



April 13, 2021

Good afternoon, my name is Alvin Salehi and I am the co-founder of Shef. I am very grateful for the opportunity to present my testimony today and, more importantly, for the opportunity to work collaboratively to elevate the issue of food justice.

The phrase food justice is used in many contexts – but there are few things more empowering and just than allowing someone to use their home kitchen to feed their neighbors. It is a movement that is already underway, responding to the food needs and the economic pressures of a society crippled by a global pandemic.

The common term for this kind of business is a microenterprise home kitchen operation, which is a relatively straightforward concept. A person who has a talent for cooking uses their own kitchen to prepare homemade meals for their local community. It is incredibly empowering. It has the power to catapult underserved and underrepresented individuals directly into the local economy, and can present a significant boost to the State's economy.

When we talk about the sale of home cooked meals, we hear people say “My aunty and my neighbor already do this.” Others tell us, “I live in a food desert, I don't have access to quality meals,” or “I feel guilty buying takeout for my kids, I wish I could feed them homemade food instead.” This is an opportunity to satisfy so many pressing needs for so many people.

A home cook may have many reasons for getting involved in a microenterprise operation. Many of the cooks on our platform are stay-at-home parents who seek opportunities to contribute to their household income, but they're unable to leave the house because they can't afford daycare. Others have recently been laid off due to the pandemic and rely on selling food to pay for necessities like rent and utilities. Microenterprise home kitchen operations present a reliable path to local ownership and local input to food systems that the Senate cares so deeply about.

We currently help talented cooks build microbusinesses through an online food community called Shef, which we started after California passed their own microenterprise home kitchen operations law (AB 626) back in 2019. Since our inception, we've been committed to helping underserved populations gain access to meaningful economic opportunities. 92% of the cooks on our platform are people of color and 83% are women. We provide them with the tools they need to learn how to become successful microentrepreneurs with minimal upfront costs. We collect taxes from customers transacting on the platform and deliver those to the State on behalf of our cooks. From a safety perspective, all cooks are required to pass an accredited food safety

certification exam and complete a food quality assessment prior to selling on the platform. Moreover, when they join, we provide cooks with masks, hairnets, gloves and thermometers to help them ensure that food is being prepared in accordance with the highest safety standards.

We are an industry asking for support from the State. By passing Senate Bill **S. 5951, which establishes the Home Kitchen Enterprise and Economic Opportunity Act**, you will facilitate the proper licensing and operation of microenterprise home kitchen operations across the State and the safe storing, handling, preparation and packaging of ready-to-eat food made at home. Introducing well-informed regulations is actually safer than doing nothing and allowing unregulated home cooking to continue in its current form, severely limited by the State's current home processing laws. By passing S. 5951, you will lift home cooks out of the shadows and give them the opportunity to feed their communities legally and safely.

One question I am asked occasionally is whether the restaurant industry will be upset about this. My answer is no. I don't believe that anything will replace the restaurant experience. My parents owned a restaurant. Eating together at a restaurant is central to our social experience and, once we transition back, I'm looking forward to going to restaurants again just like everyone else.

However, I strongly believe that the next generation of successful restaurant owners will emerge from the burgeoning community of licensed home chefs. They will have the opportunity to test their menu items, build a loyal customer following, and gauge whether the demands of cooking for more than their own family is right for them. They can do all of this without taking out enormous loans to finance their first restaurant. What motivates me is seeing my own parents, immigrants from Iran, invest in a restaurant that failed. That was a very painful experience for our family and I hope no one else has to endure that. With your help, they won't have to.

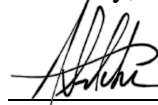
When I first introduced this idea to our local New York partners, they mentioned Jackson Heights and Corona. They mentioned the type of enforcement that took place with street vendors, both licensed and unlicensed all across the City. I learned about how the beloved "Arepa Lady" went from selling her food on the streets of Corona, Queens – making a name for herself through word of mouth and food critics – to opening up a successful brick-and-mortar shop. This positive outcome can now be replicated through microenterprise home kitchens. We can help facilitate thousands of these success stories, especially now as our community heals from a pandemic.

I understand that certain neighborhoods may not have access to reliable Internet connectivity; even in those communities, running a home kitchen operation is still possible. All they need is a few minutes a day in their local library to access the platform and they're in business. I saw the map of the local LinkNYC kiosks down Roosevelt Ave and other parts of the City where a home cook could access the platform. I believe we are on our way to making this a reality in New York.

Ultimately, we share so many of the same goals. This is a lifeline for your constituents, and the need for economic opportunity is more pressing now than it's ever been. We want low income communities and communities of color to meaningfully participate in the food economy. We want to see them share their culture and their homemade food – recipes passed down through generations – with their neighbors. We want to see them build community, one meal at a time. I'm hopeful we share the same values, and I very much look forward to working together to help your constituents land back on their feet.

Thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,



Alvin Salehi
Founder & Co-CEO