

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 9, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write to express concerns about how a lack of access to healthy, affordable food is hurting low-income communities and communities of color during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. To help address the disproportionate impact of the virus on these communities, we urge you to identify and prioritize programs at the Department of Agriculture intended to minimize food deserts and support local and regional food development projects.

Initial research has identified several factors contributing to the disproportionate adverse health outcomes for low-income and communities of color during the pandemic, including a lack of access to health care services, a higher incidence of pre-existing conditions, and a greater likelihood of working in a front line job.¹ Several of these factors are exacerbated by lack of access to healthy, affordable food.

Approximately 23.5 million Americans live in a food desert where the absence of a grocery store within one mile of their home makes it more difficult to purchase fresh, healthy, and nutritious food. Additionally, in some of the more rural regions of the country, individuals may have to travel further than 10 miles to the nearest grocer. Low-income Americans and people of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods with few healthy food options, and studies have shown that a significant barrier to the consumption of healthy foods in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods is limited access to a grocery store². Consequently, many in these communities are at a higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 due to underlying health conditions like heart disease, obesity, and diabetes. In addition, many people in these neighborhoods do not have access to food or meal delivery services and must rely on public transportation or shared rides to purchase healthy food, increasing their potential exposure to the virus.

To combat this public health crisis, we need a proactive approach that emphasizes the prevention of underlying health conditions and minimizes potential exposure to the virus while traveling to purchase food by expanding healthy food options in low-income communities and communities of color. Congress has provided the Department of Agriculture authority and funding to address the prevalence of food deserts and to support local food systems through such programs as the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, the Local Agriculture Market Program, and the Urban Agriculture Program. Additionally, Rural Development has several business and industry loan

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/09/why-are-blacks-dying-at-higher-rates-from-covid-19/>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3482049/>

guarantee and community facilities grant programs that can be applied to food development projects in underserved food desert areas.

As part of a comprehensive response to the coronavirus pandemic, we urge you to identify and prioritize programs intended to minimize food deserts and support local and regional food development projects.

Sincerely,

/s/ **Amy Klobuchar**
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

/s/ **Sherrod Brown**
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ **Debbie Stabenow**
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

/s/ **Robert P. Casey Jr.**
Robert P. Casey Jr.
United States Senator

/s/ **Tina Smith**
Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/ **Richard J. Durbin**
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/s/ **Michael F. Bennet**
Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

/s/ **Kirsten Gillibrand**
Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

/s/ **Patrick Leahy**
Patrick Leahy
United States Senator

/s/ **Chris Van Hollen**
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ **Richard Blumenthal**
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ **Mark R. Warner**
Mark R. Warner
United States Senator

/s/ **Patty Murray**
Patty Murray
United States Senator

/s/ **Robert Menendez**
Robert Menendez
United States Senator

/s/ **Bernard Sanders**
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

/s/ **Cory A. Booker**
Cory Booker
United States Senator

/s/ **Benjamin L. Cardin**
Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

/s/ **Christopher A. Coons**
Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator

/s/ **Tammy Duckworth**
Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

/s/ **Mazie K. Hirono**
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

/s/ **Jeffrey A. Merkley**
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/ **Joe Manchin III**
Joe Manchin III
United States Senator