



The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Minority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Republican Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

April 1, 2020

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McCarthy, Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer,

As Congress develops urgently needed additional legislation to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, legislators must do much more to ensure that healthy, safe and affordable food is available to all, and to minimize the challenges facing farmers, food workers and farmworkers who are risking their own health to keep our food system going.

Before this pandemic, 37 million people in the U.S. were food insecure,<sup>1</sup> and the economic crisis exacerbated by COVID-19 will leave millions more without access to affordable healthy food. From farm to fork, your response to the COVID-19 pandemic must ensure that these people – the tens of millions of food insecure households in this country, and nearly 22 million individuals employed in the agriculture and food industries<sup>2</sup> – have the economic security necessary at this critical time to feed and support themselves, their children and their families.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/94849/err-270.pdf?v=963.1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=58282>

Congress got it right by including in the Family First Act and CARES Act provisions that provide financial assistance to food banks, school nutrition programs, farmers and restaurants forced to close. But these bills do not protect food and farm workers doing their essential jobs. Food and farm workers need to be designated “first responders” because they are on the front lines of this battle. They deserve not only our gratitude but adequate protection and provision for their health, safety and financial security. They need access to adequate information about the virus. They need paid sick time so that if they do contract the virus, they can take time off to get better. They need basic safety equipment, like handwashing stations, and basic protections, like six feet of space between workers. They need health care when they do get sick, and they need fair compensation for the risks each of them takes every day to keep us fed. In addition, the CARES Act fell short of what’s needed to keep farms going, keep newly unemployed food workers afloat, and to help keep food on the table for all people in this country facing hunger, especially our seniors.

As you develop new legislation to address the COVID-19 pandemic, we urge you to:

- **Protect food and farm workers** – Much more needs to be done by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, which needs to issue and strongly enforce an Emergency Temporary Standard to mandate that employers offer adequate protections for front-line food-chain workers and others at risk. These protections must ensure that the food and farm workers who grow, manufacture, stock, sell, and transport our food have adequate protections from the virus, including personal protective equipment and the ability to report violations. USDA should also issue food and worker safety guidance to school food service workers, operators and volunteers, and provide them with personal protective equipment.
- **Expand food and farm worker benefits** – Congress should do more to support newly unemployed food and farm workers by expanding the number of weeks that workers are eligible for unemployment benefits, regardless of immigration status, and provide hazard pay. Congress should also ensure that all food and farm workers are designated as first responders and are eligible to receive state benefits such as childcare, overtime, premium pay and have the right to organize.
- **Expand paid leave** – To protect the health of food and farm workers and their families, and reduce the spread of the virus, Congress should provide free COVID-19 testing regardless of immigration status and provide universal paid sick days and paid family and medical leave. What’s more, Congress should expand health care coverage by paying for medical treatment related to COVID-19, by increasing the federal share of state Medicaid expenditures, and by adopting policies to help unemployed food and farm workers obtain health insurance.
- **Support farmers in need** – Farmers are ready to meet regional food supply needs. To ensure that they can do so, Congress should place a moratorium on farm foreclosures and expand grant and loan programs. Priority in financial assistance from USDA should be directed to those most susceptible to economic downturns, including socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and those who have lost local and regional markets

due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All farmers receiving financial assistance should demonstrate how funds will bolster local and regional food and economic security.

- **Enforce food safety laws** – Congress should ensure that the USDA, EPA and the FDA enforce laws that keep our food supply safe, especially environmental laws that protect farm workers from pesticides and protect our drinking water supplies and laws that limit line speeds in meat and poultry processing.
- **Support families facing hunger** – To support families facing hunger and provide an immediate boost to the economy, Congress should increase the SNAP benefit by 15 percent and raise the minimum monthly benefit to \$30, and suspend rules that limit benefits. Congress should also suspend the public charge rule and take other steps to prohibit discrimination in anti-hunger programs. USDA should also use its authority to make it easier to provide meals to low-income families during school closures, many of whom are food and farm workers, by issuing a nationwide waiver for area eligibility.
- **Support elderly people and families** – Congress should immediately expand the definition of “homebound” in the Meal to Wheels program to include all seniors. This will help reduce the threat the virus poses to the most susceptible Americans.
- **Support food vendors** – Congress should do much more to support independent restaurants, including street vendors, by providing grants, reforming loan forgiveness standards and expanding zero-interest loans, and by extending loan periods.

Our food and farm workers are working long hours, at enormous personal risk, to make sure store shelves are stocked and families are fed. Millions of restaurant workers have lost their jobs. Mom and pop restaurants face the risk of economic ruin. And many families who lost their jobs or depend on school meals may now go hungry.

As more workers become sick and job losses grow, our nation’s food farm system will be tested. We must get ahead of this with proactive measures rather than play catch-up later. Congress must do much more to provide the resources and policies we need to protect workers and ensure that healthy, affordable food is available to all.

Food and farm workers have always taken care of us. It is in our national interest to take care of them.