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Congress of the United States
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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION
IN EUROPE (U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)

November 25, 2020

The Honorable Bill Lee
Governor of the State of Tennessee
600 Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. Boulevard
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Governor Lee,

We are writing to express concern with the Tennessee Department of Human Services' (TDHS) plans to dispose of Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program cards that were not distributed to students by their schools within thirty days. With the spike in COVID-19 cases in our state and the associated economic hardships faced by the people of Tennessee, we are urging you to reverse this decision and directly mail any returned cards to eligible families.

We have written to you previously with our concerns about Tennessee's application process for the P-EBT program, and we appreciated your decision in September 2020 to eliminate this requirement. However, Tennessee again decided not to mail P-EBT cards directly to needy families, and instead asked schools to distribute the cards. Our state's schools are already facing incredible challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and TDHS made this task more difficult by mandating that schools disperse the cards within a mere 30 days. Despite appeals from school officials and organizations to provide clearer guidance and to eliminate this deadline, as detailed in a November 19, 2020 article in *The Tennessean*, the state has continued to defend its policy.ⁱ

We are pleased that TDHS is not repeating these mistakes and has decided to directly mail its second round of P-EBT cards – cards for meals missed during the current fall 2020 school semester – to eligible families. However, we fail to understand the state's distinction between these

P-EBT cards and those intended to assist families with meals missed during the spring 2020 semester. If the state is sending cards for fall 2020 meals to low-income families, we strongly believe the state should mail the spring 2020 cards as well, rather than throw them away.

In the middle of a devastating pandemic and painful economic downturn, the state of Tennessee must do everything it can to ensure that our state's low-income children receive the food aid to which they are entitled. As these are federally appropriated funds, it is incumbent on us to ensure this program is utilized by the people for whom it was intended. We respectfully request that you halt any plans to throw away P-EBT cards, and instead distribute these cards directly to eligible families. We appreciate your attention to this important issue and look forward to your response.

We wish you and your family a happy Thanksgiving.



Steve Cohen
Member of Congress



Raumesh Akbari
Tennessee State Senator

CC: Tony Matthews, Interim Commissioner, Tennessee Department of Human Services

ⁱ Natalie Allison, "Tennessee defends policy to throw away P-EBT cards if families don't retrieve them in 30 days," *The Tennessean*, November 19, 2020. <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/politics/2020/11/19/tennessee-defends-policy-throw-out-p-ebt-cards-not-distributed-30-days/3763024001/>