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May 5, 2022

The Honorable Dr. Eric Mackey
State Superintendent
Alabama State Department of Education
50 North Ripley Street
P.O. Box 302101
Montgomery, AL 36104

Dear Dr. Mackey,

Alabama Arise appreciates the Alabama State Department of Education's (ALSDE) commitment to ensuring that Alabama's children receive the meals they need to learn and thrive, especially during these last few difficult pandemic years. As you know, access to nutritious meals is key to our children's ability to learn and succeed in school and in life. Nowhere is that access more important than in our schools, both during the school year and during the summer, when childhood hunger often increases.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently informed state Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) administrators, including the ALSDE, that some program flexibilities, scheduled to expire on June 30, could now be continued for the entire summer, if the state requests to do so. These flexibilities include:

- Permitting non-congregate meal service, which allows parents, guardians or children to take meals from the pickup site and allows meal provision for multiple days at once;
- Allowing parents or guardians to pick up meals for their children; and
- Allowing state flexibility in program monitoring.

Alabama Arise, our 150 member groups and over 20 partners in the Hunger Free Alabama coalition believe these flexibilities are critical for the 2022 Summer Food Service Program. **We strongly encourage you to take advantage of, and apply for, these waivers.**

The June 30 end of the original waivers would happen right in the middle of summer food service. This could not be more problematic for both families and providers. Changing food service operations, including reimposition of on-site food consumption, would disrupt families' work and child care arrangements and would require that providers completely alter how they feed children in midstream. Providers would have to try to communicate these changes, and the reason for them, adequately to children and their parents. We expect this would result in considerable confusion and frustration. For exactly these reasons, many SFSP providers already have decided to discontinue operations on July 1 if this waiver is not extended. Others, unfortunately, may not participate in the program at all this summer.

We know the hunger crisis caused by the pandemic and its economic disruption has not ended yet. The latest Census Household Pulse Survey (March 30-April 11) found that 15% of responding families with children said they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat. Of those families with children identified by the Census Bureau as food insecure, 25% said their children sometimes or often were not eating enough because food was unaffordable. School meals and the SFSP are critical for these families and their children.

The SFSP waivers have been important during the pandemic, addressing health concerns, supply chain disruptions and community program disruptions caused by the health crisis and economic challenges. Keeping these flexibilities in place for the remainder of the summer will help feed children and help summer meal sites operate safely and efficiently. We urge you to apply for these waivers as quickly as possible, knowing that time is of the essence as providers and families complete their summer planning process.

We appreciate your attention and your continued concern for the needs of our children. We look forward to working with you to continue to feed Alabama's schoolchildren this summer and into the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robyn Hyden". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Robyn Hyden
Executive Director