

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 1, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

As millions of Americans face increased food insecurity as a result of COVID-19, we write today to highlight the importance of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as a vital safety net for families who are struggling to navigate these challenging times. We believe it would be an irresponsible step backwards for the Administration to proceed with any proposal to dramatically limit eligibility or decrease benefits during this pandemic or the economic recovery. We therefore urge USDA to immediately suspend all rulemaking for the “Revisions to Categorical Eligibility in SNAP” proposed rule, which was originally published on July 24, 2019.

SNAP is an important part of the coronavirus response, yet looming uncertainty regarding the status of this proposed rule threatens its effectiveness during this time of heightened need. As you said last week, “these are unprecedented times for American families who are facing joblessness and hunger.” Feeding America estimates that up to an additional 17.1 million people could experience food insecurity under current conditions, a 46 percent increase from the 37 million prior to the pandemic. A public health or economic crisis is not the time for rulemaking that would without question result in more people experiencing food insecurity and hunger.

Even prior to the pandemic, USDA’s Categorical Eligibility proposed rule was extremely concerning in that it threatened access to food assistance for 3.1 million individuals, including more than 44,000 in Maine and 25,000 in West Virginia. Now, however, in addition to making it more difficult for individuals to qualify for food assistance benefits, attempts to refine categorical eligibility requirements could notably affect populations at higher risk for severe illness associated with COVID-19, including seniors and individuals with underlying health conditions. This policy change could also have a significant effect on children’s access to free or reduced price school breakfast and lunch, which are vital during times of uncertainty. Under this proposal, those losing access to SNAP would primarily be working families with children, seniors, and people with disabilities. The proposed rule, if implemented, would also greatly increase administrative burdens on states, which are already stretched thin signing up new participants, monitoring current participation, and implementing new program flexibilities related to COVID-19. States will likely continue to experience this heightened caseload for the foreseeable future.

Beyond those that would be directly impacted by the proposed rule change, entire communities suffer when rates of food insecurity and hunger rise. Food banks across the country are experiencing dramatic increases in demand for charitable food assistance as more families are

struggling—as a direct result of COVID-19—to put food on their tables. When additional strain is placed on the charitable food system, it imposes a tremendous burden on entire communities, including faith-based and hunger relief organizations that believe it is their obligation to serve their communities but face capacity limitations.

In recognition of the health and economic challenges related to COVID-19, we urge an immediate suspension of USDA's rulemaking. Moving forward with this flawed proposal would worsen the struggles that millions of low-income Americans are facing as a result of the deepening public health and economic crisis.

Thank you for your consideration and continued work to provide food assistance to children, families, and seniors.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Joe Manchin III
United States Senator