WAIVER REQUEST

Certification Extension due to COVID-19

1. **Waiver serial number (if request is extension):** N/A

2. **Type of request**: Extension

3. **Primary regulation citation:** 7 CFR 273.12(a)(5)(iii)

4. **Secondary regulation citation:** 7 CFR 273.14(a)

5. **State:** North Carolina

6. **FNS Region:** SERO

7. **Act and Regulation Requirements:** 7 CFR 273.10(f)(3)(i) requires a minimum certification period of six months for most households. 7 CFR 273.10(f)(5) allows states to extend certification periods up 12 months or 24 months for those households that are all elderly or disabled. 7 CFR 273.12(a)(5)(iii) requires an interim periodic report in the sixth and twelfth for households assigned to simplified reporting (SR), if the certification periods exceeds six and twelve.

   7 CFR 273. 14 states no household may participate beyond the expiration of the certification period assigned in accordance with § 273.10(f) without a determination of eligibility for a new period. The State agency must establish procedures for notifying households of expiration dates, providing application forms, scheduling interviews, and recertifying eligible households prior to the expiration of certification periods. Households must apply for recertification and comply with interview and verification requirements.

8. **Proposed Alternative Procedures:** North Carolina is requesting to waive the expiration for certification periods expiring July 31, 2020. North Carolina is requesting to extend the certification periods for six and twelve months. Six-month certification period expiring July 31, 2020 recertifications would be waived until January 31, 2021 and twelve-month certification period expiring July 31, 2020 recertifications would be waived until June 30, 2021. The state is requesting to waive the periodic reporting requirement for North Carolina due to an executive order declaring a State of Emergency as a result of COVID-19. Executive order 116 which declared the State of Emergency is still in effect and will at minimum will remain in effect through Phase 3 of COVID-19 pandemic. North Carolina's Phase 3 will begin between June 19, 2020 and July 3, 2020 depending on the success of Phase 2 implementation. Phase 3 will consist of Lessening restriction for vulnerable populations with encouragement to continue practicing physical distancing, allowing increased capacity at restaurants, bars, other businesses, houses of worship and entertainment venues, and increasing the number of people allowed at gatherings.

9. **Justification for Request:** This waiver is requested under provisions of 7 CFR 272.3(c)(1)(i) which allows the Food and Nutrition Service to authorize waivers due to extraordinary temporary situations, 7 CFR 272.3(c)(1)(ii) which allows approval of waivers which result in a more effective and efficient administration of the SNAP program, and 7 CFR 272.3(c)(1)(iii) which allows waiver approval due to COVID-19, which caused a State of Emergency to be declared.

   The first positive test of the COVID-19, was on March 3, 2020, with additional cases rapidly emerging in North Carolina. As of June 6, 2020 North Carolina, has experienced 35,546 lab-confirmed cases of COVID-19 with expanded testing and increased social contact this number is expected to continue to increase for the foreseeable future. Extending the certification periods as proposed via an automated process would ensure benefits will continue to be provided to current SNAP households while minimizing client traffic in the local agencies.

   North Carolina has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of submitted application during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of FNS applications submitted during the period of March, April, and May 2020 has increased a total of 30,641 applications or 30.32% from the same period of time in 2019. Application timeliness for the same period of time has decreased from 97.14% in 2020 to 94.96% in 2019.

   Many North Carolina county department of social services have reduced the number of staff allowed to work in the local agency to increase and maintain proper social distancing.

   Call volume has significantly increased due to the increase of FNS applications, the issuance of emergency benefits to active recipients, the increase in change reports due to rising unemployment within the state, and the issuance of Pandemic EBT benefits to 838,345 students who are no longer receiving free or reduced lunches.

   Extending the certification period will allow the counties to better manage the growth in workload that has resulted from the increase in submitted applications and call volume. As well as benefiting the households by extending the certification periods for the additional months to households whose benefits are scheduled to end July 31, 2020 allowing them to continue to participate while eliminating the need for participants to leave their homes to obtain verifications or to visit the local agency for recertification reasons. This waiver approval for six and twelve months will provide the State the opportunity to be flexible in the administration of the program and prepare for significant current and future issues that may arise. This waiver will also prevent local agencies from facing a tremendous backlog of recertifications that would be required to be processed in a timely manner.

10. **Anticipated Impact on Households and State Agency Operations:** This waiver will ensure current SNAP households continue to receive benefits and allow the State to more effectively adjust workplace practices and continue to provide services to communities.

11. **Affected Caseload:** The estimated number of cases that would be extended under this proposal is approximately 56,0000 cases with 6-month certification periods and approximately 17,000 cases with 12-month certification periods for the month for July 2020. The State's current payment error rate is currently under the federal tolerance rate.

12. **Anticipated implementation date and time period for which waiver is needed:** The waiver is requested for immediate implementation.

13. **Proposed Quality Control Procedures:** The proposal does not affect quality control sampling or procedures

14. **Name, title, and email of requesting official:**

David Locklear, Deputy Director
Economic and Family Services

15. **Date of request:** June 8, 2020