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NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

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June 8, 2012

Ms. Audrey Rowe
Administrator
Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
3101 Park Center Drive
Alexandria, Virginia 22302

Dear Administrator Rowe:

I have received your letter of May 25, responding to my letter of May 2, and thank you for the explanation of why food stamp benefits in the Northern Marianas were cut this month. You report that this action was not the result of a substantial jump in the number of persons eligible, as reported by the Commonwealth government in the press, but rather the result of over-budget spending by the Commonwealth in the first half of the fiscal year. You also report that the Food and Nutrition Services Western Regional Office (WRO) has now worked with the Commonwealth to readjust spending so as to stay within budget for the remainder of the year, while still serving eligible households with an average benefit of \$242 as originally planned. On May 31, my Chief of Staff, Bob Schwalbach, asked your office for an explanation of how the CNMI could have provided benefits thirteen percent in excess of the budgeted amount for seven months of the year and still have sufficient grant funds remaining to be able to return to the budgeted level for the final five months of the year. I do not believe we have received a response to this inquiry, but we do look forward to that explanation so that we can better understand the budgetary math of this program, which is so vital to our community.

In any event, the over-budget spending does raise questions about the degree of oversight by the WRO. While it is certainly the Commonwealth's responsibility as grant recipient to abide by the agreed budget, and while it is the Commonwealth's apparent mismanagement of the program that caused the present reduction in benefits, I would hope that the federal grantor would monitor expenditures regularly, so that deviations from the budget or other terms of the grant do not go unnoticed.

Beyond that administrative concern, however, I remain adamant that the benefits themselves are insufficient and must be increased. In Guam the average household receives almost three times the Northern Marianas average. Yet food costs in the Northern Marianas exceed those in Guam, because most foods in the Northern Marianas have to be transshipped through Guam. For this reason I will continue to advocate for inclusion of the Northern Marianas in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), along with Guam, or at least for an increase in the Nutritional Assistance Program grant to the Northern Marianas until it provides a SNAP-equivalent benefit for my constituents.

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Just to underscore the dire straits families I represent face, I have learned that the Federal Emergency Management Agency has agreed to issue 20,000 Meals Ready to Eat (MRE) to the Salvation Army and other organizations and governmental units in the Northern Marianas to be provided to families whose children receive subsidized lunches during the school year, but now face a summer without those meals. Local shipping and stevedoring companies are generously donating a container and freight and off-loading services to facilitate deliver of these MREs. This is so disheartening. I know of nowhere else in America where we are reduced to feeding our children and families in this way.

Thank you for your continued commitment to meeting the nutrition needs of the people of the Northern Mariana Islands.

Sincerely,



GREGORIO KILILI CAMACHO SABLAN
Member of Congress

cc: Honorable Benigno R. Fitial, Governor
Honorable Eloy S. Inos, Lt. Governor
Paul A. Manglona, President of the Senate
Honorable Eliceo D. Cabrera, Speaker of the House of Representatives
Honorable Melchor Mendiola, Mayor of Rota
Honorable Ramon Dela Cruz, Mayor of Tinian and Aguiguan
Honorable Donald Flores, Mayor of Saipan
Honorable Tobias Aldan, Mayor of the Northern Islands