

## COVID-19 RESPONSE COMMENTS

### **Feeding the Carolinas Food Banks**

We ask the State to provide an additional \$6 million in immediate funding to the Feeding the Carolinas food banks. This funding must be flexible to allow food banks to purchase the additional food required to respond to the crisis due to the closing of schools and layoffs caused by the appropriate government required closings. In addition, these funds should help support the management, storage, and transportation of these critical food resources along with additional labor required to manage the additional need and loss of volunteer resources created by required social distancing and the protection of older adults (a large pool of community volunteers) from exposure.

Background - The North Carolina Feeding America food banks are a network of six member food banks that provide health and consistent food support to every county in North Carolina. The food banks also support more than 3,700 local charitable agencies, which provide food directly to those who need it. The North Carolina Feeding America food banks' network typically provides food to 2.6 million North Carolinians facing hunger each year. The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to, and already has, significantly increased the number of North Carolinians experiencing food insecurity. It is critical that the State provide the North Carolina Feeding America food banks with immediate and flexible funding to allow them to continue to provide food to those who need it.

### **SNAP and WIC**

We ask the State to continue to submit waiver requests to USDA to maximize SNAP and WIC funding and flexibility and take other actions to expand access to SNAP and WIC. Specifically, we request that the State:

- provide emergency supplemental SNAP benefits to any participating SNAP household;
- submit any other waiver requests to USDA and take advantage of any flexibility as permitted by future federal relief packages;
- take steps and provide funding to implement the Elderly Supplemental Assistance Project (ESAP) as soon as possible;
- operationalize P-EBT by providing meal-replacement benefits through SNAP for households with children who would otherwise receive free- or reduced-price meals, including working with the Department of Public Instruction to provide the benefit to children who are not currently SNAP recipients;
- provide funding for the capacity support each county needs to process new applications and fully administer SNAP and WIC programs while employees work remotely;
- make real-time eligibility determinations, without regard to recent income sources as many individuals have swiftly lost all income due to widespread business closures;
- remove state-level barriers to the elimination of asset tests; and
- provide support to SNAP administrators in allowing SNAP recipients to order groceries online to pick up, including allowing purchase of food and essential non-food items, like toilet paper, by splitting benefits and cash or charge payments in the same order.

Background - Nearly 1.3 million North Carolinians receive SNAP. Of those, almost 63% are in families with children and more than 29% are in families with elderly or disabled members. These are also the North Carolinians being most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As businesses continue to close and schools remain shuttered, the number of North Carolinians who qualify for and rely on SNAP and WIC for food will continue to grow. The State must take every step to provide maximum benefits and flexibility and expand access to these critical programs.

### **Child Nutrition Programs**

We ask the State to provide funding to child nutrition programs, providing maximum flexibility for the funds to be used to purchase food or for general operational needs.

Background - Now, more than ever, child nutrition programs across the state are a critical way to ensure our children have access to food. Child nutrition programs are utilizing either the Summer Food Service Program or Seamless Summer Option, which allows some flexibility, but the federal funding is inadequate for the cost of food, labor, and transport. Lack of funding necessitates that the programs offer fewer meal sites and methods of delivery, and is particularly challenging for rural communities. School closures have also left these programs without income from paid meals, sales of a la carte items, and fee for service opportunities.

### **Broadband and Access to Technology**

We ask the State to take steps to ensure all North Carolinians have access to broadband and technology allowing them to work or study from home. Specifically, we request:

- amend funding for the GREAT Program to provide \$30 million over 5 years;
- pass the FIBER NC Act to remove barriers that prevent or inhibit local governments from partnering with private providers;
- ensure all students have access to a computer; and
- increase access to technology for small businesses who are adjusting to provide virtual services.

Background - High speed internet is critical now, more than ever, to allow employees to work from home, students to continue their studies, and businesses to transition their operations. It is imperative that the State remove barriers that prevent or inhibit local governments from partnering with private providers to bring better service to residents and businesses. The State must allow local governments to accept federal and nonprofit grants to make broadband-related investments, which they cannot receive under current law. These would include grants from the USDA and Golden LEAF Foundation. Additionally, these needs are urgent, so funding is needed immediately to allow this infrastructure to be put into place. Furthermore, resources such as computers and tablets should be provided to all students who do not have access to them. Students will not be able to participate in virtual learning without access to this equipment.