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May 29, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 2250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

I write to you to inquire about expansion of approved retailers and access for rural communities to participate in the SNAP Online Purchasing pilot. USDA has done a commendable job in rapidly expanding the pilot to meet unprecedented demand due to COVID-19. The Online Purchasing pilot is a great alternative for SNAP recipients who are among the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease. While the number of States participating is increasing, the vendors remain primarily in the northeastern area of the United States. It is of great urgency that USDA expands the list of retailers to include grocery stores that service other Regions of the country, including rural communities that historically have not had access to grocery stores, to ensure equitable access for all program participants.

There are 37 States approved to participate in the pilot but only seven retailers have been selected. Of the approved retailers, only two are national chains and only one of the national retailers can reach our most rural communities. How is USDA addressing the obvious shortage of retailers to implement the pilot program? Is the Agency seeking to diversify grocers that are both nationally, regionally, and locally focused and what is the timeline for adding additional retailers?

Understandably urban communities have multiple options for retailers and other services that make this pilot less challenging to implement. However, rural communities have long suffered due to many insufficient local resources, including lack of access to grocery stores. In recent years, "dollar store chains" began to move into our country's most rural and economically depressed communities, providing relief in towns struggling to maintain a traditional grocery store presence. Their success in these communities presents an ideal opportunity for online retail

purchasing to address access deficiencies in areas some would define as hard to reach. What are USDA's plans to address the various deficiencies of rural participation, in either the pilot or in the permanent program? Is USDA considering a technical and/or financial assistance program to assist retail chains, like the "dollar stores", to develop the online purchasing structure to become vendors for the Online Purchasing Pilot?

Lastly, I am aware many grocers charge a convenience fee to use online purchasing and SNAP benefits may not be used to cover that fee. Considering the economic hardship SNAP recipients face, I implore USDA to ensure the burden of the convenience fee does not fall on the SNAP participant. I urge you to require approved vendors to waive convenience fees associated with SNAP online purchases or create some other method to avoid having the recipient pay.

The SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot Program has been a tremendous help and has great potential to address issues with rural participation. I thank you for your immediate attention in responding to my questions and concerns. If you would like to discuss further, please contact me or my staff.

With kind regards,

Sincerely,


Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.
Member of Congress