

May 10, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your swift and meaningful actions to mitigate the staggering food hardship our nation's children, especially children of color, have faced during the last year and to simplify program operations for the dedicated school nutrition professionals who have worked tirelessly to continue to feed children during the pandemic.

We are writing to encourage you to build on these critical measures by extending and expanding the Demonstration Projects to Evaluate Direct Certification with Medicaid, as proposed in the American Families Plan. This demonstration uses data rigorously assessed by another program to automatically enroll children for free or reduced-price school meals. The states participating in the current demonstration projects, which were launched during your tenure in the Obama Administration, have demonstrated improved access to meals, reduced the administrative burden on school nutrition staff, and strengthened program integrity.

Currently, 19 states use Medicaid data to directly certify students for free or reduced-price school meals, under the authority provided in Sections 9(b)(15) and 18(c) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. The evaluations of these demonstrations show that they have accomplished those goals and are yielding useful information about how to strengthen the school meal programs while improving access. In school year 2017-2018, more than 1.2 million students were directly certified using Medicaid data. These students would otherwise most likely not have been certified or would have had to complete an application.

Under the administrative pilot authority in Section 18(c) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, we believe the Department of Agriculture has the authority to build on the existing demonstration projects to test additional aspects of direct certification. For example, the use of Medicaid data could be tested in states that plan to simultaneously launch a statewide online application, to measure the reduction in administrative burden at the local level of combining those approaches. The impact of using Medicaid data could also be evaluated with regard to its effectiveness in improving access to free or reduced-price school meals for families that would face language barrier to completing school meal applications. Alternatively, the demonstration project could be expanded to include other sources of data, such as the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, as proposed, or the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

If announced with ample time, states could apply and plan projects for the 2022-2023 school year. Expanding the use of data from Medicaid and other programs to directly certify a greater share of

students would reduce the number of families that have to complete an application and the number of applications school districts have to process. It would also support the Administration's proposal and efforts to increase the number of schools operating under the Community Eligibility Provision by making it easier for schools to identify more of their low-income children, thus qualifying for, or qualifying for a higher reimbursement rate under, community eligibility.

Thank you for returning to serve the families throughout our nation who are struggling to afford healthy food to feed their families.

Sincerely,

AASA, The School Superintendents Association
Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
Alliance to End Hunger
American Federation of Teachers
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
FoodCorps
Food Research and Action Center
National Education Association
School Nutrition Association
Share Our Strength