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April 24, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

AARP, on behalf of our 38 million members and all older Americans nationwide, is deeply concerned about the growing and urgent food needs we are seeing across the country as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. We appreciate the incredible amount of work the Department, together with Congress, has undertaken to address the issue of food security. Given the gravity of the present challenge, we are calling on USDA to take additional needed steps to ensure all Americans have access to food in these times of need.

All across the country, volunteers are stepping up to increase food distribution to those in need. We have been heartened by the number of mutual aid groups who have come together to look out for their neighbors in need, and AARP has tried to support that work through our AARP Community Connections web portal (<https://aarpcommunityconnections.org>). One of the most common concerns our volunteers hear is that older Americans are struggling right now with hunger as they try to weather this COVID-19 pandemic.

We support the action USDA has taken to expedite the process of getting food from farms to food bank shelves, and we urge you to swiftly implement the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program. With food banks reporting skyrocketing demands, and the press documenting long waiting lines, it is critical that food banks across the country can help the growing number of people turning to them for assistance. AARP encourages USDA to explore additional collaborative opportunities to ensure older adults receive nutritious food while limiting exposure to the coronavirus.

AARP supports efforts to expand access to online grocery shopping and delivery using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, which could be particularly helpful for older adults who may be unable or concerned about going into a grocery store because of COVID-19. We support USDA's recommendation for states to use other options such

as “click and collect” for SNAP, where SNAP participants can shop online and then pay for their order at pick-up using their EBT card. We also applaud the steps USDA has taken to allow additional states to participate in the SNAP online pilot program. Online grocery shopping and delivery using SNAP benefits may be especially helpful for older adults—who are at higher risk of complications from COVID-19—so they can purchase the food they need while minimizing contact with others. We are, however, concerned that these programs can include minimum order requirements and delivery and other associated fees, which pose significant barriers for low-income seniors. Therefore, we urge you to work with retailers participating in the SNAP online pilot program to eliminate minimum order requirements and delivery fees for individuals who rely on SNAP benefits.

While online grocery shopping helps address concerns around physical distancing, this solution may not work for all Americans. Millions of low-income older adults do not have access to the internet at home, and many do not have experience shopping for groceries online. It will therefore be important to identify alternative ways for SNAP participants to order groceries. We encourage the Department to explore opportunities to expand partnerships between USDA, authorized SNAP retailers, and other potential partners to further support grocery delivery and curbside pickup during the emergency. Further, we urge USDA to work with SNAP retailers to make information regarding online grocery shopping and delivery options readily available so that SNAP participants are aware of their options.

We also call on USDA to suspend all rulemaking that would eliminate SNAP eligibility and reduce benefits. Two of USDA’s proposed rules—categorical eligibility and methods for calculating standard utility allowances (SUA)—would disproportionately impact older adults resulting in substantial benefit losses and eliminating SNAP eligibility for many. Now is not the time to finalize and implement these rules. Instead, we must ensure older Americans can access nutritious food in this unprecedented public health and economic crisis.

USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has approved hundreds of individual SNAP state waivers, including issuing emergency allotments. For households not already receiving the maximum SNAP benefit, the emergency allotment will provide critical resources for people who need to stock up to avoid unnecessary trips to the grocery store. We applaud USDA’s decision to extend the time period for emergency allotments and encourage the Department to work with Congress to ensure that the lowest-income participants who have not received emergency allotments also get the support they need to weather the crisis. We encourage USDA to work with Congress to explore and secure any additional opportunities and flexibilities needed to help states streamline program administration and respond to on-the-ground realities and needs for SNAP and food distribution program participants.

We also strongly support temporarily increasing both the SNAP maximum benefit and the minimum monthly SNAP benefit. Especially at this time when individuals need to stock up on food to avoid unnecessary trips to the grocery store, temporarily increasing the SNAP benefit amount should be common sense. Additionally, increasing the minimum benefit could be particularly helpful for older Americans given that older Americans make up a significant portion of people receiving the minimum SNAP benefit.

AARP stands ready to work with you to address the urgent and critical food needs of older Americans across the country. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me, or have your staff contact Nicole Burda on our Government Affairs staff at 202-826-8641.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Bill Sweeney". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "B" and a long, sweeping underline.

Bill Sweeney  
Senior Vice President  
Government Affairs