

Response to 2024-25 Grand Jury Report

Unpermitted Food Vendors in Santa Barbara County

County Executive Office
County Health Department

Board of Supervisors

September 23, 2025



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COUNTY
one
FUTURE

Summary

- On June 26, 2025, Grand Jury distributed report titled “Unpermitted Food Vendors in Santa Barbara County”
- Report focused on unprecedented growth of unpermitted food vendors and threats to public health
- Includes 4 findings and 5 recommendations
- Board must respond within 90 days

Background

- State and local laws provide requirements for proper food storage, labeling, handling, and disposal
- Vendors must obtain food handler's card and health permit to sell food
- EHS conducts inspections annually; more frequently if a complaint or prior violation exists
- SB 946 (2018) and SB 972 (2022) decriminalized sidewalk vending and limited the County's ability to regulate sidewalk vendors
- Grand Jury report highlights challenges regulating unpermitted vendors (e.g., limited regulatory authority, ineffective penalties, and vendors frequently relocate to avoid penalties)
- Recommends strategies to address enforcement

Finding 1

Finding 1: *County Health's ability to inspect mobile food vendors and enforce food safety regulations has been limited by the small number of inspection personnel currently employed in its Environmental Health Services Division.*

Agree.

- EHS is designated enforcement agency for food safety in incorporated and unincorporated areas
- Increase in unpermitted food vending activities outpaced current staffing
- Hours and location of vendors adds burden to inspections

Recommendation 1

Recommendation 1: *The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors provide County Health with sufficient funding to hire additional inspectors to facilitate more frequent inspections of mobile food vendors and to enforce compliance with existing food safety laws if violations are discovered. To be implemented by July 1, 2026.*

Will not be implemented.

- County provides more frequent inspections
- EHS worked overtime during past 6 months to conduct after-hours inspections
- County met with CHP to discuss food vending enforcement. CHP agreed to remove vendors from prohibited State freeways and ROW
- EHS will continue to monitor vendors and leverage partnership with CHP to conduct enforcement

Finding 2

Finding 2: *There is no established process by which the public can report unpermitted mobile food vendors to County Health, thus making enforcement of food safety requirements more difficult.*

Disagree.

- Increasing public awareness and ease of reporting is essential to effective enforcement
- EHS publicly posts a phone number and email for submitting complaints, which are monitored during business hours
- Complaints tracked and responded to per public health protocols and staff availability

Recommendation 2

Recommendation 2: *The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct County Health to establish a tip line for the public to report information about mobile food vendors who are not permitted. To be implemented by January 1, 2026.*

Will be implemented.

- Agree with the importance of improving public access to report concerns related to unpermitted vendors and agree there is room for improvement
- By January 1, 2026, County Health will advertise its phone line and establish online reporting form
- County Health will update its website, translate materials, and promote via social media and community partners
- Initiatives will support timely and efficient enforcement actions by enabling the public to provide information regarding location and operation of vendors

Finding 3

Finding 3: *County Health efforts to conduct inspections of mobile food vendors have been negatively impacted by safety concerns for inspection personnel.*

Agree.

- EHS inspection staff are trained professionals who routinely conduct inspections of retail food facilities and permitted mobile food vendors as part of their normal duties.
- Equipped with knowledge, protocols, and experience to perform inspections safely and effectively under standard conditions
- Coordinate with SO, CHP, and law enforcement in the Cities of Santa Barbara, Lompoc, and Santa Maria to support staff during inspections when appropriate
- Law enforcement not always present and have not prevented EHS from continuing their work
- Committed to providing safe work environment and will continue to assess risks and collaborate with other agencies

Recommendation 3a – Sheriff's Office

Recommendation 3a: *The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office delegate deputies to accompany County Health inspectors so that the inspectors, with the support of law enforcement, can safely enforce permitting and inspecting in the unincorporated areas of Santa Barbara County and in incorporated areas where the Sheriff's Office is contracted to provide services. To be implemented by January 1, 2026.*

Implemented.

- SO provides law enforcement support at pre-planned inspections in the unincorporated county and incorporated Carpinteria, Goleta, Solvang, and Buellton
- Dedicate deputies for security and scene safety
- On-duty area supervisor aware of requests and provides additional assistance as needed

Recommendation 3b – County Health

Recommendation 3b: *The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct County Health to partner with municipal law enforcement agencies so that health inspectors, with the support of law enforcement, can safely enforce permitting and inspecting within incorporated municipalities. To be implemented by January 1, 2026.*

Implemented.

- Inspectors coordinate with law enforcement in cities when available
- Partnered with SB Police Dept on joint enforcement efforts in high-traffic areas and after-hours operations
- Partnerships pursued on a case-by-case basis and continue to strengthen

Finding 4

Finding 4: *Food trucks and carts are often not located in proximity to restroom or handwashing facilities for staff and customers as legally required, which poses a significant public health risk.*

Disagree partially.

- CA Retail Food Code requires all permitted vendors maintain access to approved restroom and handwashing facilities within 200 feet of operation if stationary for more than 1 hour, unless exempt
- Permitted vendors must demonstrate access to required facilities as part of their approved operating procedures, which is checked during inspections
- Any vendor found operating without required facilities is subject to enforcement

Recommendation 4

Recommendation 4: *The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct County Health to focus inspection and enforcement efforts on mobile food vendors who operate without proximity to appropriate restroom or handwashing facilities. To be implemented by January 1, 2026.*

Will not be implemented.

- Access to restroom and handwashing facilities is critical component of safe food operations
- EHS prioritizes enforcement based on severity of potential public health risk
- Primary focus: Unapproved food sources, improper food storage, inadequate temperature control, or sale of high-risk foods at unpermitted facilities
- Respond to all complaints involving lack of handwashing or restroom access
- Violations addressed with education, notices of violation, and coordination with law enforcement

Recommended Actions

- a) Consider and adopt the responses in Attachment A as the Board of Supervisors' response to the 2024-25 Grand Jury report entitled "Unpermitted Food Vendors in Santa Barbara County;"
- b) Authorize the Chair to sign the letter included in Attachment A, and forward the letter and responses to the Presiding Judge of Santa Barbara County Superior Court; and
- c) Determine pursuant to CEQA Guidelines 15378(b)(5) that the above actions are not a project subject to CEQA review, because they are government administrative activities that do not result in direct or indirect physical changes to the environment.



Questions?