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Gov. Wolf: Congress and USDA Must Take Action to Help Food Security During COVID-19 Pandemic

Harrisburg, PA – Governor Tom Wolf today sent a [letter](#) to the members of Pennsylvania’s congressional delegation urging Congress to take legislative action to ensure access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to those who need it now and during the recovery months that will follow.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) received a similar [letter](#) requesting reconsiderations for interpretations of SNAP made by the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), which denied Pennsylvania’s request to allow college students to be counted towards their household’s benefit and determined that time-limited pandemic unemployment compensation would be counted as income, potentially disqualifying households that would have otherwise qualified.

“Many Pennsylvanians are now experiencing extremely challenging economic situations due to the pandemic,” Gov. Wolf wrote. “Pennsylvania needs to have every tool possible to support our most vulnerable citizens. That’s why we are calling on Congress to take swift action to ensure access to SNAP so Pennsylvanians have enough food throughout the COVID-19 crisis. We appreciate that Congress and the USDA have provided some flexibility for the SNAP program, but more must be done to help Pennsylvanians weather the difficult weeks ahead.”

The Wolf Administration has submitted numerous SNAP-related waivers for Pennsylvania to the FNS. Pennsylvania has been permitted to waive certain regulatory requirements to provide flexibilities for the commonwealth’s administration of SNAP and provide emergency allotments to some current SNAP households.

These waivers allow for eased access and increased benefits for families that rely on the program; however, more must be done. FNS has denied waivers that would have permitted Pennsylvania to:

- Allow for low-income households with a student who is attending an institution of higher education to receive additional SNAP benefits. Current SNAP rules do not allow college students to be counted when determining a household’s monthly SNAP benefit. Now that students are home, these families may not have the financial or food resources to support additional family members now at home.
- Make additional SNAP payments to all enrolled households. Pennsylvania previously requested authority to issue an extra payment equal to one month’s benefit to all SNAP households. FNS interpreted the Families First Coronavirus Response Act to mean an extra payment that would bring households up to the maximum monthly benefit. However, this interpretation means that households currently receiving the maximum monthly benefit – 40 percent of Pennsylvania’s SNAP households – received no extra assistance. Broader issuance of emergency payments would help to further shift

some demand from the emergency food system and into grocery stores, directly supporting Pennsylvania's struggling retail and agriculture economy.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) has also requested clarifications on operational adjustments necessary to administer SNAP during the pandemic. The federal government has not directed states on how to verify for reductions in income, as opposed to outright job loss, due to the COVID-19 health emergency. This guidance is necessary so applications may be properly processed.

The Wolf Administration has also requested that Pennsylvania be permitted to exclude Pandemic Unemployment Compensation from the SNAP grant benefit calculation. This is not counted as income for Medicaid or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs, but is for SNAP. Counting this short-term payment as a regular payment would create an administrative burden that could result in households being removed from SNAP for a short period, only to be eligible again when payments end. This would create unnecessary confusion and loss of benefits for houses that were eligible for SNAP prior to losing their employment.

“SNAP is the nation's single-most important food security program – it provides nine meals for every one meal provided by a food bank,” said DHS Secretary Miller. “As we navigate this difficult time, we must be sure that we are able to fully leverage the SNAP program to help Pennsylvanians feed themselves and their families. It is critical that Congress and the USDA recognize the potential for SNAP to help stabilize both households in need and grocery stores and retailers and support access to SNAP for those who need it most.”

DHS is continuing to process applications for SNAP and encourages people and families who need assistance to apply online at www.compass.state.pa.us. Emergency applications for SNAP can be expedited in five days, and all Pennsylvanians who are in a difficult financial situation due to the economic challenges of this pandemic should apply to see if they are eligible for assistance.

Pennsylvanians who need help feeding themselves or their family can also find and contact their local food bank or pantry through [Feeding Pennsylvania](#) and [Hunger-Free Pennsylvania](#) to access food resources in their community.

Visit pa.gov for a [“Responding to COVID-19” guide](#) or the Pennsylvania Department of Health's dedicated [Coronavirus webpage](#) for the most up-to-date information regarding COVID-19.

Guidance to DHS providers related to COVID-19 is available [here](#).

View the governor's letter to the congressional delegation as a PDF [here](#) or on [Scribd](#).

View the governor's letter to the USDA as a PDF [here](#) or on [Scribd](#).