

Senators advocate to extend USDA waiver authority in spending package

Written by Staff Reports
Friday, 11 March 2022 05:06



WASHINGTON— As schools across the nation continue transitioning back to normal operations, U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich, D-NM, a member of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, is leading a group of 29 Senate colleagues, including Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), in an effort to make sure school administrators, staff, and industry partners that supply food to child nutrition programs have continued support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act that granted USDA the authority to issue several nationwide waivers and flexibilities for schools and program operators. In 2021, through the Continuing Appropriations Act 2021 and Other Extensions Act, Congress extended USDA's initial authority to June 30, 2022.

In a letter to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), the senators requested that the upcoming omnibus spending bill include a provision to “continue to provide USDA authority to issue all necessary waivers, including an extension of all authority provided by FFCRA for state and nationwide waivers from June 30, 2022 to September 30, 2023 .”

The senators add, ‘Without these waivers, federal child nutrition programs will not be able to adequately meet the needs of children as we work to transition beyond COVID-19. The meals provided through the child nutrition programs are critical to our nation’s pandemic response to childhood hunger.’”

The letter was also signed by U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Michael Bennet (D-CO.),

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Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Ben Cardin (D-MD), Thomas Carper (D-DE), Bob Casey (D-PA), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Tim Kaine (D-VA), Mark Kelly (D-AZ), Angus King (I-ME), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM), Joe Manchin (D-WV), Ed Markey (D-MA), Chris Murphy (D-CT), Alex Padilla (D-CA), Gary Peters (D-MI), Jack Reed (D-RI), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Tina Smith (D-MN), Jon Tester (D-MT), and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI).

“Dear Leader Schumer and Leader McConnell:

Since the onset of the pandemic, Congress has taken action to address the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 public health emergency, including by granting USDA authority in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) to issue several nationwide waivers and flexibilities for schools and program operators.

We write to ask that the omnibus continue to provide USDA authority to issue all necessary waivers, including an extension of all authority provided by FFCRA for state and nationwide waivers from June 30, 2022 to September 30, 2023, in order to provide the flexibility needed to respond to the ongoing pandemic and to ensure that the federal child nutrition programs continue to operate and provide healthy snacks and meals to students.

Going forward, schools across the country will continue to need flexibility in providing school nutrition programs. That’s because school districts that continue to operate in-person face a slew of challenges that impact meal service such as workforce shortages, unpredictable and cancelled food deliveries, increased food prices, and the inability to source standard food items or products like trays and cutlery.

It will take time for nutrition operations at schools to recover from the challenges created during the pandemic, to rebuild their programs, and overcome the significant financial impact.

We recognize schools will continue to have the option to serve free meals to all students through June 2022 via the Seamless Summer Option. However, it is clear that schools and suppliers are continuing to face ongoing operational and supply challenges as they work to transition back to normal operations.

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Given that over 29 million children receive low cost or free meals at school every day, extending the SSO and other waivers are critical to keeping our nation's children fed this summer and during the 2022-2023 school year. This is especially true for states with high rates of poverty, where large portions of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch.

The June deadline means that summer meal programs will not be able to operate under the same program rules through the entire summer. This deadline also restricts the ability to respond to the operational and access challenges that schools may face into 2023.

For schools that continue to face fluctuations in participation and staffing shortages, returning to normal National School Lunch Program rules on meal counting and eligibility would shortchange schools of adequate commodities and make both school and summer programs virtually impossible to run effectively.

Further, schools will need support when they ultimately transition back to normal school meal operations under the National School Lunch Program. USDA will need to waiver authority to support schools and program operators through this process and be able to effectively respond to unexpected challenges that may arise.

We believe extending the authority to issue state and nationwide waivers through September 30, 2023 will provide much needed assistance to school administrators, staff, and industry partners that supply food to child nutrition programs.

Without these waivers, federal child nutrition programs will not be able to adequately meet the needs of children as we work to transition beyond COVID-19. The meals provided through the child nutrition programs are critical to our nation's pandemic response to childhood hunger."

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