

May 13, 2020

The Honorable Sanford Bishop
Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives
Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Hoeven
Chairman
U.S. Senate
Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jeff Fortenberry
Ranking Member
U.S. House of Representatives
Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate
Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairmen Bishop and Hoeven and Ranking Members Fortenberry and Merkley:

Thank you for your leadership and diligent work on the COVID-19 relief legislation and efforts thus far to help children stay nourished. On behalf of undersigned organizations and advocates for child nutrition, we appreciate the opportunity to provide a recommendation for the fourth package.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has placed a spotlight on the central role of schools in feeding our nation's children and school nutrition leaders across the country have stepped up in remarkable ways to nourish their communities. But, this spotlight has also illuminated areas where we need further investment to ensure schools are supported during the pandemic and well positioned to recover after the pandemic. One such area is the need for investment in our school kitchen infrastructure. With school nutrition on the frontlines of response now, we write to urge Congress to include \$200 million in funding for school kitchen equipment grants in the next COVID-19 response bill.

School nutrition departments are responding swiftly to serve their communities during the pandemic. Many are incurring additional, unforeseen costs that may not be reimbursed by the USDA, such as for personal protective equipment and additional equipment for storage, delivery, and distribution of emergency meals. These additional expenses on top of lost revenue from severely lower meal participation means that many schools will not be in a financial situation to invest in maintaining and updating their kitchen infrastructure necessary to meet the needs of students when they resume normal operations.

The pandemic has also shown that many schools may not have been set up with proper equipment to respond to emergency feeding situations like the one presented as they transitioned to curbside and delivery feeding. Most schools have already begun planning for the fall school year, and with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommending that students not congregate in large group settings and that meals be served in classroom in the 2020-2021 school year if there continues to be a community spread, action must be taken now. Providing additional funding will help schools acquire adequate equipment to adhere to CDC recommendations, such as mobile serving carts and coolers, to adapt to these emergency scenarios or longer-term alternative meal service.

Even before the pandemic, nearly 90 percent of schools need at least one piece of updated school kitchen equipment. When schools do not have adequate equipment, they are forced to use costly and inefficient workarounds. As schools stretch to respond to the food insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic while also facing significant financial losses from this crisis, providing an infusion of additional funding can help ensure schools are prepared to serve healthy, nutritious foods when schools return.

Congress recognized the potential for economic stimulus that school kitchen equipment can play when it allocated \$100 million in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. With the need from schools estimated to be nearly \$1 billion at the time, the demand for those funds far surpassed supply. Since then, Congress has made funding available to schools through the USDA School Kitchen Equipment Grant program, including \$35 million in Fiscal Year 2020. However, the need has grown and evolved.

By increasing funding for these grants, Congress can ensure schools have the resources they need to support and strengthen their meal service infrastructure in the face of financial uncertainty. In addition, these funds will be spent in local economies to support jobs and companies that manufacture and install the equipment and infrastructure schools need to serve healthy meals to students.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

American Heart Association

Balanced

Center for Science in the Public Interest

Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition

Common Threads

Community Food Advocates

FoodCorps

GoFarm

Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University

National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Education Association
National Farm to School Network
National Milk Producers Federation
National PTA
National WIC Association
School Nutrition Association
Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior
Society for Public Health Education
Society of State Leaders of Health and Physical Education
United Fresh Produce Association

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