



May 14, 2020

Members of the Pennsylvania Congressional Delegation
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC

Dear Members of the Pennsylvania Congressional Delegation,

The devastating effects of COVID 19 have impacted the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in countless ways. Due to a dramatic increase in demand for emergency food assistance, it has become especially critical for our food assistance programs to operate at their fullest capacity and as efficiently as possible. One of these essential programs is the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP). This program is successfully administered by the Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), part of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), but Pennsylvania is requesting immediate legislative action to allow additional flexibility to serve our older adults, perhaps the most vulnerable population impacted by this pandemic.

Since 2006, the SFMNP has provided low-income older adults with fresh, nutritious, locally grown fruits, vegetables, and herbs from approved farmers in Pennsylvania. In 2019 alone, over 160,000 vulnerable older adults in Pennsylvania benefitted from this program. This program also supports more than 1,100 Pennsylvania farmers, 828 farm stands, and 88 farmers markets.

FNS regulations require that a participating older adult provide a signed statement affirming that their household size and income does not exceed the maximum income eligibility standard. Presently, most access points (Area Agencies on Aging, senior centers, etc.) are closed to the public, which provides an increased challenge for older adults to sign up for the SFMNP and obtain the vouchers in person. Additionally, older adults may not have access to the technology to obtain and print applications from online sources or submit these forms electronically. They also may not have the necessary materials available in their home to mail the signed application back. Most importantly, until cases of COVID-19 significantly decrease, older adults may be fearful to risk exposure by leaving their homes, or they might not have someone who can obtain these documents for them. To provide vouchers to older adults, agencies will need to distribute these documents via U.S. mail instead of distributing in person, correspondingly increasing agency administrative costs.

Due to risks and challenges from COVID-19 impacting the older adult population, we request that Congress provide a temporary legislative waiver for this requirement for the duration of the 2020 season. This waiver would afford older adults the flexibility to verbally affirm by contacting intake staff on the phone or electronically affirm via an email message that they meet the requirements of this program. A notation of this affirmation could be adhered to the application, providing safe and efficient access to this program.

We also request that additional funds for administrative support of this program be provided immediately. These administrative funds would be used to cover banking costs incurred by farmers participating in this program when they deposit multiple small-value vouchers and assist agencies with increased costs for mailing vouchers and other required materials. At a time when budgets have been put under increasing financial strains, the provision of these administrative funds would relieve some of the additional costs that agencies will incur in carrying out this program.

We appreciate the inclusion of Section 60604 in H.R. 6800 and request that this language, in addition to the specific needs identified in this letter, be included in the final stimulus package. It is critical that this flexibility and additional support be provided immediately, as we are quickly approaching the start of the Farmers Market Nutrition Program season.

Thank you for hearing our concerns and considering the opportunities to assist with the challenges facing the tens of thousands of older Pennsylvanians this program serves. We look forward to your response and appreciate your support in protecting this vulnerable population and Pennsylvania's agricultural industry.

Sincerely,



Russell C. Redding, Secretary

PA Department of Agriculture



Robert Torres, Secretary

PA Department of Aging