11 May 2020

Governor Michael Dunleavy

Alaska State Capitol

Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Governor Dunleavy:

The COVID-19 Public Health Emergency continues to create an unprecedented need for food assistance within our communities. Food Bank of Alaska is experiencing a 75% increase in the need for food assistance, and other food assistance providers are reporting even higher increases. As leaders in supporting Alaska’s families and children, we are writing to urge you to take action to ensure no child goes hungry during this pandemic.

Federal nutrition programs both play a key role in addressing food insecurity in our state and provide an important influx of federal dollars into our economy. The State of Alaska is rapidly adapting programs to operate safely and efficiently during the pandemic, but we encourage implementation of additional waivers, flexibilities, and programs to increase access to and benefits from essential nutrition programs.

We recommend three essential actions:

1. Strengthen the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
2. Implement the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) Program
3. Ensure School Based Meal Delivery Programs Continue Through the Summer

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**

*SNAP is the first line of defense in the fight against hunger. Plus, SNAP provides a boost to local economies during this time of uncertainty - every $1 in SNAP benefits provides $1.70 in local economic activity in a weak economy, according to Moody’s Analytics. We encourage all efforts to streamline the application process for clients, boost benefits, and expand access to this critical program to help eliminate food insecurity.* Specifically, we endorse the following priority actions:

* **Pursue no-cost administrative flexibilities** already allowable under USDA, including temporarily suspending claims and collections for SNAP clients, and waiving the interview before issuing SNAP benefits. Both are easy actions the state can take to reduce administrative burden for both the agency and the clients and get food to hungry families.
* **Implement Broad Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE)**, an existing state option, which allows families to access the SNAP program without depleting moderate savings needed as a financial safeguard both during the current emergency, and for future emergencies. Allow for the removal of the "benefit cliff" many families will otherwise experience as they get back on their feet during the economic recovery phase.
* **Pursue technological improvements** to the application process, including implementing a telephonic signature, allowing community partners to sign on behalf of clients, and/or establishing an online application.
* Explore ways to **suspend households temporarily ineligible due to federal unemployment insurance benefits**. The additional $600/week federal unemployment boosts make many households temporarily ineligible for SNAP and requires them to re-apply for benefits when that funding source runs out. Alaska could limit churning by requesting a waiver to suspend cases through July for households that become ineligible due to increased Unemployment benefits.
* **Explore all possible state and federal options to maximize food delivery** networks to low-income families, seniors and persons with disabilities who face additional challenges accessing grocery stores during normal times, and even more so under quarantine, including options such as online purchasing and the restaurant meals program.
* Ensure that **all available waivers and flexibilities remain in place beyond the pandemic** and through the economic recovery to ensure strong nutrition access for all Alaskans.

**Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)**

*The P-EBT program ensures that children continue accessing nutritious meals when schools are unexpectedly closed. All children who would receive free or reduced-price meals at school, if not for their school closure due to COVID-19, are eligible to receive P-EBT. This SNAP-like benefit would provide Alaskan families with an extra $183.20 a month per eligible child, and the benefits could be distributed retroactively to the first day that schools were closed due to COVID-19. We recommend:*

* Alaska should **implement this program as soon as possible**.

**Child Nutrition Programs**

*School districts were granted many flexibilities to allow for the distribution of meals while school is closed, but they have incurred significant unexpected expenses as a result. Failure to address this budget gap will leave districts in a precarious position over the next school year. Additionally, there is concern that the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) will not be widely available due to the uncertainty around the pandemic and the transition timeline for school programs. We recommend:*

* Ensuring the financial capacity of school districts to **provide food to all children, regardless of enrollment status**. Schools are experiencing steep increases in cost as they adapt their feeding programs to ensure safe delivery of meals. These unanticipated costs jeopardize districts' ability to serve students next year.
* **Incentivize schools to continue school food programs throughout the summer**, understanding that considerable uncertainty remains around the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) at this point in the pandemic. The state could financially support schools to continue their service, ensuring continued access to meals for all children.

We are grateful for your continuing leadership and support of Alaska’s families. We look forward to working together to ensure that all our state’s children are able access meals during this time.

Sincerely,

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