

April 16, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

On behalf of over 175 nutrition, public health, anti-hunger, consumer, environmental, agriculture, faith-based, and school-based groups, we thank you for what you've done so far to help keep children fed. However, as the pandemic grows, we are learning that much more needs to be done to support schools and communities in providing necessary meals. School food service programs are playing a central role feeding communities and food service workers are part of the frontline.

These investments are needed to ensure school food service remain fiscally solvent during and after the pandemic:

Require the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), to coordinate meal distribution through the course of the pandemic. The pandemic is presenting similar challenges for emergency feeding as during natural disasters. For instance, during natural disasters FEMA has used school kitchens and sites to provide food and helped distribute food to the community. Further, the ability to travel to a feeding site may be compromised and some sites have presented some security risks to food service workers. As much as possible, FEMA must help increase distribution of the food directly to households and coordinate with other emergency feeding providers such as food banks and pantries.

Extend the Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) through the summer and permit additional P-EBT distribution sites. Widespread business closures and mounting health impacts of COVID-19 have made it increasingly difficult for low-income families to afford food. School food authorities are struggling to meet the demand. With social distancing guidelines in place and more Americans losing jobs, Congress should expand P-EBT benefits through the summer. P-EBT eases the burden on already-reeling school food authorities, allows families to purchase the foods that meet their needs, and can reduce the number of trips outside the home. Most importantly, P-EBT, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), reduces hunger while infusing much-needed capital into the economy. P-EBT must be rolled out as smoothly and effectively as possible.

Provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for food service workers and other staff handling meal preparation and distribution to work alongside FEMA. Many food service staff fear for their safety going to work, and some feeding sites have opted to close because of

staff getting COVID-19. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act included money for schools to purchase cleaning and sanitation supplies, which can include PPE for food service workers. However more help is needed and the federal government must make it clear that school food service programs are eligible. These food service workers are on the frontline feeding the community and must be protected with masks and gloves at the minimum.

Provide funding relief for school nutrition programs to cover costs incurred during the pandemic response and school closures. School nutrition programs rely on reimbursement from meal service to pay for expenses. Many school districts across the country maintained or incurred more expenses than normal (i.e. labor, transportation) while seeing a significant decrease in revenues from reduced meal participation during school closures. This unanticipated loss of revenue has forced districts to tap into fund balances and draw upon lines of credit. In order to sustain these essential feeding programs while protecting jobs and district educational funds, funding must be provided to make programs financially solvent.

Ease the administrative burden for school food service programs as they transition back in the next school year. There will be a massive influx of children eligible for free or reduced-priced school meals when school year 2020-2021 starts. Providing meals at no cost for all enrolled students will help program finances as they recover from losses from the pandemic, and mitigate the time and resources needed to process all the new applications.

Increase Section 32 funding to the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (DoD Fresh). USDA should be commended for allowing states to convert unspent USDA Foods entitlement dollars to access fresh fruits and vegetables at this time. However, many states have already spent through their school year 2019-2020 funds. Accordingly, an additional \$200 million should be available through DoD Fresh immediately to ensure schools have adequate access to fresh fruit and vegetables. Additionally, another \$100 million should be included to fund the DoD Fresh Summer Food Service Pilot Program and automatically include all states and territories that participate in the program. Expanding the summer program to include all states that participate in the school year will help ensure programs are able to meet the core nutritional needs of the students they serve during this crisis. Any unspent funding can be applied to a school's entitlement for school year 2020-2021.

Increase funding for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP). FFVP provides critical access to fresh produce for the nation's lowest-income elementary schools. Schools should be provided the flexibility to serve these snacks, typically distributed in a classroom setting with nutrition education, as a complementary component to any alternative feeding program. Eligibility should be extended to all students 18 and under in a district with qualifying FFVP schools, with additional section 32 funding being made available to accommodate any increase in participation. As always, FFVP is a voluntary program for schools.

