

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

August 3, 2020

Mr. Brandon Lipps
Deputy Under Secretary
Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue N.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Lipps:

We write to urge you to immediately extend the waivers for school nutrition programs requested by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)¹ in order to allow Massachusetts school districts to continue to meet their students' basic needs during the coming 2020-21 school year. Since the beginning of the coronavirus public health emergency, Massachusetts schools and community organizations have made extraordinary efforts to meet the rising hunger in their communities. As this crisis continues to present unpredictable and unprecedented public health challenges, we ask that you continue to provide local communities with the flexibility to meet their students' needs.

Massachusetts school districts are currently submitting plans for a variety of reopening models for the 2020-21 school year, including fully remote learning, hybrid models, and in-person learning with new safety requirements, with the expectation that any of these models may be needed at various points during the school year.² This approach allows schools to adapt to the changing public health circumstances in their communities; it also recognizes that there is significant uncertainty about the coming school year. It is highly likely that many Massachusetts students will spend a substantial amount of the coming year participating in distance education, whether as part of a fully remote or hybrid model. It is currently impossible for families and schools to identify the specific duration of remote learning, with so much still unknown about the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on children.³

Because of this uncertainty, it is essential that Massachusetts schools have as much flexibility as possible to continue to provide meals to students in a remote learning setting. The need for child nutrition programs in Massachusetts continues to be widespread and urgent. In March 2020 alone, approximately 38% of Massachusetts residents reported experiencing food

¹ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Request for Operation of SFSP During Unanticipated School Closures Through 6/30/21," July 30, 2020, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/school-meals.html#waiivers>.

² Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Initial Fall School Reopening Guidance," Jeffrey C. Riley, June 25, 2020, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/return-to-school/guidance.pdf>.

³ Associated Press, "How does COVID-19 affect kids? Science has answers and gaps," Lindsey Tanner, July 17, 2020, <https://apnews.com/10310a821f24356c1620c365d82579ff>.

insecurity.⁴ In July 2020, nearly one in five Massachusetts families with children reported not having enough food to eat.⁵ Along with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Pandemic-EBT, and the emergency food system, meals provided by schools play a crucial role in preventing family hunger during this crisis.⁶

In order to continue to address these urgent needs, DESE is requesting an extension of its approved waivers for non-congregate meal service, parent/guardian meal pick-up, area eligibility, and meal-time restrictions waivers, as applied to the Seamless Summer Option and Summer Food Service programs, through June 30, 2021.⁷ We urge you to immediately grant these waiver extensions. This will allow Massachusetts schools to enter the new school year with the confidence that they can continue to meet their students' basic needs, whether through a traditional school meals program or through flexible, creative feeding programs that safely align with public health guidance.

We greatly appreciate the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) responsiveness throughout this public health crisis. We know that USDA shares our goal of providing meals to every student in need. We urge you to continue this collaborative partnership between federal, state, and local agencies to support our most vulnerable children during the coronavirus pandemic.

Thank you for your consideration of this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

William R. Keating
Member of Congress

Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress

⁴ Project Bread, "Our Policy Proposals for Combating Hunger Through COVID-19 and Beyond," May 20, 2020, <http://www.projectbread.org/news-and-events/news/covid-policy-proposals.html>.

⁵ Northwestern Institute for Policy Research, "Visualizing Food Insecurity," Diane Schanzenbach and Natalie Tomeh, July 14, 2020, <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/state-food-insecurity.html>.

⁶ NPR, "Schools Race to Feed Students Amid Coronavirus Closures," Cory Turner and Anya Kamenetz, March 20, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/20/818300504/schools-race-to-feed-students-amid-coronavirus-closures>.

⁷ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Request for Operation of SFSP During Unanticipated School Closures Through 6/30/21," July 30, 2020, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/school-meals.html#waiwers>.

Joseph P. Kennedy, III
Member of Congress

Katherine Clark
Member of Congress

Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress

Seth Moulton
Member of Congress

Lori Trahan
Member of Congress