His Excellency Charles D. Baker  
State House, Room 280  
Boston, MA 02133

May 26, 2020

Dear Governor Baker,

As organizations working every day to address the unprecedented level of food insecurity in Massachusetts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, we write to ask for your help in assuring that meal sites around the state will be able to continue their work feeding children through the summer by weighing in with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding Massachusetts’ application for an extension to the area eligibility waiver. Without this waiver, 217 communities in the Commonwealth stand to lose some or all of their meal sites.

Individuals and families across the state are feeling the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 crisis as they face challenges such as lost wages, school closures or an inability to purchase necessary food while social distancing. Before this crisis, far too many of our neighbors in Massachusetts were facing food insecurity – 1 in 11 households and 1 in 9 children. As we confront this public health emergency and the resulting record unemployment, the problem is growing exponentially. In a study conducted in late March, approximately 38% of Massachusetts residents report experiencing food insecurity during the coronavirus pandemic.  

In this time of national crisis, the USDA has granted critical waivers in the Child Nutrition Program. These flexibilities have allowed school meal sites serving breakfast and lunch to children during the pandemic to greatly expand their reach to more children in the community and to provide meals while complying with social distancing guidelines.

While the first round of waiver approvals was set to expire on June 30, 2020, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue recently announced an extension of three nationwide waivers: Non-Congregate Feeding, Parent Pickup, and Meal Times. This important development will allow meal sites to continue the innovative and successful models they have developed to safely provide meals during this time.

Unfortunately, there is an additional waiver set to expire on June 30th that the USDA has yet to act on. Without an extension of the area eligibility waiver, which allows meal sites to operate in areas where less than 50% of the student population receives free and reduced price meals, 217 communities with currently operating meal sites would lose some or all of those sites as of July 1st. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) submitted a waiver request on May 15th for an extension of the area eligibility waiver until August 31, 2020.

We know that the economic impact of this crisis will continue to be felt for the foreseeable future. The school meal sites, along with federal nutrition programs, such as SNAP and Pandemic EBT, and the

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emergency food system, are a critical part of a multi-pronged system that is responding to an unprecedented rise in food insecurity in Massachusetts. If a significant number of these sites are lost at the end of next month because the area eligibility waiver is not extended, the demand will shift to the other resources. While a portion of these families will be eligible for SNAP, some do not qualify for a variety of reasons. The food pantries are already operating beyond capacity and will not have the ability to fill such a large gap.

In addition to supporting families, the Summer Food Service Program normally brings in over 7 million dollars in federal reimbursements into the Commonwealth\(^2\). While it is uncertain whether the current crisis will increase or decrease participation in summer meals, what we know for certain is accessibility is among the key factors determining participation. If fewer sites are able to operate, fewer families will have access to meals and Massachusetts will draw down less in federal reimbursements.

We urge the Baker Administration to weigh in with the USDA and emphasize the urgency of extending the area eligibility waivers requested by states including Massachusetts. Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

Sincerely,

Project Bread
Greater Boston Food Bank
Food Bank of Western Massachusetts
Merrimack Valley Food Bank, Inc.
Worcester County Food Bank
MA Law Reform Institute

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