

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 27, 2010

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to you out of concern about Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for our constituents. We are grateful that state agencies are able to develop a Standard Utility Allowance (SUA), which helps simplify the application and paperwork to determine a family's benefits under SNAP. However, we are concerned that the upcoming expiration of the blanket waiver of the SUA adjustment requirements for this coming year will greatly reduce the nutrition assistance benefits that many of our constituents rely on to feed their families during this continued time of economic distress. In addition, we are worried that the failure to extend this waiver will disproportionately impact the elderly and persons with disabilities.

According to federal regulations, the SUA values must be updated annually to address changes in utility costs. In 2008, utility prices were abnormally high, with heating oil prices exceeding \$4 per gallon in many areas of the country. Correspondingly, the SUA values rose for the winter of 2008-2009, and food stamp benefits reflected this higher cost. The economic downturn then caused a serious decline in global energy demand and utility prices fell from their 2008 highs. However, while utility prices fell, the need for SNAP assistance increased dramatically as over 8 million Americans lost their jobs and families across the country struggled with many basic living expenses.

In 2009, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) offered states a one-time blanket waiver of the requirement that the SUA be updated. This allowed states to use the previous year's SUA calculation and prevented a decrease in nutrition assistance benefits. We were pleased that FNS recognized the continued demand and great need for SNAP during these difficult economic times and offered a second waiver for 2010-11. However, we are extremely frustrated and disappointed that none of the 17 states that took part in the original waiver last year are eligible to participate again. As a result, many low income families will see their SNAP benefits decline dramatically, some by as much as 20%.

Many states have expanded broad-based categorical eligibility to allow the elderly and households with members who have disabilities to access SNAP benefits even if their household assets or income slightly exceeds federal guidelines. Seniors and disabled recipients are also allowed to deduct the full value of their excess housing costs. Because of these provisions, seniors and the disabled will be disproportionately impacted by decreases to the SUA and the failure to extend the SUA adjustment waiver to all states, even those who used it last year.

Families are still facing significant economic challenges, with the elderly and disabled especially vulnerable during this time. We ask that USDA and the FNS prevent a drastic decrease in the nutrition assistance benefits by again extending the SUA waiver to states that took advantage of the program in 2009-2010 or consider a compromise that that will lessen this dramatic drop in the SUA adjustment from 2008 to 2010.

Sincerely,



BERNARD SANDERS
United States Senator



JOHN F. KERRY
United States Senator



JEANNE SHAHEEN
United States Senator



PATRICK LEAHY
United States Senator



KIRSTEN E. GILLIBRAND
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CHARLES E. SCHUMER
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United States Senator



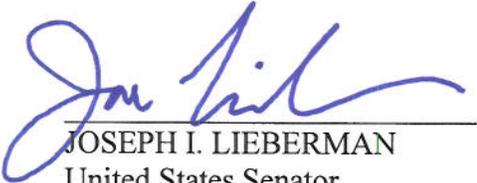
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DANIEL K. AKAKA
United States Senator

Cc: Administrator Julie Paradis