

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 13, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

On behalf of the millions of Massachusetts residents that we represent, we write to urge the Administration to halt implementation of federal SNAP rule changes while we contend with containing the impact and mitigating the spread of COVID-19. Massachusetts is currently confronting COVID-19 on a large scale. On March 10, Governor Charlie Baker declared a state of emergency.¹ As of the writing of this letter, universities across the state are sending students home, elementary and secondary schools are closing, and businesses have been directed to consider reducing person to person contact.

Potential widespread efforts to slow transmission – including social distancing and quarantines – cause major disruptions in daily routines. These disruptions disproportionately place financial strain and harm on low-wage and low-income households. When schools are closed, parents may not be able to find child care and have to miss work to stay home. If businesses close or employees are asked to stay home, they may not receive sick leave. Fewer people travel or go out to eat, and conferences and events are cancelled – slashing or eliminating pay for hospitality, service, and tourist industry workers. For example, Logan International Airport has already seen a 13% reduction in passengers from the same time last year.² Overall, families with tight budgets and few savings whose income is disrupted for an extended period will face great financial strain and risk falling further into poverty.

COVID-19 has serious consequences for low-income households, and those consequences are made more severe by the Administration's efforts to cut SNAP through regulation changes. In 2019 the Administration proposed three rules that would cut SNAP in Massachusetts. These rules would 1) worsen a strict SNAP time limit in areas of Massachusetts that struggle with elevated rates of unemployment, 2) implement a benefits cliff and prevent low-wage working households from accessing SNAP if their income exceeds 130% of the Federal Poverty Level, and 3) prevent Massachusetts from using state data to inform a standardized calculation of utility costs in determining SNAP benefit amounts.

The Administration's proposed SNAP rules would increase hunger and hardship for an estimated 104,000 residents – in a state in which 1 in 9 residents help put food on the table with SNAP.³

¹ No. 591: Declaration of a State of Emergency to Respond to COVID-19.
<https://www.mass.gov/executive-orders/no-591-declaration-of-a-state-of-emergency-to-respond-to-covid-19>

² The Boston Globe. Logan traffic way down as coronavirus fears spread.
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/03/10/metro/logan-traffic-way-down-corona-fears-spread/>

³ The Urban Institute. Estimated Effect of Recent Proposed Changes to SNAP Regulations. November 25, 2019. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/estimated-effect-recent-proposed-changes-snap-regulations>

This translates to a loss of approximately \$165 million per year in SNAP.⁴ **These rules will exacerbate harm if enacted while the country grapples with COVID-19.**

Most urgently, we ask the Administration to halt implementation of the rules restricting flexibility for states to waive the time limit for Able Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWDs), currently scheduled to go into effect April 1, 2020. USDA's rule drastically shrinks the criteria states can use to exempt ABAWDs living in areas with elevated rates of unemployment. In Massachusetts approximately 16,000 residents are at risk of losing SNAP if the rules go into effect. Adults who generally face significant barriers to getting good, consistent work face monumental barriers during a pandemic.

We are already facing a worsening economy and serious economic consequences as a result of COVID-19, and we expect these challenges to continue. Implementing the ABAWD rule and/or other SNAP rule changes proposed by the Trump Administration will worsen food insecurity in a time of massive economic disruption and uncertainty.

As members of the Massachusetts Congressional Delegation, we will do all that we can to protect our most financially vulnerable constituents. SNAP is our country's the first line of defense against hunger during normal times – and it is an invaluable resource when it comes to ensuring families can put food on the table during a pandemic. Limiting the ability of states like Massachusetts to best support its residents by restricting SNAP will serve to further the harm of COVID-19 and increase risk for all residents. Placing increased obstacles to hunger-relief programs will worsen public health outcomes and roll back significant progress in the fight against hunger and poverty in America.

We strongly urge the USDA to reconsider the damaging nature of these policies, and to halt implementation while we work to protect and stabilize our communities.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Joseph P. Kennedy III
Member of Congress



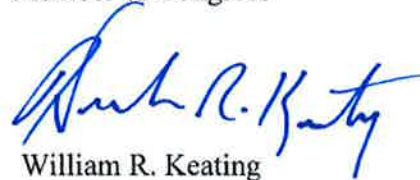
Lori Trahan
Member of Congress



Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress



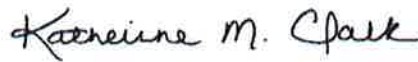
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