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30 March 2022

The Honorable John Boozman
Senator for the State of Arkansas
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Pandemic EBT

Dear Senator Boozman:

We write to you on behalf of the Alaska School Nutrition Association (AKSNA), representing school nutrition professionals serving over 78,000 breakfast and lunch meals across the great state of Alaska per day. We applaud efforts to ensure food security during pandemic conditions that resulted in the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program. As school nutrition professionals, we work each day to provide nutritional meals to children under snow, ice, rain, wind, or sun facing temperature extremes ranging from 60°F below zero to nearly 100°F in a state that spans 365 million acres. We request that the Federal Government, through congressional act, better support child nutrition by redirecting its efforts into the already established school nutrition program rather than the new and problematic P-EBT program which has adversely impacted efforts of existing programs.

School nutrition programs, like child-hunger, never took a break. School nutrition professionals were some of the first to return to work at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Alaska, we fought harsh weather conditions to serve from busses, curbsides, and vestibules to ensure schoolchildren throughout our great state enjoyed a continuous, uninteruptable source of nutrition. Children also found a sense of normalcy amongst the pandemic as they collected meals from the friendly face on their school's nutrition team.

As the pandemic eases and we have mostly returned to our normal lives, we now struggle with rising costs, instability due to supply chain disruptions, and staffing shortages. Additionally, we face uncertainty of potential Federal, State, and local responses to future mutations of the Coronavirus such as lockdowns and school closures. Initially, P-EBT provided up to \$5.86 per child per day of school missed, this has increased by 15% in 2021. These funds could better support the existing school nutrition program that is already established, operational, and receives regulatory oversight. These funds could support increased per-meal reimbursements, extend waivers that are needed as we navigate supply chain and inflationary challenges, or expand access to Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which provides free meal to all students at schools identified as being in a high-poverty area.

Administering P-EBT has created a substantial burden on our State Agency (SA), School Food Authorities (SFA), and Local Education Authorities (LEA). Alaska's SA expects to process 70,000 applications which


requires a managerially intense process due to reconsideration requirements. SFAs as well as their respective LEAs are bombarded with data requests and parent inquiries. Staff at the SA and SFAs are stretched due to this administrative burden that come in addition to severe labor shortages hampering efforts to support and operate the existing school nutrition program.

Many families continue to await their P-EBT benefits well beyond the time in which their children's schools closed. The USDA acknowledged these delays in its 22 January 2021 press release, stating, "...many households have had trouble claiming benefits." Despite this, the press release and ongoing actions of the USDA have not provided any relief. Administrative burden and data-reporting lag further jeopardize this timeline; in juxtaposition, school nutrition professionals throughout our great state and across the nation provided uninterrupted food service throughout the height of the pandemic.

For SFAs whose families have received P-EBT benefits, several adverse impacts were observed. P-EBT cards have very low restrictions of the food items that can be purchased; items high in sodium, sugars, and low nutritional value are among those that may be purchased. P-EBT has therefore been observed to cause a reduction in meal participation, even when school is in session, as funds may be used to purchase candy, sodas, and snack foods that are not available through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Programs which meet the rigorous nutrition standards established by the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. In some cases, students were found to have used P-EBT cards to purchase and resell snack foods at schools, completely forgoing the intended benefits of the program.

P-EBT was intended to ensure students have access to uninterrupted nutritional support in the face of school closures and quarantines, however, nearly all SFAs demonstrated substantial resilience as they provided continuous access to nutritionally dense quality meals to schoolchildren in the face of rapidly changing circumstances. We therefore request that efforts and monies for P-EBT be redirected toward the already proven school nutrition program as this is the more optimal use of the public's money and trust.

Sincerely,



Sandie Ponte
President



Rachel Spencer
Public Policy & Legislation Chair

cc. The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Senator for Alaska
The Honorable Dan Sullivan, Senator for Alaska