

Wolf Administration Urges USDA to Maintain Flexibility for States Administering SNAP Benefits in Response to Continued Threat of COVID-19

Harrisburg, PA – Governor Tom Wolf today sent a letter to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Sonny Perdue urging the USDA to extend waivers granted to provide states for longer than a month at a time to preserve flexibility they need to ensure the uninterrupted and safe administration of public benefits during the COVID-19 public health crisis. The flexibilities granted by waivers from the USDA specifically related to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) reduce the need for in-person interactions between Department of Human Service (DHS) staff and current and potential clients, keeping both safer from COVID-19 while allowing DHS to continue to meet needs of Pennsylvanians during this period of economic uncertainty.

“While stay at home orders are being lifted and Pennsylvania is beginning to reopen, we must be mindful in our efforts to mitigate risk of an increased spread of COVID-19 cases. This includes reducing the need for in-person interactions, especially for our county assistance office workers,” said Governor Wolf. “We are grateful that USDA has extended some of our waivers until the end of July, but the general uncertainty is very difficult to plan and communicate to our caseworkers and for our clients. States are working tirelessly to manage COVID-19 and eliminate localized outbreaks, and as the administrators of SNAP and similar programs in our states, we are best positioned to understand what flexibilities are necessary to meet current needs and keep staff and clients safe.”

Numerous waivers previously granted by the USDA for the SNAP program were set to expire on June 30. Thus far, DHS has been granted a one-month extension for the following waivers:

- **Elimination of Face-to-Face and Quality Control Interviews:** Under normal circumstances, a face-to-face interview must be conducted to determine benefit eligibility and at random for quality control processes. Due to COVID-19, these waivers allows states to perform interviews over the phone to accommodate social distancing and keep DHS staff and clients safe while ensuring continuity of benefits and eligibility determinations.
- **Extension of Fair Hearing and Administrative Disqualification Hearings Timeframes:** These waivers help Pennsylvania remain in compliance with SNAP regulations by granting DHS staff more time to conduct appeals and disqualification hearings. DHS’ Bureau of Hearings and Appeals is currently operating under a blended on-site and telework model, but there is currently a backlog of cases being worked through from when the stay at home order first began in March. Without these waivers, Pennsylvania would be out of compliance with federal regulations.
- **Temporary Suspension of Claims Collections:** This waiver allows Pennsylvania’s Office of Inspector General to pause recoupment if SNAP benefits are overpaid. Without this waiver, SNAP households with a previous overpayment would receive less benefits during the COVID-19 health emergency and would have complicated households’ ability to receive emergency SNAP payments. Given current economic uncertainty, the Wolf Administration would like to continue this temporary pause to prevent further strain on households until circumstances improve.

These waivers are set to expire on July 31, 2020, but Pennsylvania is requesting a longer term, 90-day extension. Waiver extensions of up to 90 days, instead of the current 30 days, would allow for greater predictability and efficiency in DHS operations, as the certainty would eliminate the need to reapply for waivers each month and prepare processes for changes necessary if waivers are not granted.

DHS has also requested waiver extensions to extend SNAP certification periods so current recipients do not have to submit additional paperwork in order to maintain benefits, and to adjust interview requirements, which can slow issuance of benefits and increase rates of people churning off and back on to SNAP. These waivers are also set to expire on June 30.

Governor Wolf also encouraged the USDA to continue to allow states to extend emergency SNAP allotments to current SNAP households. These payments, which are authorized under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, grant an additional payment to SNAP households that do not receive the maximum monthly benefit for their household size to bring these households to the monthly maximum.

Pennsylvania was approved for this benefit for July, but states lose the authority to issue the supplemental payments if the federal or state disaster declarations are rescinded. Without this, Pennsylvania would lose \$100 million per month in additional federal funds that get returned to grocers, farmers markets, and other small businesses in local economies, and SNAP households would receive only the normal benefit amount when many counties still experiencing economic challenges as well as increases in the cost of groceries.

Governor Wolf also urged Secretary Perdue and the USDA to recognize the important role the SNAP program plays in helping more than 1.9 million Pennsylvanians avoid going hungry, which can have adverse effects on a person's health and well-being. Because SNAP primarily serves populations like the elderly and low-income communities that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, removing flexibilities that could potentially remove people from the program would be another way of directing support away from vulnerable Pennsylvanians.

“As the nation faces the COVID-19 pandemic, access to essential needs like food is more important than ever to help keep people healthy and mitigate co-occurring health risks. We cannot allow our current circumstances to make matters more difficult for disadvantaged people in Pennsylvania and around the country,” wrote Governor Wolf. “Our actions in the weeks and months to come will shape not just our response to this pandemic, but also the world we will accept when COVID-19 is no longer a threat. Preserving access to this critical resource and food access in these communities is the least we must do to be sure that this pandemic does not further define inequity in these communities for generations to come.”

For more information on the SNAP program, visit www.dhs.pa.gov.