SUMMARY
California’s leadership to combat poverty and hunger are most evident through the implementation of the CalFresh Program. Currently, there are 4.8 million people in 2.6 million households that receive CalFresh benefits. Recent policy expanded the program to allow recipients to purchase more fresh fruits and vegetables at California certified farmers’ markets. Unfortunately, only a limited number of certified farmers’ markets are able to take advantage of this expansion due to bureaucratic hurdles. Senate Bill 907 would establish a non-competitive grant program at the Department of Social Services and the Department of Food and Agriculture to ensure those who need it most have access to healthy foods at our California certified farmers’ markets.

BACKGROUND
CalFresh, federally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provides monthly benefits to low income families, seniors, students, and others to help reduce hunger and increase healthy outcomes.

In 2010, AB 537 (Arambula) allowed farmers markets to offer electronic benefits transfer (EBT) services. Farmers’ markets are an important source of low-cost, nutritionally dense produce for Californians in need of food assistance and shopping at local farmers’ markets has been associated with healthy behavioral changes. Successful implementation of EBT access at a farmers’ market creates the infrastructure needed to allow for the incorporation of nutrition incentive programs, which double the buying power of CalFresh dollars. These successful models include the participation of CalFresh recipients, vendors, and technical and administrative support from non-profit organizations with market expertise.

PROBLEM
Unfortunately, the current system prevents many farmers markets from offering EBT access and presents many hurdles. Some of the hurdles market operators point to are cumbersome qualifications requiring the farmers’ market manager to become an authorized USDA SNAP retailer, high costs associated with the need to staff the EBT machine(s), backend accounting and reporting requirements, and the implementation of best practices to encourage EBT use. According to recent research published in the American Journal of Health Promotion, a 38 percent decrease was reported in weekly SNAP transactions at markets with an unpaid volunteer managing the services compared to those with a paid staffer. Additionally, since most farmers’ markets operate on thin margins, EBT access at farmers’ markets becomes dependent upon a varying and unpredictable collection of funding sources. As a result markets don’t offer any EBT access, offer only an underutilized and limited form of EBT access, or have EBT access constantly at risk of ending if enough funding cannot be secured.

SOLUTION
This bill would increase access to healthy foods at all certified farmers’ markets in California by establishing a noncompetitive grant program that would primarily provide dedicated EBT processing staff and EBT administrative support. The funding would be used to scale and improve EBT processes at existing farmers’ markets, establish EBT access at new certified markets in under-served low-income communities, and develop education and outreach efforts to local communities. SB 907 increases EBT access at farmers’ markets, which drives increased consumption of fresh produce and leverages state and federal nutrition dollars that directly benefits our farming community, and most importantly, decreases nutritional disparities in various communities across our state.

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SUPPORT
Alchemist CDC (co-sponsor)
NextGen California (co-sponsor)