Provide additional funding for School Meal Kitchen Equipment Grants. Nearly 90 percent of schools need at least one piece of updated school kitchen equipment. Equipment helps schools meet their needs. When schools do not have adequate equipment, they are forced to use costly and inefficient workarounds. In its first year, Congress provided \$100 million for equipment grants, while the need was estimated to be nearly \$1 billion. Since then, Congress has made

funding available to schools through the USDA School Kitchen Equipment Grant program, including \$35 million in Fiscal Year 2020. Most recently, the pandemic has shown that many schools may not have been set up with proper equipment to respond to emergency feeding situations like the one presented. Providing an infusion of additional funding can help ensure schools are prepared to serve healthy, nutritious foods when schools return, particularly if they are unable to invest in upgrades as a result of financial stress from the pandemic, and can help them acquire adequate equipment to be prepared for future emergencies.

The following investments provide greater support for emergency feeding and communities in need:

Increase access to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). WIC services are effective at improving health outcomes throughout pregnancy and early childhood. To make sure we are covering all vulnerable populations, especially during the pandemic, Congress should expand access by increasing child eligibility to age six, increasing postpartum eligibility to two years, and extending infant and child certification periods to two years. These steps will address existing nutrition gaps and reduce duplicative paperwork requirements on both participants and service providers.

Increase benefits for fruit and vegetable purchases through WIC. The January 2017 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) recommended increasing the value of WIC's Cash Value Benefit (CVB), which offers participants between \$9-\$11 per month to purchase a variety of fruits and vegetables. With shortages of WIC items on the shelf, increasing the CVB value will ensure that WIC participants will have sustained access to nutritious foods throughout the public health emergency.

Encourage the Obesity Prevention and Nutrition Education Grant Program (SNAP-Ed) to provide new flexibility needed to respond to and address the increase in eligible SNAP participants by promoting local food access, healthy eating, and food security through safe and nutritious food preparation and distribution. In situations where gaps exist, SNAP-Ed providers may also assist with food distribution approaches at various sites including, but not limited to: schools, senior meal programs, emergency food providers, and FEMA. SNAP-Ed reaches large numbers of low-income households at risk for COVID-19 due to pre-existing conditions and is also well situated to accelerate SNAP and P-EBT enrollment. However, they are unable to do so due to operational challenges under existing statutory authority. A nationwide waiver with no match requirement should be provided to allow SNAP-Ed to support SNAP enrollment efforts, including P-EBT and other food assistance programs designed for families and communities. Additionally, adequate resources should be provided for increased need to enhance and highlight best practices, resources, and case studies that showcase innovative approaches in a virtual environment.

Finally, the importance of SNAP to feed households in need cannot be understated. The CARES Act provided economic supports across industries, assuming that the economic repercussions of COVID-19 will continue past the public health emergency, yet failed to take full advantage of one of the most effective economic supports during downturns: SNAP. **We urge you to strengthen SNAP by increasing the maximum benefit available to all households by 15**

percent and increasing the minimum benefit from \$16 to \$30 through the longer-term economic downturn, rather than the immediate public health emergency, and delay the implementation of proposed and final rules that the Administration has issued for SNAP.

Sincerely,

1,000 Days

50by40

A Place at the Table

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

Action For Healthy Kids

Advocates for Better Childrens Diets

Agri-Cultura Network

Alaska Food Policy Council

Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, USF

Alliance to End Hunger

American Academy of Pediatrics

American Diabetes Association

American Heart Association

American Public Health Association

American Society for Nutrition

Association of SNAP Nutrition Education Administrators

Association of State Public Health Nutritionists

Balanced

Berkeley Media Studies Group

Better Food Foundation

Beyond Hunger

Brighter Bites

C. O. E. Cousins Empowerment Optimists of Optimists International

California Conference of Local Health Department Nutritionists

California Food is Medicine Coalition

CEDA (Community & Economic Development Association of Cook County)

Center for Biological Diversity

Center for Digital Democracy

Center for Ecoliteracy

Center for Food Safety

Center for Science in the Public Interest

Center for Wellness and Nutrition

ChangeLab Solutions

Chicago Food Policy Action Council

Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion

Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition (COPC)

