

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 17, 2008

The Honorable Nancy Montanez-Johner
Under Secretary of Agriculture for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services
U.S. Department of Agriculture
212A Whitten Building
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Under Secretary Montanez-Johner:

As you know, ahead of Hurricane Gustav nearly 2 million Louisiana residents evacuated their homes in 17 parishes – or about 95 percent of the population of south Louisiana. It was the largest, most successful evacuation in U.S. history, with 82,000 residents taking shelter in eight other states. When families returned to their homes, they faced many challenges, the most significant being a widespread lack of utilities. In particular, Gustav left more than 1.3 million customers in Louisiana without electrical power in the days following the storm and as of today there are still thousands without power. Overall, preliminary estimates suggest that Gustav caused \$7 to \$15 billion in property damage in Louisiana and \$2 to \$5 billion in lost economic activity. Hurricane Ike also has taken a heavy toll on southwestern Louisiana so we appreciate the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) ongoing efforts to assist victims of these storms, primarily through the Disaster Food Stamp Program (DFSP) which is being operated by the Louisiana Department of Social Services (DSS).

Local media has reported consistent problems with the DFSP in Louisiana and our offices have received countless calls from constituents with questions/concerns about the program. In an effort to provide greater clarity and transparency for our constituents, we are inquiring on behalf of our constituents for additional information in the following key areas: (1) how the DFSP is currently operating and (2) clarify major differences between the post-Katrina DFSP and the post-Gustav DFSP. With this in mind, we respectfully request that not later than September 24, 2008, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provide in writing the following:

- Information on income eligibility for the DFSP and whether evacuation costs are included in disaster related expenses. There have been reports of constituents denied assistance for being \$1, \$5 or \$25 over the income limits. Furthermore, many applicants have been denied assistance for having income in checking/savings accounts – funds which usually are obligated for credit card purchases related to the mandatory evacuation or other bills. Please explain the flexibility, if any, that DSS is provided regarding income limits and other assets.
 - Also provide agency justifications for denial of DSS waiver requests related to the exclusion of liquid resources and income limits for the program.
- Information on waivers approved for the State of Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 which were requested, but denied, for Hurricane Gustav. In particular, please explain all major differences between Katrina and Gustav programs, also outlining areas where Federal regulations or laws have changed which have changed program policies.

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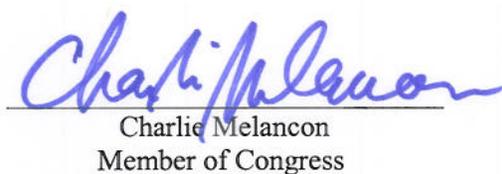
- DSS requested a waiver of the face-to-face interview requirement. It is our understanding that waiving that requirement may result in increased fraud in the program, extended delays in providing benefits to applicants and increase the possibility of theft as cards are mailed to applicants. Please provide information on the justification for denial of this waiver and whether it has been waived for other disasters.
- A brief review of program effectiveness to date, including an overview of FNS/DSS coordination and FNS recommendations, if any, for improving program execution moving forward. Please outline applications processed and benefits provided by DSS.
- Information on the current number of DSS application sites, their location, and staffing.

Thank you for your attention to these important matters.

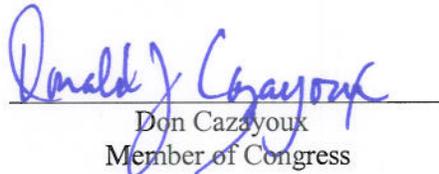
Sincerely,



Mary L. Landrieu
United States Senator



Charlie Melancon
Member of Congress



Don Cazayoux
Member of Congress

cc: Kristy Nichols, Interim Secretary, Louisiana Department of Social Services