

Food as Medicine Initiative Launched in Sacramento

Friday, May 10, 2024

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Good Men Project, Katie Ettman

(Sacramento, CA) – On Tuesday, April 16 physicians, patients, and food equity experts met at the State Capitol to express their support for Assembly Bill 1975, authored by Assemblyperson Mia Bonta. This bill would make California the first state in the nation to provide medically supportive food and nutrition interventions, such as medically tailored meals and produce prescriptions, a permanent Medicaid benefit.

"Too many Californians, particularly Californians of color, are living with largely preventable chronic illnesses and conditions", said Bonta. Making these interventions permanent will advance health equity by providing services to Californians disproportionately impacted by diet-sensitive chronic conditions.

Bonta shared, "To put the potential of this bill's impact into context consider this... Black women and birthing people have over 1.5 times more preterm births than their white counterparts. Pregnant people who receive a medically supportive food intervention have seen a 37% reduction in rates of preterm birth. Give our bellies smoothies for a smooth delivery."

Champions of the food as medicine movement, including the San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) and the Food as Medicine Collaborative highlight the many benefits of incorporating medically supportive food and nutrition into patient care.

"AB 1975 Medically Supportive Food and Nutrition builds on the work of California's transformative Medicaid waiver, CalAIM. Within that waiver, we are testing and piloting ways to address the social determinants of health like food insecurity and housing insecurity. Through the pilot phase medically supportive food and nutrition has been the number one most utilized service reaching more than 29,000 Californians who now have the opportunity to access the food they need to live healthy and fulfilling lives," said SPUR's food and agriculture senior policy manager Katie Ettman.

"Healthcare providers see everyday the effects of social drivers of health. By covering the full spectrum of medically supportive food and nutrition they are able to tangibly address barriers to patients achieving their health goals" said the Food as Medicine Collaborative director Erin Franey.

Elizabeth Duran, a patient at Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center and participant in the Recipe4Health program, shared "What I initially envisioned as a weight loss program turned out to be much more than I could have imagined. I not only received beautiful organic greens and vegetables, I learned of their nutritional value and how to incorporate them into a healthy diet. I am cooking and eating much better today! I started learning how to incorporate different types of physical activity into my daily life. My worry has become less, my sleep more. I am feeling happy again, and not from a pill."

Dr. Steven Chen, the Chief Medical Officer of Alameda County's Recipe4Health program shared, "A primary driver of chronic conditions is an unhealthy diet, which is attributed to 500,000 deaths a year in the US, surpassing tobacco use. But the good news is this, food as medicine programs across the state are springing up and addressing this issue."

Joining Assemblymember Bonta at the launch of the initiative was Assemblymember Lori Wilson, Chair of the Legislative Black Caucus who had the following to say: "The California Legislative Black Caucus included this bill in our 2024 Reparations Task Force package because of the attention it brings to the lack of access to nutritious and affordable food in low income brown, indigenous and black communities."

As we know, the Medi-Cal program is crucial to provide healthcare services to low income individuals. This bill aims to improve the program by emphasizing the role of nutrition in overall health and wellbeing.

"It [medically supportive food and nutrition] doesn't need to be a pilot or program, we know and the science backs and our experience tells us that this works. Give us an apple, give us care, give it to every Medi-Cal recipient" said Bonta.

AB 1975 was heard in the Assembly Health Committee and passed out with a 14-1 vote. It will now move to Assembly Appropriations.

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