

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

December 8, 2023

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to request that you adjust the recently authorized summer EBT benefit to account for the higher cost of food in Hawaii. In order for this new benefit to provide real buying power for Hawaii families and serve its statutory purpose of feeding low-income children during the summer months, it is essential that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) account for the significantly higher food costs in the state relative to the contiguous 48 states. In addition, we urge you to ensure that your calculation incorporates data from our neighbor islands where residents face higher food prices than in Honolulu.

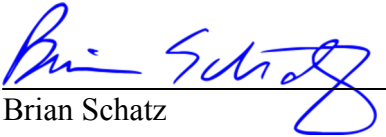
Congress expanded food access for families by permanently authorizing a summer EBT program in the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, Fiscal Year 2023*. This critical new program builds upon successful pandemic-era initiatives that helped to prevent children from going hungry. From the pandemic experience, we know that there is considerable need in Hawaii: more than 95,000 children received benefits in 2023 through the Summer Pandemic EBT program.

However, for the program to have meaningful impact on child hunger in our state, you must use the flexibility Congress provided and adjust the program's per child per month benefit amount. In doing so, USDA would be applying precedents across your nutrition programs, where the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as well as the National School Lunch and National School Breakfast programs adjust federally funded amounts to reflect the higher costs of food in Hawaii. In SNAP, for example, this results in a benefit that is 52% higher compared to the contiguous 48 states. Applying a similar adjustment in the new summer EBT program is critical now as food prices in Hawaii surged from June 2019 to 2022, and there is no clear trend of falling prices.

Further, as you develop your methodology, it is essential to include data on food costs across the state. Hawaii's unique geography as an island state means that neighbor island residents cannot drive to access lower cost foods. Families face higher prices on our neighbor islands due to the smaller market, reduced competition, as well as additional shipping and storage costs. Incorporating neighbor island cost data is especially critical as a higher proportion of the population benefit from USDA's nutrition assistance programs.

We appreciate and share USDA's commitment to ensuring no child in this country goes hungry during the summer. That is why it is paramount that you reflect Hawaii residents' experience at the checkout counter where food prices are substantially higher than the contiguous 48 states and continue to rise. Thank you for your consideration of this request and prompt attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Brian Schatz
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Ed Case
Member of Congress



JM Tokuda
Member of Congress