

Vote to End Hunger Candidate Survey

Scott Wiener



Running For:
State Senate, District 11

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COVID-19 has caused a rapid and historic spike in food insecurity, especially among communities of color. If elected, what will you do to increase economic opportunity and food access for our hardest-hit communities?

As your State Senator, increasing access to food has been a high priority for me. As Chair of the Senate Human Services Committee for two years, I helped shepherd many pieces of legislation expanding access to food, as well as legislation to help lift people out of poverty.

I've also worked in partnership with the SF-Marin Food Bank, and other food access advocacy organizations, to author legislation to expand access to Cal Fresh. For the past two years, we've worked together on legislation to streamline the application process for Cal Fresh by mandating telephonic applications, improving translation of non-English applications, and creating a simplified application for seniors and people living with disabilities. While we haven't yet passed that legislation due to political pushback, we're continuing to pursue it.

I authored successful legislation, also working with the food bank, to expand access to the "Double Up" program — where Cal Fresh recipients receive double benefits when they purchase fresh produce — by requiring counties to load those extra benefits onto recipients' EBT cards, rather than require them to carry around paper vouchers.

Our legislative work isn't sexy and doesn't grab headlines. But it tangibly moves the ball forward in the critical effort to expand access to Cal Fresh and to help people avoid food insecurity.

With COVID-19 significantly increasing food insecurity, we've had to step up our efforts significantly. I supported efforts to increase state budget allocations for food banks in this year's budget, I've regularly volunteered at the Food Bank since the pandemic hit, and I hosted a yoga fundraiser benefiting the SF-Marin Food Bank.

I'll always be an ally to and supporter of this amazing, life-saving organization.

San Francisco ranks 46th of 58 counties in enrolling eligible people in the CalFresh program. If elected, what actions will you take to improve CalFresh program access and utilization?

California's Cal Fresh structure is fundamentally broken, which is why California ranks almost last among the 50 states in the percentage of eligible people who are signed up for Cal Fresh. California does so poorly in signing people up for Cal Fresh because we make it too hard to sign up. By administering Cal Fresh through the counties instead of at the state level, we've created a fragmented system, often with different databases, and force people to sign up again if they move to another county. People typically cannot sign up by telephone. The application process is long, and people have to repeatedly re-certify, which causes a drop-off. Translation of forms is often not well-done, yet again making it hard for people to sign up.

We need to fundamentally restructure how we deliver these life-saving benefits in our state. We need to move toward a more centralized model, streamline the application process, and just make it easier, more intuitive, and less time-intensive to sign up. As described in my answer to the first question, I've authored several pieces of legislation to make

it easier and faster for people to sign up and to access their Cal Fresh benefits.

As for San Francisco, we need to do much more to reach out to low income communities — in a culturally competent way — to ensure that every single resident who is eligible for Cal Fresh knows about the benefit and knows how to sign up.

Food insecurity is a major contributor to poor health and higher healthcare costs. What steps or legislative actions would you take to ensure that food insecure people with diet-related diseases have access to nutritious food?

It's not enough to provide people access to food. People need access to nutritious food. As Project Open Hand pioneered, "food is medicine."

Too many low income people live in food deserts, with little or no access to markets with healthy foods. When I was on the Board of Supervisors, I supported legislation to help corner markets offer healthier foods and to prioritize those foods. This includes giving people access to healthy beverages, instead of focusing only on sugary beverages, which give people diabetes and other ailments. I spearheaded San Francisco's first effort at a soda tax and authored legislation to require warning labels on soda ads.

In addition, healthy foods are often more expensive than unhealthy foods. We need to help subsidize healthy alternatives. As noted above, I authored successful legislation to expand the "Double Up" program so that people on Cal Fresh received double the benefits when they use their benefits to purchase fresh produce, whether at a supermarket, corner store, or farmers market.

Finally, we need to have specialized support for people whose health requires specific nutritional interventions. People need to be educated about what they should eat or avoid and then be helped to access those foods.

In SF and Marin, 1 in 5 people experience food insecurity. What other steps or legislative actions would you take to address poverty and hunger in your community?

-We must increase funding for food access, at the federal, State, and local levels. We perpetually under-fund both Cal Fresh and our food banks. We need more funding for these critical programs.

-We need to make it much easier to sign up for Cal Fresh, as described above.

-We need to provide financial incentives for corner stores to offer healthier options, so that people can afford healthier foods.

-We need a statewide soda tax, in addition to other strategies to help people make healthier choices about what they drink. Revenues from the soda tax should be reinvested in strategies to help people eat well and stay healthy.

-We need a universal basic income to ensure everyone has a basic level of income to meet their basic needs, including food.

-We need to fix our broken housing system so that people can access housing and remain housed. Unstable housing and homelessness are devastating for individuals and communities and make it extremely hard to eat well and remain healthy.

These are examples of the many strategies we need to employ to lift people out of poverty and help them succeed in a world that becomes more difficult by the year. Working together, I know we can do it.