Dear Governor Polis and Members of the Colorado General Assembly,

We thank you for your leadership through this difficult time. The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing tremendous numbers of Colorado families into dire economic circumstances, resulting in skyrocketing food insecurity across our state. We would like to share some information on the importance of Colorado’s vital food security work.

Right now, children across the state are going hungry in unprecedented numbers. According to a recent Brookings Institute study, more than 1 in 3 children (nationally) are now food insecure – almost two and half times the number before COVID-19. Those numbers align with what we have seen in Colorado, as Hunger Free Colorado’s Food Resource Hotline has received three times the usual call volume, and Colorado’s Department of Human Services has received tens of thousands of calls for food and other assistance.

Responding to this crisis is critical to our state’s public health and recovery. Studies show that consistent access to healthy food is vital for promoting physical and mental health, with even short-term deprivations among youth leading to life-long negative impacts (Food Research and Action Center, 2017). We also know that boosting spending in the food and agriculture sector is one of the best ways to jump-start local economies. The dollars we invest in food systems, to help people purchase food while supporting our local producers and food retailers, will help Coloradans access the nutritious food they need and help pave our economic path forward. Below are some of the ways that Colorado can respond.

First, we must continue to support our state’s past work to reduce hunger. This includes funding that currently helps our school districts provide the nutritious meals that Colorado’s children depend on. We ask you to not reduce funding for the reduced-price lunch co-pay for students in pre-K through twelfth grade, which was instituted with the passage of Colorado’s Expanding Child Nutrition School Lunch Protection Act (HB19-1171). This program has experienced an increase of 36 percent in the 2018-2019 school year, meaning that more than 10,000 students (who might not have otherwise eaten) can access school meals, setting them up to thrive in the classroom (Food Research and Action Center, 2019). In Colorado, the need for healthy school meals is substantial and growing during the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, 159,000 of our state’s children (13 percent) were living in food insecure households at some point during the year. This need will grow as Colorado’s youth go back to school, as we see the equity gap widening as rates of household food insecurity increase in the context of COVID-19.
Second, it is vital to strengthen our emergency food response while also supporting our local small farmers and ranchers. Food pantries across the state are seeing 2 to 6 times the number of people coming for assistance, with many going to a food pantry for the very first time. Even with significantly increased USDA food distribution, food pantries and food banks have struggled to respond to the demand. A COVID-19 emergency food response fund received more than $9 million in applications for funding in just a few weeks. Meanwhile, small farmers have struggled to stay afloat as their sources of revenue diminish. Passing the Connecting Colorado Proud and Food Pantries Act will solidify the Food Pantry Assistance Grant program, which over the past two years has helped almost 100 food pantries serving over 80,000 people purchase produce, meat and dairy from local Colorado Proud producers. Funding for these grants provides critical resources for food pantries to meet increased demand, while also providing them the flexibility to purchase the types of food their communities need. This program also helps Colorado's small farms, providing a sustainable source of revenue during these challenging times. The Connecting Colorado Proud and Food Pantries Act is a long-term investment in our communities and local economies as we enter the years-long economic impact of the pandemic.

Third, our state has and should continue to use every opportunity to draw down all the federal resources we can during this crisis. In past recessions, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) has kept thousands of Coloradans out of poverty. By providing families in distress with an EBT card, they can purchase food at local retailers. SNAP is a proven and powerful economic driver that also protects communities' access to food. Colorado can bring in these food resources for families by continuing to fund SNAP outreach to ensure all eligible families get the help they need. And sadly, more Coloradans qualify today than ever before because of the staggering increases in unemployment. Every $1 Colorado spends on SNAP outreach brings in more than $9 in federal benefits. And research shows that every $1 of SNAP benefits used, generates $1.50 to $1.80 in local economic activity. SNAP outreach funding is a wise investment that provides great returns in helping Coloradans and stimulating our economy.

Finally, the pandemic has highlighted the need to invest in local and regional food systems to ensure all Coloradans have access to food and producers have markets for their products. The Healthy Food Incentive Fund provides a large return for our food systems for a small investment through the Double Up Food Bucks and Produce Box Programs. From 2016-2019, people on SNAP using the Double Up program in Colorado spent close to $900,000 at Double Up retailers and the Produce Box Program in Colorado distributed 513 Community Supported Agriculture shares to nearly 1,700 individuals in 10 counties while paying $187,948 directly to Colorado producers. Continuing these programs will ensure that our Colorado food system is resilient and accessible.

At this unprecedented time, hundreds of thousands of people across the state, many for the first time in their lives, are unable to access enough food for themselves and their families. We believe food security must be a priority for Colorado leaders during the pandemic and for the foreseeable future. These are programs that can help us meet those needs. We hope the information we have provided proves useful to you as you make decisions about our state
needs and how to meet them over the next year. We ask you to include food security in any future COVID-19 response planning. Access to food is access to health, and we can help protect it, together.

Please contact Ashley Wheeland (ashley@hungerfreecolorado.org) with Hunger Free Colorado with any questions.

Sincerely,

Adams 12 Five Star Schools
Adelante Network
American Heart Association
The Apprentice of Peace Youth Organization
The Bell Policy Center
Bienvenidos Food Bank
Bread for the World
Care and Share Food Bank for Southern Colorado
Children's Hospital Colorado
Cloud City Conservation Center
Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger
Colorado Children’s Campaign
Colorado Fiscal Institute
Community Food Share
Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition
Colorado School Nutrition Association
Colorado Springs Food Rescue
Community Ministry of Southwest Denver
Cooking Matters
Crossfire Ministries, Inc.
Denver Food Rescue
Denver Housing Authority
Denver Inner City Parish
Ecoshyft
EFAA
Evergreen Christian Outreach (EChO)
Family Resource Center Association
Family Resource Center of the Roaring Fork Schools
Feeding Colorado
Food Bank for Larimer County
Food Bank of the Rockies
Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley
Food for Thought
Frontline Farming
Goodshyft
GoFarm
The Good Food Collective
The Good Samaritan Center
Growing Home
Guidestone Colorado
Healthier Colorado
Healthy Community Food Systems
The Healthy People Project
Hunger Free Colorado
Hunger Free Golden
Jefferson County Council PTA
Jefferson County Food Policy Council
Jewish Family Service’s Weinberg Food Pantry
KidsPak/A Loveland Rotary Project
LiveWell Colorado
Memorial Regional Health
Metropolitan Community Church of the Rockies
Mountain Family Center
Mountain Valley School
National Young Farmers Coalition
Manna Soup Kitchen
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
Mile High Farmers
Montezuma Food Coalition
Mountain Family Center
Mountain Resource Center
Mountain Valley School
Onward! A Legacy Foundation
PASCO (Personal Assistance Services of Colorado)
Project Angel Heart
Pueblo Food Project
P2P Housing and Human Services Alliance
Rangely School District Re-4
Rocky Mountain Farmers Union
SECORCares
Silver Key Senior Services
South High School Food Pantry
Sprout City Farms
Support Jeffco Kids
Street Fraternity
Thrive Partners
Tri-County Health Network
UpRoot Colorado
Urban Colors Arts and Mentoring
Valley Food Partnership in Montrose
We Don't Waste
Weld Food Bank
Weld RE-5J School District Johnstown-Milliken
Westminster Public Schools Foundation
Westside CARES
Westwood Food Cooperative
Wildwood Food Pantry