



OFFICE OF THE BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENT
THE BRONX COUNTY BUILDING
851 GRAND CONCOURSE
BRONX, NEW YORK 10451

RUBEN DIAZ JR.
BOROUGH PRESIDENT

TEL. 718-590-3500
FAX. 718-590-3537
E-MAIL: rdiazjr@bronxbp.nyc.gov

July 21, 2016

Hon. Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I am writing to request that you use your existing authority to expand and accelerate the timing of your department's pilot program to enable companies that deliver food to consumers to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) benefits online using Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT) cards.

I am also writing to invite you and/your staff to hold a listening session in The Bronx to obtain feedback directly from SNAP participants and retailers on the usefulness of using SNAP benefits through online portals. I do think it would be helpful for the department to hear directly from the stakeholders most impacted by these efforts.

As you well know, 48.1 million Americans live in food-insecure households, including more than 15 million children. These children are more likely than others to face a bevy of health problems, including but not limited to anemia, lower nutrient intake, cognitive problems, higher levels of aggression and anxiety, poorer general health, poorer oral health, a higher risk of being hospitalized, asthma, having some birth defects and experiencing behavioral problems. "Food deserts" are areas that lack fresh fruit, vegetables and other healthful whole foods, and are usually found in impoverished and/or rural areas. Deserts exist where there are a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets and healthy food providers. Food deserts are often short on whole food providers. Instead, they are heavy on bodegas and other corner stores that often offer mostly foods that are heavily processed, sugary and fat-laden, and are known contributors to our nation's obesity epidemic.

While The Bronx is undergoing a historic renaissance due to job creation, economic development, lower unemployment and reduced environmental risks, we continue to have particularly high rates of food insecurity and poverty. According to USDA data analyzed by Hunger Free America, fully 31 percent of children and 21 percent of seniors in The Bronx live in food insecure homes. Too many parts of The Bronx are still food deserts, with limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. As a result of all these risk factors, The Bronx also has very high rates of obesity and diabetes.

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Hon. Tom Vilsack

As you also know, SNAP is a key driver to reducing food insecurity. SNAP benefits can be used to buy food in authorized retail outlets, which number about 250,000 nationwide. SNAP provides a pathway for individuals to access nutritious food that is trumped by the limited availability of wholefood vendors. Recipients of SNAP who live in food deserts are unable to take full advantage of their SNAP benefits due to the limited availability of grocery stores. SNAP recipients who live in rural areas, have limited range in their mobility due to their age and/or a disability lack the opportunity to access nutritious foods.

The advancement of technology coupled with online retailers presents a unique opportunity for the advancement of food access and optimization of SNAP benefits, in order to reduce hunger and boost health and economic development.

The Bronx has benefited from a “demonstration project” pursuant to Provisions Section 4011 of the Agricultural Act of 2014, which allowed online grocery retailer Freshdirect to engage in a pilot program that allowed for the use of SNAP benefits through an online portal. Consequently, we recommend that the demonstration project be expanded to other retailers and implemented statewide with certain additional enhancements, specifically, that the benefit transaction be processed by the approved retailer at the time the order is placed rather than at the delivery of food and/or other goods, and that the department develop a secure way of processing benefits without requiring pin numbers to be entered at the time and place of delivery. Officials from your Food and Nutrition Service were kind enough to brief my staff on the progress your department is making towards those goals.

Because SNAP benefits are fixed across the continental United States, with the exception of Alaska and Hawaii, and because food costs are not uniform across the country, the benefit may fall short in high-cost regions, such as New York. Providing SNAP recipients with more access to online vendors will provide them with more opportunities for cost savings without having to sacrifice nutrition.

Expanding online SNAP purchases would aid both hungry New Yorkers and the economy, by creating jobs. It would be a clear “win-win” For consumers and retailers alike. Therefore, I hope you can accelerate your department’s release of the Request for Volunteers under your pilot authority so that it is issued very soon, and that the final RFV be as broad, flexible and as easy as for companies to participate in as possible.

If you or your staff would like to discuss this issue further, please contact Paula Richter, my Director of Health and Human Services, at 718 590-6816.

Thank you for your kind consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ruben Diaz Jr." followed by a period. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ruben Diaz Jr.

cc: Kevin Concannon, USDA Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services