

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20510

June 30, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Ave, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Rollins and Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.:

We respectfully request the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), in conjunction with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), provide prompt responses to the questions outlined below in this letter on the impact anticipated cuts to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the current version of the reconciliation bill will have on student access to free and reduced-price school meals, including schools' ability to implement the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). USDA should also address how they will ensure that eligible students have uninterrupted access to free school meals to support their nutrition, health and learning.

Under current law, children from families enrolled in SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Head Start or Food Distribution on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and children who are homeless, migrant, runaway or in foster care can be automatically certified for free school meals, without the need for a separate application, through a process known as direct certification.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, 44 states use Medicaid and household income data to directly certify children for free or reduced-price school meals.<sup>2</sup> There are a multitude of benefits direct certification brings to children and school nutrition operations, from increasing eligible children's access to nutritious school meals to reducing administrative burdens on school nutrition departments. Continued efforts to strengthen direct certification means fewer low-income, food-insecure children are left behind.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Extending categorical eligibility to additional children in a household*. Food and Nutrition Service U.S. Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/extending-categorical-eligibility-additional-children-household>

<sup>2</sup> *National School Lunch and school breakfast program demonstration projects to evaluate direct certification with Medicaid*. Food and Nutrition Service U.S. Department of Agriculture. (n.d.-b). <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/direct-certification-medicare-demonstration-project>

<sup>3</sup> Neuberger, Z., & Levin, M. (2014, July 25). *Improving direct certification will help more low-income children receive school meals | center on budget and policy priorities*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/improving-direct-certification-will-help-more-low-income-children-receive-school-meals>

States across the country also rely on direct certification to identify schools that are eligible to utilize CEP. The CEP is a meal service option for eligible schools to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge.<sup>4</sup> Under the previous Administration, USDA expanded access to the program by reducing the eligibility threshold. Now, to qualify for CEP, a school, group of schools within a district, or a school district must directly certify at least 25% percent —down from 40%— of enrolled students who are identified as eligible based on participation in certain income-based federal assistance programs.<sup>5</sup>

The adoption of CEP by schools has skyrocketed from 33,300 schools in 2021 to close to 54,234 in 2024—a 62.9% increase.<sup>6</sup> And given its numerous benefits to schools, students, and families, USDA should be encouraging even further adoption of CEP. Research has found that CEP participation is associated with improvements in student health and educational outcomes, including modest reductions in childhood obesity, increased attendance, and lower suspension rates.<sup>7</sup> It also eliminates stigma surrounding free meals for students and reduces administrative burdens on schools and families.<sup>8</sup>

We are highly concerned with how the changes in the current reconciliation bill could cause regression on the progress our country has made towards feeding hungry youth at school under the previous Administration. It is estimated that more than 2 million children will lose SNAP benefits under this bill,<sup>9</sup> and children whose eligibility is not required by federal law are at risk of losing Medicaid coverage.<sup>10</sup> These children will then lose direct certification for school meal programs, which further risks schools not meeting the 25% minimum identified student percentage threshold

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<sup>4</sup> Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. (n.d.). *Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services*. Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services seal. <https://www.fdacs.gov/Food-Nutrition/Nutrition-Programs/National-School-Lunch-Program/Community-Eligibility-Provision>

<sup>5</sup> *CEP Final Rule Summary*. Food and Nutrition Service U.S. Department of Agriculture. (n.d.-a). <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/cep-final-rule-summary>

<sup>6</sup> *Community eligibility: The key to hunger-free schools, school year 2024–2025*. Food Research & Action Center. (n.d.). <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/cep-report-2025>

<sup>7</sup> Spill, M. K., Trivedi, R., Thoerig, R. C., et.al. (2024). Universal Free School Meals and School and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review. *JAMA network open*, 7(8), e2424082. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24082>

<sup>8</sup> *Implementation of Universal School Meals During COVID-19 and Beyond: School Food Authority and Parent Perspectives*. No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices. (n.d.). <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/implementation-universal-school-meals-during-covid-19-and-beyond-school-food-authority-and>

<sup>9</sup> *By the numbers: House Republican reconciliation bill ...* Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (n.d.). <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/by-the-numbers-house-republican-reconciliation-bill-takes-food-assistance>

<sup>10</sup> Sara Rosenbaum et al., “Deep Medicaid Spending Cuts Put Health Care Coverage at Risk for One of Five Enrolled Children,” *To the Point* (blog), Commonwealth Fund, May 5, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.26099/0k08-xs63>

to qualify for CEP.<sup>11</sup> As rising food costs and growing meal debt<sup>12</sup> continues to strain schools, USDA should be focused on expanding free meals, not limiting food accessibility for vulnerable youth.

