



February 23, 2021

Adam Crum, Commissioner  
Alaska Department of Health and Social Services  
3601 C Street, Ste. 902  
Anchorage, AK 99503-0060

Dear Commissioner Crum:

The Anchorage Economic Resiliency Task Force is a coalition of business, non-profit, and community leaders. We are writing to you to address problems with food insecurity and SNAP benefits in Alaska.

The COVID crisis has increased unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity. Statewide, 11.6% of Alaskans struggled with food insecurity in 2018. By April of 2020, the rate had risen to 18.1%.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the growing hunger crisis in Alaska, the State is failing in its obligation to process SNAP applications within 30 days. A 2018 Alaska Ombudsman report found that Alaska violated federal timelines for many public benefits, including SNAP. In July 2018, DPA reported it processed 86.9% of SNAP applications within 30 days. In February 2021, the State reported it processed only 74.7% of SNAP applications on time. This problem has gotten worse, and Alaskans deserve better.

Alaska has not taken advantage of federal flexibility in its SNAP program, even as the USDA has increased administrative flexibility for states in the COVID era. Administrative costs of the SNAP program are 50% federally funded, so administrative efficiency benefits the state.

- Alaska is one of only three states that do not offer a way for residents to apply for SNAP online. Alaska requires that applicants submit a paper SNAP application with original signatures. DPA offices are closed for in-person service because of COVID. USDA allows states to use telephonic and online applications, so why is the State still relying on mailed applications?
- Alaska recertifies its SNAP recipients every six months, which is the shortest amount of time allowed by USDA. Recertification is labor-intensive because it involves interviewing recipients and requesting documentation from them. Alaska is one of only four states that certify recipients so frequently. Why is the State making work for itself by using the shortest recertification period?
- Alaska has the option of adopting “broad based categorical eligibility” (BBCE), which expands SNAP eligibility. Adopting BBCE reduces the complexity of the application process, increasing administrative efficiency. 42 states have adopted BBCE. Alaska has not.

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<sup>1</sup> *How much has food insecurity risen? Evidence from the Census Household Pulse Survey.* Institute for Policy Rapid Research Report. <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/reports/ipr-rapid-research-reports-pulse-hh-data-10-june-2020.pdf>



Alaska has not fully implemented additional federal assistance for low-income children suffering from food insecurity. The federal Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program was created in 2020 to provide additional funds for food to children who qualified for free and reduced-price school meals but who could not access those meals when their schools were closed last spring. Alaska mismanaged its PEBT program and failed to deliver benefits to many eligible children.

Successful PEBT programs included several features that Alaska's program did not: direct issuance of benefits to eligible children, rather than requiring households to apply; robust outreach programs; a clear process for families to resolve questions and problems about the benefit; and adequate staff for the PEBT program.<sup>2</sup>

Congress reauthorized PEBT for the 2020-2021 school year, and USDA has announced it is increasing the P-EBT benefit by 15%. States can issue retroactive benefits for eligible children who did not receive their benefits for spring 2020, and administrative costs of the reauthorized PEBT program will be 100% federally funded. This is a chance for Alaska to provide food to hungry children, quickly and efficiently, and to do it at federal expense. However, Alaska has not yet submitted a state plan for USDA approval. As of February 5th, twelve other states had already begun to implement their new PEBT programs.

Economists estimate that every dollar of SNAP benefits generates \$1.70 in economic activity. In an average month during SFY 2020, Alaska issued \$4,624,371 in SNAP benefits to Anchorage residents.<sup>3</sup> This \$7.8M/month of economic activity is vital to our community. We hope you will focus your efforts on improving the SNAP and PEBT programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nikole Nelson".

Nikole Nelson  
Co-Chair  
ERTF Workforce Working Group

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Silvia Villamides".

Silvia Villamides  
Co-Chair  
ERTF Workforce Working Group

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Bill Popp".

Bill Popp  
Chair  
ERTF

Cc: Acting Mayor Austin Quinn-Davidson, Municipality of Anchorage  
Felix Rivera, Chair, Anchorage Assembly  
Members of the Anchorage Assembly

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<sup>2</sup> *Lessons From Early Implementation of Pandemic-EBT: Opportunities to Strengthen Rollout for School Year 2020-2021.* Food Research and Action Center. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/lessons-from-early-implementation-of-pandemic-ebt>

<sup>3</sup> *DPA Statewide Profile -SFY 2020; Average Monthly Caseloads & Benefits by Census Area.*  
<http://dpaweb.hss.state.ak.us/files/reports/Statewide200xProfile.pdf>