Church World Service

Coalition for Healthy School Food

Colorado Children's Campaign

Columbia Food Policy Committee

Common Threads
Community Farm Alliance
Community Resource Center
Congressional Hunger Center
Connecticut Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity
Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children
Consumer Federation of America
Covering Kids & Families of Indiana
DC Central Kitchen
DC Greens
Del Norte and Tribal Lands Community Food Council
Department of Nutrition - University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Detroit Food Policy Council
Dine' (Navajo) Food Sovereignty Alliance
Dubuque County Food Policy Council
Eat for the Earth
Enlace Chicago
Factory Farming Awareness Coalition
Farm Forward
Farm Sanctuary
Farm to Table NM
Fayette County Community Voices
FEAST
First Focus Campaign for Children
Florida Impact to End Hunger
Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
Food Shift
FoodCorps
Fresh Approach
Friends of the Earth
Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing
Futurewise
Global Food Research Program at UNC
Global Health Advocacy Incubator
GoFarm
Good Shepherd Center
Greater Chicago Food Depository
Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities
Grow Benzie
Hartford Food System
Health Care Without Harm
Healthy Food America
Healthy School Food Maryland
Healthy Schools Campaign
Heartland Communities, Inc.
Heuristic Management

Hunger Free America
Hunger Free Colorado
Illinois Public Health Institute
Indiana Public Health Association
Indiana Uplands Food Network
Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility
Interfaith Sustainable Food Collaborative
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Jump IN for Healthy Kids
Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education and Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University
Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council
LiveWell Colorado
Local Food Alliance of Northern Michigan
Loop Learning Center
Los Angeles Food Policy Council
Lurie Children's Hospital
Lyon County Food and Farm Council
Marion County Public Health Department
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
Michigan Fitness Foundation
Michigan League for Public Policy
Montgomery County Food Council
National Action Against Obesity
National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
National Athletic Trainers' Association
National Education Association
National Farm to School Network
National WIC Association
Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)
Neighborhood House Association
North Carolina Alliance for Health
Oceanside Unified School District
One Meal a Day for the Planet
Ottawa Food
Pajaro Valley Food, Farming and Health Policy Council
Physicians Association for Nutrition USA
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
Pikes Peak Farm to School
Pittsburgh Food Policy Council
PlantPure Communities
Poetry X Hunger
Prevention Institute
Public Health Advocates
Public Health Institute
Real Food for Kids
REAP Food Group

Redstone Center for Prevention and Wellness
Reinbold Properties
Resources for Community Development
Rooted
Roots of Change
Sacramento Food Policy Council
Safe Routes Partnership
San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative
San Diego Food System Alliance
San Diego Hunger Coalition
San Diego Unified Food and Nutrition Division
SE Medical, Inc
Sebastopol Farmers Market
Second Harvest of Silicon Valley
SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators
Share Our Strength
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas – Justice Team
Sitka Local Foods Network
Slow Food California
Slow Food USA
Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior
Society of State Leaders of Health and Physical Education
Socorro Senior Center
Southern Nevada Food Council
Spokane Food Policy Council
Sustainable Agriculture Education
The Curriculum of Cuisine
The Growing Project
The Horizon Foundation of Howard County
The Humane Society of the United States
The Praxis Project
TomKat Ranch
Tri-County Health Department
True Health Initiative
Trust for America's Health
U.S. Apple Association
Union of Concerned Scientists
United Fresh Produce Association
United Planning Organization
United Way of Pierce County
UpRoot Colorado
Urban School Food Alliance
Wellness in the Schools
World Animal Protection

cc: Chairman Pat Roberts, Senate Agriculture Committee
Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow, Senate Agriculture Committee
Chairman Bobby Scott, House Education & Labor Committee
Ranking Member Virginia Foxx, House Education & Labor Committee
Chairman John Hoeven, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Chairwoman Shelley Capito, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Ranking Member Jon Tester, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Chairwoman Lucille Roybal-Allard, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Ranking Member Chuck Fleischmann, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Ranking Member Jeff Merkley, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Chairman Sanford Bishop, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Ranking Member Jeff Fortenberry, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Chairman Ron Johnson, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Ranking Member Gary Peters, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Chairman Bennie Thompson, House Homeland Security Committee
Ranking Member Mike Rogers, House Homeland Security Committee