



August 18, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

On behalf of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, we write to thank you for the state and nationwide feeding waivers the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has approved since March as we have continued to address the ramifications caused by this unprecedented coronavirus pandemic. Your leadership and actions have been critical to our efforts to ensure that Pennsylvanians in need of food assistance have access to the resources they need. As we prepare for schools to open across the commonwealth in just a few short days, we ask for your continued support by approving additional flexibilities that ensure one of our most vulnerable populations – our children – continue to have access to critical food resources.

According to Feeding America's annual Map the Meal Gap report, in 2018, 10.9% of Pennsylvanians didn't always know where their next meal was coming from. That number included nearly 15.1% of all Pennsylvania children. In 2020, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, these numbers are expected to grow substantially. According to a series of data analysis reports compiled by Feeding America, the number of Pennsylvanians facing food insecurity is projected to grow to 15.9% in 2020, an increase of 45.2%. Even more startling, they project that the percentage of children in our state facing food insecurity will rise to 23.8% – an increase of 57.6% in just two years.

For many children facing food insecurity, the most consistent meals they receive are the ones served to them through the school breakfast and lunch programs. However, due to the pandemic, a safe return to in-person instruction looks different across schools, districts and counties and may not be immediate. These deviations from normal school operations present innumerable challenges as schools and community organizations work to provide consistent food access to the increasing number of children living in low-income households.

We commend USDA's actions to serve many of these children through the extension of several nationwide waivers through June 30, 2021. These waivers providing flexibility in meal patterns and the time and place requirements, as well as allowing for parent/guardian meal pick-up, are critical first steps in meeting the needs of school-age children. However, more flexibilities are urgently needed if schools and community-based providers are to effectively meet the needs of all children during this pandemic. As a result, we respectfully request that you use the USDA's existing waiver authority provided through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act to extend the following nationwide waivers:

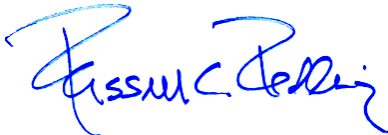
- (1) Allow the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) to be used to feed children during the 2020-21 school year.** Extension of this waiver is critical for schools and community-based nonprofit organizations to provide meals to children in the most effective and efficient manner possible. Permitting both schools and nonprofits to continue use of this waiver will significantly reduce administrative burdens, limit confusion as to where meals can be accessed, allow meals to be provided at locations most convenient for families, and limit overt identification of children from low-income households.

- (2) **Expand the non-congregate and other approved waivers for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to the SFSP and the SSO and allow these programs to be used to feed children when they are not physically in school.** Extending these nationwide waivers to SFSP and SSO will allow community-based nonprofit organizations to assist schools in meeting the needs of children at locations that work best for families, particularly on days when children are learning remotely.
- (3) **Extend the Area Eligibility waiver for SFSP and SSO through the 2020-21 school year.** Allowing feeding sites to provide meals in communities that do not meet the 50% free or reduced-price threshold for area eligibility has been essential to providing necessary food to children despite the uncertainty and stress that has come with the COVID-19 pandemic. Extending this waiver for SFSP and SSO will allow schools and community-based nonprofit meal sponsors to continue providing free meals to all children (including younger siblings of school-aged children who may not be receiving meals in a child-care setting) and will eliminate the excessive administrative burden. Extension of this waiver also will alleviate confusion for families who have become accustomed since March to accessing meals for their children at a local feeding site regardless of school enrollment or their status for free or reduced-price school meals.
- (4) **Waive the Afterschool Educational or Enrichment Activity Requirement for the Afterschool Meal and Snack Programs available through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and NSLP through the 2020-21 school year.** While the current non-congregate waiver extension includes the Afterschool Meal and Snack Programs, it does not waive the accompanying activity requirement. This waiver is critical for CACFP sites to be able to provide access to meals and snacks when providing the activity component isn't otherwise safe or feasible. Similarly, this waiver is critical to schools' ability to provide evening meals in combination with take-home breakfasts and lunches.
- (5) **Allow those providing meals through the SFSP or SSO to also serve through the Afterschool Meal and Snack Programs.** While children receiving meals through SFSP or SSO are only able to receive two meals per day, USDA allowed a third meal to be provided under guidance issued through the unanticipated school closure waiver. This waiver was critical throughout these past six months to being able to provide three meals a day to children and is necessary moving forward for community-based nonprofit organizations to replicate the meal options being provided by schools.

In these extraordinary times, our children are being forced to routinely face and adapt to the evolving changes in their daily lives. With the countless uncertainties our children are currently coping with, they should never have to cope with the uncertainty of not knowing where their next meal will come from.

Thank you for your leadership and your consideration of these critical waiver requests.

Sincerely,



Russell C. Redding
Secretary of Agriculture



Pedro Rivera
Secretary of Education

CC: The Honorable Brandon Lipps
The Honorable Pamilyn Miller