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Secretary of Agriculture Implores USDA to Continue Waiver to Safeguard Food Bank Employees, Volunteers, Clients

Harrisburg, PA – Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding wrote a [letter](#) to U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue pleading for his continuance of Pennsylvania's waiver for the need to collect client names and addresses and verify income eligibility for those receiving USDA Foods through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) through the end of the fiscal year on September 30, 2020.

"While we are working to reopen Pennsylvania amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we are one of just a handful of states reopening not experiencing a steady increase in our COVID cases," said Secretary Redding. "We must continue every effort possible to continue protecting Pennsylvanians, as they do their part to save lives. This waiver is one way to continue protecting Pennsylvanians by not requiring both volunteers and clients of food banks to break social distancing simply to complete forms."

Redding's letter outlines that older adults overwhelmingly comprise those who work in or volunteer with our state's more than 3,000 local food assistance agencies. Those working on the front lines to feed those in need, are at a disproportionately higher risk for developing more serious complications from COVID-19. The reality is, that if this waiver is dropped our intake workers, volunteers, and clients will not be able to maintain a 6-foot social distance.

"While we have a responsibility to do everything in our power to protect Pennsylvanians and make it easy for them to social distance, we also have a responsibility to feed those in need," added Redding.

As a direct result of COVID-19, Pennsylvania's charitable food system continues to experience stress from unprecedented demand. A survey of Feeding American member food banks in Pennsylvania revealed that they are seeing an average increase in demand of more than 50 percent since the pandemic began. In a state that normally serves approximately two million people annually through our emergency food response in all 67 counties, data collected since the end of March shows that Pennsylvania's charitable food system has served more than 5.5 million people in just three months. Allowing Pennsylvania's food banks to forgo data collection for providing USDA Foods can help to alleviate further bottlenecks at food distributions, where lines are already long.

"I'm hopeful that Secretary Perdue will acknowledge the importance of this waiver to Pennsylvania's overall health and well-being, as he has done before when we were in need, and we'll have swift response and approval," said Redding. "Throughout this pandemic, I continue to be grateful for our partners at the federal level who continue to support Pennsylvania's work to combat COVID-19 and adjacent concerns, like hunger."

For information as it relates to agriculture during COVID-19 mitigation in Pennsylvania visit agriculture.pa.gov/COVID. For the most accurate, timely information related to Health in Pennsylvania, visit on.pa.gov/coronavirus.