

## Candidate Hunger Action Challenge

# Michael Lai



Running for:  
**San Francisco Board of  
Supervisors, District 11**

*"Government should play a big role in stimulating economic prosperity & also a social safety net, maintaining peace, managing climate change, and more. In the 21st century, no one should go hungry."*



## What do you think are the root causes of hunger, and what do you see as the government's role in addressing them?

Hunger is personal for me. My grandparents in China survived the Chinese civil war, and during the Great Leap Forward, 9 of my maternal grandfather's 11 siblings died of famine. My parents and I immigrated to the US with \$100, we were on food stamps. I've personally volunteered at many food pantries, including Glide Memorial Church in the Tenderloin. The root causes of hunger are complex and multifaceted, involving a combination of social, economic, environmental, and political factors in a post-agrarian society:

First & most importantly, poverty & economic inequality.

Second, lack of access to food because of food deserts & inadequate food distribution systems.

Third, conflict, political instability, and poor government policies like corruption & underinvestment in agriculture.

Fourth, climate change & environmental degradation.

Fifth, global economic systems & trade that are poor for local agriculture.

Sixth, lack of health & education or gender inequality.

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## If elected, how would you ensure coordination between the multiple government departments that fund and administer food assistance programs?

I'm grateful to be endorsed by leaders at the CA state level (e.g. State Senator & Budget Chair Scott Wiener & Assembly Appropriations Chair Buffy Wicks), city level (Mayor London Breed & 4 sitting supervisors Catherine Stefani, Rafael Mandelman, Matt Dorsey, and Joel Engardio), and business leaders such as the Chairman of Gap, and various small business leaders in District 11.

I would bring together representatives across state & city levels including relevant SF departments such as the Department of Public Health, Human Services, and the Office of Economic and Workforce Development, food-related community organizations, and private large grocery chains like Safeway & small business markets like El Chico in District 11.

In this process, I would first look at the importance of data sharing & impact evaluation. That way, we can build a system of more coordinated supports and understand our efforts' efficacy.

Moreover, I would like to survey the largest pain points community members face when applying for food assistance and what procedures prove to be a challenge to access these benefits. With this information, I would advocate for specific UI/UX & process changes, as well as stronger automated referral systems for social safety net programs (e.g., automatically refer eligible food stamp users to qualifying benefits programs), so people do not face heavy administrative burdens.

## Studies have shown food can be medicine. If elected, how do you plan to use your position to improve food-related health disparities?

District 11 is an underserved neighborhood, and I'll focus on expanding access to fresh, nutritious food in underserved neighborhoods through initiatives like increasing farmers' markets, supporting urban agriculture (I recently was the other candidate to go and support Rec & Park's free compost day supporting many residents doing their own gardening), and bringing grocery stores to food deserts.

Moreover, I'll advocate for improved school nutrition programs and push for partnerships between healthcare providers and local farms to "prescribe" fresh produce to patients with diet-related conditions.

Additionally, I'll work to ensure food assistance programs offer culturally appropriate options and support expanded nutrition education in our communities.

## The San Francisco-Marin Food Bank will be closing all Food Bank-run Pop-up Pantries by June 2025 due to cuts in government pandemic funding. This program currently serves 11,400 households, 75% of which are estimated to lose access to free weekly groceries when the funding ends. If elected, what would you do to ensure that all San Franciscans have access to nutritious foods?

This is heartbreaking, and in my term as supervisor, I will prioritize food-related initiatives in the city budget. I'm the only candidate running that has experience managing budgets (8 figures on the Board of Wu Yee Children's Services & at my own early childhood network Tinycare), managing people, and raising investment (\$17.9M for my early childhood startup), and I'll take those skills to help with food related funding at a time of cutting.

To ensure continued access to nutritious food for the 11,400 affected households, I'd pursue emergency funding to bridge the gap, foster public-private partnerships with local businesses and tech companies, and support community-led food initiatives.

First emergency funding. This may require philanthropy. In 2018, I helped start nonprofit early childhood venture studio Promise Venture Studio, funded by Omidyar Network, a \$1B venture philanthropy fund; I would look at similar funders here such as Crankstart, the Haas Family Foundation, Blue Meridian Promise Neighborhoods, and more.

Second, community initiatives. Right now, District 11 (I live in the Excelsior) has more school aged children than any other, but no farmers market. Bringing a farmer's market would be a top priority.

For the long-term, I'd work on policy reforms to strengthen our food security infrastructure, including measures to reduce waste and incentivize donations.