

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

June 11, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary  
United States Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Pam Miller  
Administrator  
Food and Nutrition Service  
3101 Park Center Drive, Suite # 906  
Alexandria, VA 22302

Dear Secretary Purdue and Administrator Miller:

As Massachusetts implements the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) online electronic benefit transfer (EBT) purchasing pilot program, we write to request that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) expand their efforts to bring more food retailers onboard. Doing so will improve the pilot program, expand food access for beneficiaries, and directly support local economies.<sup>1</sup> FNS approved Massachusetts to provide online purchasing to SNAP recipients in May,<sup>2</sup> but we are concerned that Massachusetts SNAP beneficiaries do not have access to a wide variety of retailers within the online purchasing program.

SNAP is an indispensable part of America's food system and provides nutritious meals to about 45 million people across the United States, including 785,000 people in Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup> Authorized as part of the 2014 farm bill, the SNAP online purchasing pilot program provides a convenient way for SNAP beneficiaries to shop for groceries online and, for many, to have these items delivered to their homes. This capability is especially important during the current pandemic; SNAP beneficiaries, many of whom are elderly or severely disabled<sup>4</sup> and are therefore at higher risk of hospitalization if infected with the novel coronavirus, need flexible access to

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<sup>1</sup> Press Release, U.S. Dep't of Agriculture, *USDA Launches SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot*, (Apr. 18, 2019), <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2019/04/18/usda-launches-snap-online-purchasing-pilot>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Dep't of Agriculture, FNS Launches the Online Purchasing Pilot Program, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/online-purchasing-pilot> (last updated May 20, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Mass. Dep't of Transitional Assistance, Performance Scorecard, SNAP participation (May 2020), <https://www.mass.gov/lists/departments-of-transitional-assistance-performance-scorecards#2020-performance-scorecards-by-month->.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

healthy food. Further, SNAP benefits provide critical economic stimulus to local communities, especially during recessionary times.<sup>5</sup>

FNS must do more to ensure that the online purchasing program meets the needs of Massachusetts residents. Currently, FNS has approved the participation of only five EBT retailers in the online purchasing program and only two larger retailers for Massachusetts: Amazon and Walmart.<sup>6</sup> Yet more than 260,000 retailers participate in SNAP across the nation,<sup>7</sup> and over 5,000 retailers participate in Massachusetts.<sup>8</sup> Lack of a wider range of approved retailers leaves Massachusetts SNAP beneficiaries with extremely limited options, especially for fruits, vegetables, and other perishable food.

If the online purchasing pilot is to succeed in expanding access for SNAP beneficiaries in Massachusetts, and as the pandemic drives up increased demand for these services, USDA must take aggressive steps to enroll a variety of retailers in the program. USDA has noted that online payment presents “technical and security” challenges for the SNAP online purchasing program,<sup>9</sup> but has not provided sufficient guidance or technical assistance on how interested retailers can best address the IT and security requirements.<sup>10</sup> We call on USDA to provide clearer guidance for SNAP retailers interested in participating in the SNAP online purchasing program and to consider providing technical assistance and support to further increase the participation of community retailers in this innovative approach to food access.

To that end, we ask you to respond to the following questions by June 24, 2020:

1. Please describe the steps USDA has taken to expand the number of SNAP retailers participating in the SNAP online delivery pilot program and USDA’s plans to directly assist interested retailers in meeting the multiple requirements that FNS has implemented for participating in the online program.
2. Please describe the steps USDA has taken to address the “technical and security” challenges faced by interested retailers, and any plans USDA has to issue additional guidance for retailers to address these challenges.

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Dep’t of Agriculture Economic Research Service, Quantifying the Impact of SNAP Benefits on the U.S. Economy and Jobs, (May 2019), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2019/july/quantifying-the-impact-of-snap-benefits-on-the-us-economy-and-jobs/>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Dep’t of Agriculture, FNS Launches the Online Purchasing Pilot Program, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/online-purchasing-pilot> (last updated May 20, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Ctr. on Budget and Policy Priorities, SNAP Retailers Database, (Apr. 6, 2018), <https://www.cbpp.org/snap-retailers-database>.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Wolkomir, Ctr. on Budget and Policy Priorities, SNAP Boosts Retailers and Local Economies, (Apr. 6, 2018), <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-boosts-retailers-and-local-economies>.

<sup>9</sup> Press Release, U.S. Dep’t of Agriculture, *USDA Announces Retailer Volunteers for SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot*, (Jan. 5, 2017), <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2017/01/05/usda-announces-retailer-volunteers-snap-online-purchasing-pilot>.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Dep’t of Agriculture, Retailer Requirements to Provide Online Purchasing to SNAP Households, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-requirements-provide-online-purchasing> (last updated May 6, 2020); U.S. Dep’t of Agriculture, FNS Electronic Benefits Transfer Online Purchasing Pilot Request for Volunteers §§ 2.4, 2.5 (Sept. 15, 2016), <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/onlinepurchasing-rfv.pdf>.

Secretary Perdue & Administrator Miller

June 11, 2020

Page 3

3. Please describe any other challenges USDA has come across that are preventing more retailers from participating in the SNAP online purchasing pilot program and any steps USDA is taking to help interested retailers address these additional challenges.
4. Please provide a comprehensive list of retailers that submitted an application to USDA to participate in the SNAP online purchasing program, but were denied participation in the current rollout, including why each application was denied.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions about these requests, please contact Brianna Battle of Senator Markey's staff at [brianna\\_battle@markey.senate.gov](mailto:brianna_battle@markey.senate.gov).

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress

Ayanna Pressley  
Member of Congress

Stephen F. Lynch  
Member of Congress

Joseph P. Kennedy  
Member of Congress

William Keating  
Member of Congress

Richard P. Neal  
Member of Congress

Lori Trahan  
Member of Congress

Seth Moulton  
Member of Congress

Katherine Clark  
Member of Congress