

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205

October 29, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1280 Maryland Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

I write today to urge you to provide expeditious and fair implementation of the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) Program in Puerto Rico and the U.S. territories. I ask that you also provide swift guidance and communication to the states and territories on implementation of new P-EBT provisions included in the recently passed Continuing Resolution (P.L. 116-159). As you know, The Families First Coronavirus Act created the P-EBT program which provides nutritional resources to families with children who would receive free or reduced priced school meals, if not for school closure. Continuing Resolution (P.L. 116-159) extends the P-EBT program until September 30, 2021, and finally allows our fellow Americans in Puerto Rico and the U.S. territories to participate, while also expanding P-EBT coverage to young children in childcare, among other critical provisions to provide much needed nutrition assistance to Americans.

Since the signing of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) in March 2020, all 50 states plus the District of Colombia and the US Virgin Islands have had the option to opt-in to the P-EBT Program. However, our fellow American citizens in Puerto Rico were not afforded that option. Roughly 300,000 school aged children are eligible for P-EBT in Puerto Rico, but were unfairly denied when FFCRA was passed in March. With the financial and health distress experienced by families with children on the island, USDA must act quickly to approve P-EBT for Puerto Rico expeditiously and fairly, including the new provisions that were included in the Continuing Resolution (P.L. 116-159).

Currently, the poverty rate in Puerto Rico is 43 percent. On average, the poverty rate for children in Puerto Rico is 57 percent versus 18 percent in the states. Over 83 percent of all children live in high-poverty areas vs. 10 percent of children in the states. ¹As a result of the pandemic, close to 39,000 more children enrolled in the federal Nutritional Assistance Program (NAP), exacerbating demands on the capped \$1.9 billion block grant and limited nutrition funding provided in FFCRA and CARES Act. This combined funding did not meet the nutritional needs

¹ Coalition for Food Security. *Food Insecurity & Hunger in Puerto Rico*. PDF file. August 15, 2020.

of school-age children entitled to free federal school lunch programs, creating higher food insecurity levels for them and their families. As many families are still struggling with the devastating effects of Hurricane Maria and dozens of recent earthquakes, the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating an already struggling economy and population. We must equalize the disparity faced by children in Puerto Rico where families are already receiving, on average, 60 percent less in SNAP funding than their continental U.S. counterparts.¹

USDA must act now to support the futures of thousands of struggling families in Puerto Rico. As fellow Americans they are entitled to the same benefits the rest of our country receives. Thank you for your careful consideration of this request, and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



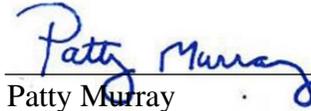
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