



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE **COMMISSIONER SID MILLER**

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TDA RECEIVES IMPORTANT USDA FLEXIBILITY ON SCHOOL MEALS *Commissioner Miller seeks to give schools freedom they need in COVID-19 crisis*

AUSTIN – Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller tonight announced the Texas Department of Agriculture has received important approval on waivers designed to loosen federal meal program mandates so Texas schools can continue to provide meals during the COVID-19 emergency. One of the most important waivers will now allow parents to pick up meals for their children without the children being present.

TDA had already gotten approval from USDA to allow schools to serve meals even if the school is closed. However, under those guidelines, when a parent arrived to pick up a meal for their child, federal law required the child to be present. With social distancing, shelter-in-place regulations, and the threat of a spreading virus, requiring a child to travel to the feeding site was deemed an unnecessary risk.

The letter from USDA waives the requirement of a child being present when the meal is delivered, provided TDA comes up with a plan to maintain accountability and program integrity. The waiver applies to any provider serving meals to those eligible for free or reduced cost meals under the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Summer Food Service Program.

"This will bring a huge sigh of relief for Texas parents," said Miller. "We didn't want federal guidelines to put children at risk, or add any more burdens to their parents. In some low income situations, parents were being forced to drive - or walk - all their kids up to a school to pick up a meal. There's no reason to put kids or parents through that. There had to be a better way, so we asked, and USDA agreed."

"This is another example of making sure federal mandates don't get in the way of a child getting a meal they might desperately need," said Miller.

Another waiver just approved by the USDA specifically grants flexibility to provide meals that may not meet all the requirements, or meal pattern, mandated by federal law. For instance, if a provider cannot serve a meal with one of the required components: dairy, grain, protein, fruit or vegetable, as required by law, this waiver allows them to continue to serve the meal and be reimbursed as normal.

"For some kids, the meal from school might be the best meal they have all day," Miller said. "We need to keep that available, even if the school is closed due to this virus and even if the meal doesn't check every box normally required under the law. It's the right thing to do."

"Normally, these regulations are in place to make sure children get the best, most healthy meal possible. But as schools and families struggle to adjust to this COVID-19 crisis, we will do all we can to make sure these kids get fed no matter what."

Since the coronavirus emergency began, the Texas Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Division has requested over a dozen waivers from federal law to give meal providers the greatest flexibility to respond and meet the needs of their recipients. Still more are under development. Most have been approved quickly.

"My folks at TDA have acted quickly and smartly, as they always do for disasters like hurricanes or floods," said Miller. "I especially want to thank USDA for their swift response and excellent communications. They're getting us what we need when we need it. There's no question this administration and Secretary Perdue have made this a top priority."

For the most recent list of waivers requested, approved or under development, visit the [Square Meals website](#).

To learn more about TDA's response to the coronavirus crisis, visit the [TDA COVID-19 Response website](#).

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