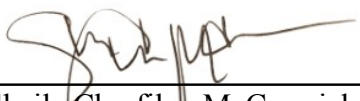

To fully understand and prepare for these impacts, we request that USDA, in consultation with HHS, provide prompt responses to the following questions:

- 1. An estimated number of students nationwide who would lose automatic eligibility for free or reduced-price meals due to potential cuts to Medicaid and SNAP;**
- 2. A breakdown of how many schools across the country, including in counties like Broward County, Florida, would no longer meet CEP eligibility thresholds as a result of reconciliation cuts;**
- 3. Demographic and geographic data on the impacted students and families, including information on race, income, and urban vs. rural locality;**
- 4. Recommendations for how USDA can support schools and low-income families in maintaining and potentially expanding meal access should such eligibility disruptions occur.**

This information is essential for Congress to ensure that federal nutrition programs are not negatively impacted by unrelated policy changes. Protecting access to free school meals is a proven, effective strategy to improve educational outcomes, reduce hunger, and support working families.

Thank you for your consideration of this urgent request.

Sincerely,

  
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Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick  
Member of Congress  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Debbie Wasserman Schultz  
Member of Congress

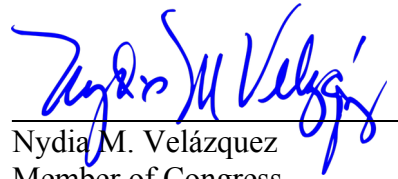
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<sup>11</sup> *By the numbers: House Republican reconciliation bill ...* Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (n.d.).  
<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/by-the-numbers-house-republican-reconciliation-bill-takes-food-assistance>

<sup>12</sup> *SY 2024/25 School Nutrition Trends Report.* School Nutrition Association. (n.d.).  
<https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024-25-School-Nutrition-Trends-Report.pdf>



Rashida Tlaib  
Member of Congress



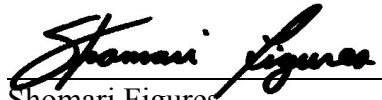
Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress



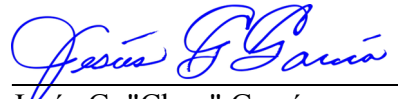
Scott H. Peters  
Member of Congress



Shri Thanedar  
Member of Congress



Shomari Figures  
Member of Congress



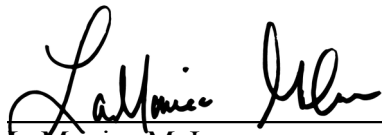
Jesús G. "Chuy" García  
Member of Congress



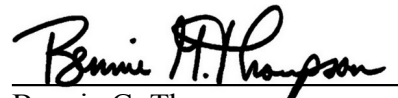
Marilyn Strickland  
Member of Congress




Delia C. Ramirez  
Member of Congress



LaMonica McIver  
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Bennie G. Thompson  
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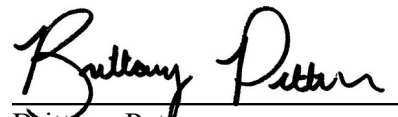
Jasmine Crockett  
Member of Congress



Danny K. Davis  
Member of Congress



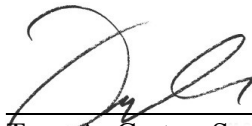
Adam Smith  
Member of Congress



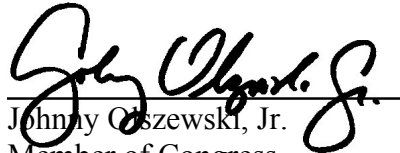
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Member of Congress



Raja Krishnamoorthi  
Member of Congress



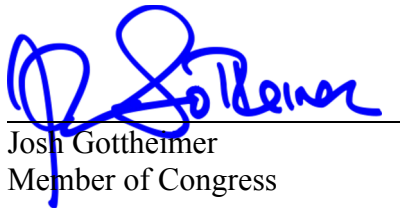
Froy A. Carter, Sr.  
Member of Congress



Johnny Oszewski, Jr.  
Member of Congress



Andrea Salinas  
Member of Congress



Josh Gottheimer  
Member of Congress



MARK TAKANO  
Member of Congress



Yvette D. Clarke  
Member of Congress



Suzan K. DelBene  
Member of Congress



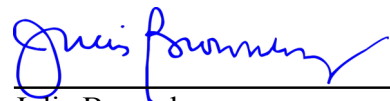
Gabe Amo  
Member of Congress



Kathy Castor  
Member of Congress



Steve Cohen  
Member of Congress



Julia Brownley  
Member of Congress



Dwight Evans  
Member of Congress



Frederica S. Wilson  
Member of Congress

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AC' with a flourish.

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André Carson  
Member of Congress