ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY
A focus of the Central California Alliance for Health’s Medi-Cal Capacity Grant Program

CREATING LOCAL HEALTH CARE SOLUTIONS
The 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 330,000 Medi-Cal members to providers and programs in an effort to provide accessible, quality health care.

FOOD INSECURITY IMPACTS HEALTH, MEDICAL COSTS
Food insecurity is a lack of access to enough affordable, nutritious food. This challenge, experienced by many Alliance members, 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.
• Physical and mental problems in pregnant women, as well as birth complications.
• 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.

FAST FACTS ABOUT FOOD INSECURITY IN THE ALLIANCE SERVICE AREA

<table>
<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>Children experiencing food insecurity</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>Merced</td>
<td>Monterey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage who report cost as a barrier to healthy eating</td>
<td>More than 75% in Merced</td>
<td>Nearly 50% in Monterey</td>
<td>Nearly 50% in Santa Cruz</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage who report lack of healthy food knowledge and difficulties preparing healthy food</td>
<td>Nearly 50% of Hmong speakers</td>
<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

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.

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 innovative projects that involve 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. To date, the MCGP has awarded over $1.2M 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 Pilot** provides up to 450 Medi-Cal members with 14 ready-made, nutritious meals per week for 12 weeks after hospital discharge. This two-year program is offered to Medi-Cal members who have a diagnosis of diabetes, congestive heart failure and/or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease who are also identified as at high risk for readmission. The Alliance’s pilot is being implemented at the same time as the State of California’s three-year Medically Tailored Meals Pilot Program, which launched in April 2018 in seven communities outside of the Alliance service area. The pilot focuses on post-discharge meal delivery service for Medi-Cal members who are high utilizers of the health care system and are at a higher risk of hospital readmission. Evaluation of these two programs will inform future program development in this area. Current research shows that medically-tailored post-discharge meals can result in 70% fewer emergency department visits and fewer than half as many hospital admissions for individuals with serious illness.\(^4\)

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. Foreseeable results of the Alliance’s investment in this area include a reduction in preventable chronic disease diagnoses, a decrease in preventable hospitalizations and medical utilization, and stronger linkages in the health care delivery system.

Access to care, member wellness and promotion of value are the focal points of the Alliance’s work. Addressing food insecurity ties into these priorities. 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.

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For more information, contact Medi-Cal Capacity Grant Program staff at 831-430-5754 or grants@ccah-alliance.org.