

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 15, 2019

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, District of Columbia 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Today is day 25 of the shutdown. In total, nine Federal departments are unable to operate to their fullest extent and adequately meet the needs of American taxpayers. As Ranking Member of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, I am particularly concerned about the adverse impact of the shutdown on seniors, people with disabilities and their families.

Food assistance programs administered by the Department of Agriculture (USDA) play an important role in providing food and economic security for millions of American families. In 2016, 8.7 million Americans over age 50 received assistance with the purchasing of food through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). In 2015, the number of people with disabilities receiving food support was 11 million. If USDA remains closed for regular business, or if there is insufficient funding for SNAP to continue uninterrupted, as USDA has indicated may be the case, millions of seniors and people with disabilities may experience significant hardship.^{1,2}

Similarly, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, also known as the Senior Food Box Program, provides 700,000 seniors across the country with monthly boxes of shelf-stable food. During the shutdown, community organizations are unable to access USDA money needed to administer and distribute the foods within a Senior Food Box. Food banks across the country must take drastic measures, pulling money from other operations to fund distribution of the monthly Senior Food Box. It is unknown how long food banks will be able to shoulder the burden placed on them during this shutdown. If seniors are unable to access SNAP benefits or shelf-stable food, seniors will be more likely to experience hunger and health complications.

¹ Dottie Rosenbaum, *USDA to Fund SNAP for February 2019, But Millions Face Cuts if Shutdown Continues*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, (January 10, 2019) available at (<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/millions-face-cut-in-snap-food-assistance-if-government-shutdown-continues>).

² Jeff Stein, *Trump team promises shutdown won't stop food stamp payments in February, says program lacks funds for March*, The Washington Post, (January 8, 2019) available at (https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/trump-administration-promises-food-stamp-benefits-will-continue-through-february-despite-shutdown-says-program-lacks-funds-for-march/2019/01/08/b4b0b30c-139b-11e9-803c-4ef28312c8b9_story.html?utm_term=.d28decf84675).

Further, it is possible that some seniors and people with disabilities could be forced out of their homes if the shutdown continues. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which is also unable to conduct regularly scheduled business due to lack of funding, may not be able to renew at least 1,150 expired rental assistance contracts. The number of expiring contracts will grow if the shutdown continues. Through these contracts, HUD pays the difference between the tenant's rent payment and the contract rent.

More than two-thirds of the people who receive this type of assistance are seniors and people with disabilities. The people who benefit from this type of assistance have average incomes of less than \$13,000.³ It will be next to impossible for these individuals to make up the difference in rent typically covered by assistance from HUD. Without a rental payment, it may be difficult to pay a mortgage, insurance and property taxes. If the shutdown continues and these rental assistance contracts are not renewed, owners may fail to receive multiple assistance payments and be forced to decide if continuing to rent to existing tenants remains viable.

As we encourage seniors and people with disabilities to age in place, in their homes and communities, it is essential that we support their daily travels. Yet, the shutdown, which has stalled activity at the Department of Transportation (DOT), may be trapping seniors in their homes, leaving them without transportation to important medical appointments or the grocery store. For example, I am particularly concerned about the continuing operations of the non-profit van services, paratransit and other organizations funded through the Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program. Each month, these service operators receive critical funding to take seniors and people with disabilities to receive the health care or food they need. As the shutdown stretches on, the risk of isolation for these populations heightens.

The shutdown also affects the federal government's efforts to protect seniors from scams. Every year, scams and financial abuses targeting seniors adds up to at least \$3 billion. These con artists rob our loved ones of their nest eggs, sometimes up to hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), as well as law enforcement partners at the Department of Justice help prevent these scams and go after criminals. The FTC Consumer Response Center, where older adults can report scams or suspicious activity, and the FCC Consumer Complaint Center, where seniors can report complaints of illegal robocalls and spoofing used to perpetuate fraud, are not operational due to a lack of funding. Also, law enforcement's ability to fight fraud is hampered by the inaccessibility of the FTC's Consumer Sentinel Network. These centers and networks allow law enforcement to analyze reports filed by older adults in order to look for trends, spot enforcement targets and develop cases against those under investigation. Absent information, criminals are more likely to be able to con older Americans and others out of their hard-earned savings.

³ Douglas Rice, *Seniors, Families, and Others Risk Losing Housing as Shutdown Continues*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, (January 9, 2019) available at (<https://www.cbpp.org/blog/seniors-families-and-others-risk-losing-housing-as-shutdown-continues>),a

Elected and appointed officials in Washington have a sacred responsibility of ensuring seniors can age with dignity and people with disabilities can live independently. I request you direct the USDA, HUD, DOT, FTC and FCC to provide additional information to Congress on the steps they will take to mitigate the harmful impact this shutdown will have on seniors and people with disabilities. And, I urge you to reopen the government so that the health and financial security of our aging loved ones are no longer put in jeopardy.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

Cc: The Honorable Sonny Perdue, Secretary of Agriculture
The Honorable Ben Carson, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development
The Honorable Elaine Chao, Secretary of Transportation
The Honorable Joseph Simons, Chair of the Federal Trade Commission
The Honorable Ajit Pai, Chair of the Federal Communications Commission