

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

November 30, 2023

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write today to request that you provide the Hawaii Department of Education (HIDOE) with the flexibility to provide all students on Maui with free school meals for at least the remainder of the 2023-2024 school year. Since the Hawaii Wildfires (DR-4724-HI) burned down Lahaina in August, students across Maui have been dealing with inconceivable circumstances. Given the current situation on the ground and the time it will take to rebuild, providing them with free meals is fully appropriate.

On Aug. 8, 2023, an entire community on Maui was devastated by wildfires. Before the wildfires, more than 3,000 students and hundreds of teachers and staff members from HIDOE's Lahainaluna Complex were getting ready to start their school year. But these students, teachers, and staff members had their lives completely upended by the wildfires, which displaced many of them to other communities. Since then, it has been clear that the impacts of the wildfires are being experienced by the entire island.

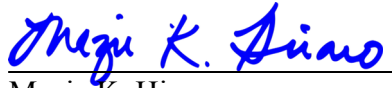
Following the wildfires, initial unemployment insurance claims on Maui have sharply increased and the unemployment rate is expected to steadily rise. By some estimates, the unemployment rate could increase to 11 percent later this year and remain above 4 percent until late 2026.¹ As a result, individuals affected by the wildfires have been relying on programs like the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP), for which the Hawaii State Department of Human Services (DHS) received over 3,600 applications during the enrollment period between Sept. 18, and Sept. 23, 2023. The conditions are hardly better for businesses, which, immediately after the wildfires, were losing \$13 million in visitor spending per day. Clearly the impacts of the wildfires have been experienced across the island.

Given the tremendous work that lies ahead for Maui, it would be fully appropriate for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide HIDOE with the flexibility to provide all Maui students with free school meals for at least the remainder of 2023-2024 school year – and possibly longer. We therefore ask you to use your authority as Secretary to provide this flexibility to HIDOE.

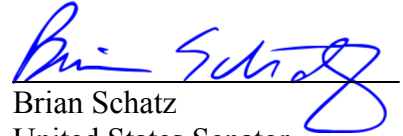
¹ University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization: "Wildfires Deliver Heavy Blow to Maui Economy" (September 22, 2023).

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator



Jim Tokuda
Member of Congress



Ed Case
Member of Congress

CC: Adrienne Wojciechowski, Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, USDA; Jesus Mendoza, Western Regional Administrator, USDA; Marisa Cheung, Director of Child Nutrition Programs (Western Region), USDA; GeNam Chew, Branch Chief of School Nutrition Programs, USDA