

SELLING HOME-COOKED FOOD

The State of Microenterprise Home Kitchens in California



A growing movement of cooks and advocates is working to legalize Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operations (MEHKOs) so that home cooks—many of whom are immigrants and members of minority communities—can legally and safely cook and sell meals to their neighbors.

California passed the Homemade Food Operations Act (AB-626) in 2018. The Act allows counties to legalize and regulate the estimated 100,000 unlicensed home cooking businesses found across the state. Counties that opt in can license home cooks and inspect their businesses for health and safety.

As of October 2020, eight counties or cities have expressed intent to opt in to the Homemade Food Operations Act, and Riverside County has started issuing licenses (to a total of 65 home cooks so far).

In October 2020 more than a hundred cooks, chefs, advocates, county officials and staff and supporters of home cooking businesses virtually gathered for the Home Cooked 2020 convening to discuss challenges, successes and strategies for licensing home cooks to legally and safely cook and sell meals to their neighbors.

The convening was organized by the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program (UC SAREP) in partnership with the COOK Alliance, a non-profit organization with a national membership of nearly 5,000 cooks and advocates working for legalization of MEHKOs.

Key takeaways from the convening are summarized in the box at right.

KEY MESSAGES

MEHKOs benefit home cooks & communities

- MEHKOs are less expensive and risky than opening a restaurant or operating a food truck, and can provide part-time income to those with care-giving commitments or other restrictions.
- MEHKOs are especially beneficial in rural areas with no commissary kitchens, in urban areas with few healthy food options, and in areas with few jobs.

Home cooks and MEHKO advocates emphasize technical assistance needs

- The top needs identified by home cooks are **(1)** help understanding the requirements and applying for licensing, **(2)** help organizing bulk purchasing of food and supplies, **(3)** help understanding and meeting food safety requirements, and **(4)** help with marketing.
- Advocates emphasize that counties and cities that opt in to the program should set affordable MEHKO permit costs (or offer subsidies for financially needy applicants) and make the implementation timeline and application process clear.

LEARN MORE:

- COOK Alliance: cookalliance.org
- COOK Alliance Facebook: facebook.com/cookalliance/
- “How to Sell Home Cooked Food in CA” Public Group: facebook.com/groups/HomemadeFoodOperationsAct