

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 9, 2017

The Honorable George Ervin “Sonny” Perdue III
Secretary, United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Purdue,

We appreciate the efforts that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), in coordination with other Federal Agencies, has already undertaken in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. However, we believe the U.S. territories in the Caribbean will need further resources in the coming months to ensure access to essential services. We urge you to consider: 1) providing additional flexibility in USDA program benefits, 2) working with Congress to increase funding for food assistance programs, and 3) increasing program assistance to ensure these U.S. citizens have sustained access to food.

A crucial component in the recovery is getting electricity restored. In Puerto Rico, the percentage of the island without electricity still lingers at 90 percent, which has widespread negative implications on residents’ ability to access federal recovery programs. As you know, the lack of access to power prevents food assistance recipients from properly accessing benefits, which are distributed electronically. For the 45 percent of Puerto Rico’s population who are living below the poverty line, accessing these benefits is a matter of life and death.

Increased flexibility of benefits

Unlike recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the mainland U.S., Puerto Rico receives a block grant each year in the form of the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP). Like SNAP, NAP distributes benefits on an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) debit card. Given that power outages are so severe that restoring electricity may take up to six months,¹ and that only 33 percent of ATMs are currently working in Puerto Rico,² the USDA should find creative solutions to ensure that beneficiaries receive the benefits they qualify for.

Additionally, measures to allow more of the NAP benefit to be redeemable as cash would increase access to basic food needs. Currently, part of the NAP benefit is provided in a form redeemable as cash, and the rest as an EBT. Prior to the 2017 Fiscal Year, participants were able to redeem 25 percent of their benefits to cash. However, authorized program changes will eliminate this cash assistance by year 2021.³ In the aftermath of disaster, USDA has already delayed the timeline for

¹ Frances Robles, Lizette Alvarez, and Mary Williams Walsh, “Facing Months in the Dark, Ordinary Life in Puerto Rico is ‘Beyond Reach,’” *The New York Times*.

² Government of Puerto Rico, <http://status.pr/>, Retrieved October 6, 2017.

³ “Examination of Cash Nutrition Assistance Program Benefits in Puerto Rico,” *Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture*, August 2015.

decreasing the cash share of NAP benefits (from 20 percent to 15 percent) for two months. Given the lack of connectivity on the Island, and the expected timeline of recovery, it is only reasonable to increase the amount redeemable for cash. We urge you to allow beneficiaries to redeem up to 50 percent as cash or, at a minimum, delay the statutory timeline further.

Work with Congress to increase NAP block grant

Due to this disaster, more people will need help putting food on their tables. To help those struggling to recover, we urge you to work with appropriators in Congress to increase funding for this potential surge of NAP participants and ensure food access past the most urgent recovery period.

Ensure program access for people relocating to U.S. States

Lastly, recovery efforts extend past the geographical boundaries of the islands. As you may know, the State of Florida recently declared a state of emergency because of the growing number of Americans forced to flee Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. We ask that the USDA work closely with States that receive evacuees from Hurricanes Irma and Maria to ensure that they are able to provide continued access to SNAP, WIC and any other federal benefits for current and new recipients, and streamline the process for application so those displaced can get back on their feet.

Thank you again for the ongoing efforts of the USDA staff who are working to support those affected by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. We look forward to your immediate attention to this matter to ensure that people in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands receive proper nutrition during this period recovery.

Please feel free to contact our staffs with any questions.

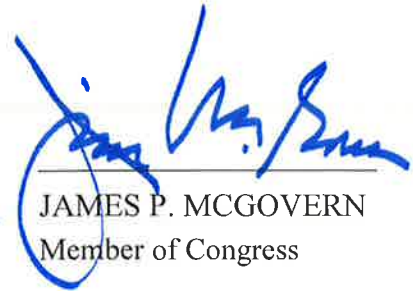
Sincerely,



ALMA S. ADAMS
Member of Congress



NYDIA M. VELÁZQUEZ
Member of Congress



JAMES P. MCGOVERN
Member of Congress

Cc: President Donald J. Trump

Cc: The Honorable James Mattis, Secretary of Defense