



CONGRESSIONAL HISPANIC CAUCUS

Joaquín Castro | *Chairman*

116TH CONGRESS

June 12, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 216W, Whitten Building
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

We write today expressing support for the Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) program and respectfully urge the USDA to continue prioritizing it in your efforts to bring food to as many American families and children as possible. The P-EBT program allows states to provide temporary meal replacement benefits to families with children who would otherwise receive free or reduced-price meals at schools if schools were open. This pandemic continues to exacerbate economic hardships across America while exposing how vulnerable low-income families and communities of color have the highest food insecurity rates in the country. Food assistance programs such as P-EBT provide vital nutritional support for children who have been directly impacted by COVID-19-triggered school closures, and in the states that have already set up this program, families have been able to access the food resources to feed their children that were once unreliable for them. Currently, there are already 41 approved state P-EBT plans plus the District of Columbia, that are working to push this program further in order to keep children fed.

Child food insecurity has soared since school closures began in early March. According to recent data from the Brookings Institution, nearly one in five mothers with children (age 12 and under) report that their children at home are not eating enough because they cannot afford food.¹ These findings confirm the early predictions of COVID-19-inflicted hunger. Reports by Feeding America show that the overall child food insecurity could reach unprecedented levels by the end of 2020 alone.² Before COVID-19, more than 22 million children across our country were relying on free and reduced-price school meals. Recent job loss, underemployment, and school closures leave these vulnerable families with an increased risk of household food insecurity. USDA's latest annual report indicates that Hispanic or Latino households experienced

¹Lauren Bauer, *The COVID-19 Crisis Has Already Left Too Many Children Hungry in America* May 6, 2020

https://www.hamiltonproject.org/blog/the_covid_19_crisis_has_already_left_too_many_children_hungry_in_america (last accessed May 12, 2020)

² Feeding America, *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Local Food Insecurity* May 19, 2020

https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Brief_Local%20Impact_5.19.2020.pdf

higher rates of food insecurity (16.2%) than the national average of 11.1% in 2018.³ Predictions indicated that COVID-19 and economic disruptions would make it worse. A recent report from the Urban Institute confirmed predictions by showing that two-fifths (40.6%) of Hispanic adults (age 18-64) reported a range of financial hardships due to the pandemic including food insecurity.⁴

The most important thing to note with these findings are the physical and psychological effects that food insecurity will have on young children long after this crisis. Going hungry can negatively impact a child's cognitive development and overall health. While disruptions in social routines for children are unavoidable during a global pandemic, hunger should not be. Evidence shows that school meal programs improve the overall well-being of students. The USDA should prioritize programs like P-EBT and provide states with the necessary technical and financial resources as much as possible as they work to implement this new program quickly and equitably. The United States must ensure that every family is able to avoid the negative life-long consequences of food insecurity for our country's youngest learners, especially when Congress has provided the federal government the tools and resources to advocate for our nation's most vulnerable children and families across the nation.

We strongly express our support for P-EBT as our country battles through unprecedented times and call on the USDA to continue prioritizing P-EBT's speedy and inclusive implementation across the country. We look forward to working together and thank you for your commitment to ensuring that our nation's children are adequately supported and fed.

Sincerely,

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³ United States Department of Agriculture, *Food Insecurity by Household Characteristics* <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx> (last Accessed September 04, 2019)

⁴ Dulce Gonzalez, Michael Karpman, Genevieve M. Kenney, Stephen Zuckerman, *Hispanic Adults in Families with Noncitizens Disproportionately Feel the Economic Fallout From COVID-19* May 6, 2020 https://www.urban.org/research/publication/hispanic-adults-families-noncitizens-disproportionately-feel-economic-fallout-covid-19/view/full_report

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