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KRISTY H. NICHOL
SECRETARY

State of Louisiana

Department of Social Services
Office of the Secretary

May 11, 2009

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Today in the United States, obesity is an epidemic. More than one third of U.S. adults and 16% of U.S. children are obese. Here in Louisiana, 35.6 % of our children ages 10-17 and nearly two-thirds of our adults are either overweight or obese. You may be aware of recent public efforts in Louisiana to call attention to this issue, efforts recognized on the floor of the United States Congress by Congressman John Fleming. In many cultures, the prevalence of obesity is often tied with abundance and wealth. However, in Louisiana, we are challenged by the troubling coexistence of obesity and poverty. According to the National Coalition for a Healthy America, nearly 35% of those between 100 and 200% of the federal poverty level are obese - a rate 3% higher than the national average. Other chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and high blood pressure correlate with obesity and improper nutrition, and this major cost contributor to our health care system and declining quality of life can no longer be ignored.

Policy changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are essential to improve the health status of families dependent on this program. We recommend policies that further the promotion of nutrition and healthy food choices along with increased access to fresh local fruits and vegetables. As you know, SNAP benefits can currently be used to purchase a wide variety of food products, whether healthy or processed. Foods high in refined grains, sugars and fats are lower in cost; therefore, serving as a built-in incentive to purchase processed and unhealthy foods. We urge you to make sweeping changes to the program by introducing incentives for the purchase of healthy food products, with disincentives for the purchase of processed or unhealthy foods. We recognize the balance that must exist between an individual's freedom of choice of food products, and the encouragement of healthy choices in such purchases. Education will be an essential component to assist families in establishing healthy eating habits, but education alone will not help meet the goals.

We are encouraged by pilot programs that "double" benefits expended on fruits and vegetables purchased at local farmers' markets. We will be closely monitoring their outcomes and hope that

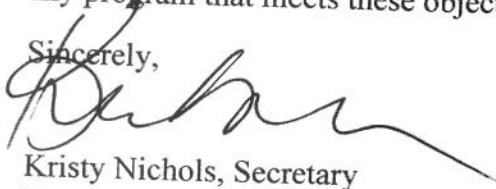
Sec. Vilsack
Page 2
May 11, 2009

the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) will quickly consider wide implementation of such programs if positive outcomes are realized, such as healthy food purchases from local farmers.

Additionally, in a state with high poverty in rural areas, of special concern are "food deserts" where low-income citizens have little to no access to fresh produce. We encourage FNS to consider regulatory flexibility to ease administrative burdens on incentive programs and encourage farmers markets to offer SNAP recipients incentives for purchasing healthy food with electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards. We further encourage FNS to support local farmers through the SNAP program wherever possible.

The SNAP program, as the primary nutrition assistance program in the country, has a unique opportunity to use the power of the marketplace to help influence consumer behavior in a manner which certainly coincides with the President's goal of improving prevention and better health. The State of Louisiana stands ready to support this effort, and will gladly participate in any program that meets these objectives.

Sincerely,



Kristy Nichols, Secretary
Department of Social Services



Alan Levine, Secretary
Department of Health and Hospitals



Patrick Williams
State Representative



Mike Strain DVM, Commissioner
Louisiana Department of Agriculture

cc: Louisiana State Legislature
Louisiana Congressional Delegation
Governor Bobby Jindal
Congressman John Fleming