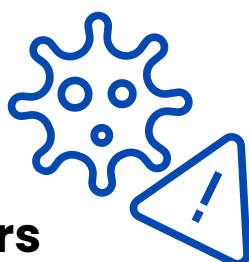
Third part delivery apps (like DoorDash or Uber Eats) can't be used by a MEHKO

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**

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 Your
Home
Inspection**

MEHKOs + Street Vending

State law allows a MEHKO, [with local health department approval](#), to serve as the commissary for up to two permitted Compact Mobile Food Operations (CMFOs) operated by the same individual. San Francisco's proposal would authorize this option locally

- Street vendors would still need a CMFO permit and must meet all applicable health and vending requirements
- Using a MEHKO as the commissary can reduce commercial kitchen costs, lowering barriers to legal compliance
- A MEHKO permit does not make an otherwise ineligible street vending setup eligible for a CMFO permit. Hot dog grill carts and large stationary setups with canopies and tables would still not qualify.
- MEHKOs operating with a CMFO could have higher caps of 80 meals/day, 200/week, and \$200,000/year
- MEHKOs can also provide an alternative pathway for vendors who no longer feel safe selling food in public and would prefer to operate from home



MEHKO Myths & Facts

MYTH: MEHKOs create a new food safety risk.

FACT: Home-based food sales already happen, with or without a MEHKO program. MEHKOs bring that activity into a regulated system with permits, food safety training, inspections, and accountability. The program does not create a new risk; it creates oversight where there may otherwise be none.

MYTH: Food businesses do not belong in residential kitchens.

FACT: Home-based food businesses already operate legally in San Francisco under California's Cottage Food law. MEHKOs build on that existing framework for freshly prepared meals.

MYTH: MEHKOs create unfair competition for restaurants.

FACT: MEHKOs operate at a much smaller scale, with strict limits on meals, sales, staffing, and operations. Bringing existing home-based food businesses into a permitted system also creates a more level playing field than leaving that activity unregulated. MEHKOs can also serve as a stepping stone into larger food businesses.



MEHKO Myths & Facts

MYTH: MEHKOs will create neighborhood problems.

FACT: Other jurisdictions are not reporting widespread traffic, parking, or nuisance problems. All residential ordinances still apply to MEHKOs, and permitted operations have generated very few complaints.

MYTH: MEHKOs will create grease, sewer, and waste problems.

FACT: MEHKOs operate on a fraction of restaurant scale, and operators must demonstrate proper disposal of fats, oils, and grease. Operators also have a direct incentive to protect their own plumbing and avoid damage to their homes. Jurisdictions with MEHKO programs have not reported systemic grease, sewer, or waste problems.

MYTH: MEHKOs could freely sell alcohol from homes.

FACT: A MEHKO permit does not authorize alcohol sales. A MEHKO seeking to sell alcohol must go through the same ABC licensing process as a commercial food facility, and approval is separate from the MEHKO permit. Since the MEHKO program began in 2019, only two operators statewide have obtained an ABC license.

MYTH: San Francisco would need significant new resources.

FACT: San Francisco can build on existing Environmental Health systems (like Cottage Food) and materials from other jurisdictions. The MEHKO program operates on a cost-recovery basis.

Questions?

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