

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

March 22, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

On behalf of the more than 82,000 students in Maine who qualify to participate in the National School Lunch Program, we write to highlight the unique nutrition challenges children face in our State and across the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. With schools closed, COVID-19 is already placing a tremendous burden on families, school districts, and hunger relief organizations.

We appreciate the Department approving a congregate meal waiver for the State of Maine on March 11, 2020, and also applaud the Meals-to-You rural meal delivery partnership that was announced this week. Yet, in order for children to continue to receive free meals when school is out, we encourage the Department to immediately utilize the new authorities provided in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act to expand flexibility around the low-income area eligibility requirement for Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO).

During the regular school year, school nutrition programs provide nearly 225,000 meals daily to children across Maine. We want children to continue to thrive despite the unanticipated challenges caused by COVID-19, but that begins with ensuring they have access to food. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (H.R. 6201) importantly provides the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) with flexibility surrounding budget restrictions in Child Nutrition Programs.

Now that H.R. 6201 has been signed into law, we urge the Department to give states prompt guidance on what new program flexibilities will be available to better meet the needs of our nation's children. More than half of the school districts in the State of Maine are currently unable to operate as open meal sites for the community because less than 50 percent of the children in the area qualify for free or reduced price school meals. Nearly twenty school districts are within six percentage points of qualifying.

Removing the low-income area threshold and allowing all sites to operate without administrative burdens would go a long way to helping ensure that no child goes hungry as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. States and local school districts are working tirelessly to develop innovative plans to best serve their students during this pandemic, such as through "grab and go" meals or delivery along bus routes, and prompt guidance from USDA and the Food and Nutrition Service will best prepare them for success.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to working with the Department to prioritize the nutrition needs of children during this very challenging time.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
U.S. Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
U.S. Senator



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Jared Golden
Member of Congress