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U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Approves Program to Feed Children in U.S. Virgin Islands

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U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue today announced the that U.S. Virgin Islands has been approved to operate Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), a new program authorized by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), signed by President Trump, which provides assistance to families of children eligible for free or reduced-price meals dealing with school closures.

Background:

The U.S. Virgin Islands will be able to operate Pandemic EBT, a supplemental food purchasing benefit to current SNAP participants and as a new EBT benefit to other eligible households to offset the cost of meals that would have otherwise been consumed at school.

For the 2019-2020 school year, the US Virgin Islands had approximately 13,200 children eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch (all children in participating schools).

Under FFCRA, States have the option to submit a plan to the secretary of Agriculture for providing these benefits to SNAP and non-SNAP households with children who have temporarily lost access to free or reduced-price school meals due to pandemic-related school closures, according to the USDA. State agencies may operate Pandemic EBT when a school is closed for at least five consecutive days during a public health emergency designation during which the school would otherwise be in session.

The implementation of Pandemic EBT is in line with USDA's commitment to keep Americans safe, secure, and healthy during this national emergency and to keep kids fed when schools are closed. USDA is working with states and local authorities to ensure schools and other program operators can continue to feed children. This latest action complements previously-announced flexibilities for the Child Nutrition programs that:

- Allow parents and guardians to pick up meals to bring home to their kids;
- Temporarily waive meal times requirements to make it easier to pick up multiple-days' worth of meals at once;
- Allow meals be served in non-congregate settings to support social distancing;
- Waive the requirement that afterschool meals and snacks served through certain programs be accompanied by educational activities to minimize exposure to the novel coronavirus; and
- Allow states, on an individual state-by-state basis, to serve free meals to children in all areas, rather than only those in areas where at least half of students receive free or reduced-price meals.

Today's announcement is the latest in a series of actions that USDA's Food and Nutrition Service has taken to uphold the USDA's commitment to "Do Right and Feed Everyone" during this national emergency. Other actions include:

- Launching a new coronavirus webpage to proactively inform the public about USDA's efforts to keep children and families fed;
- Providing more than five million meals a week through public-private partnership Meals to You;
- Increasing access to online purchasing by expanding the online purchasing pilot to more than half of all SNAP households;
- Debuting "Meals for Kids" interactive site finder – to help families find meals for children while schools are closed across more than 50,000 locations;
- Allowing states to issue emergency supplemental SNAP benefits totaling more than \$2 billion per month to increase recipients' purchasing power;
- Collecting solutions to feeding children impacted through feedingkids@usda.gov; and
- Providing more than 2,800 administrative flexibilities across programs to feed children and help families.

These actions and more are part of USDA's focus on service during the COVID-19 outbreak. To learn more about FNS's response to COVID-19, visit www.fns.usda.gov/coronavirus.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers 15 nutrition assistance programs that leverage American's agricultural abundance to ensure children and low-income individuals and families have nutritious food to eat. FNS also co-develops the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which provide science-based nutrition recommendations and serve as the cornerstone of federal nutrition policy.

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