

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

April 19, 2021

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Congratulations again on your recent appointment to serve once more as the United States Secretary of Agriculture. We look forward to working with you on issues pertaining to farmers, ranchers, producers, and consumers. We recognize that your job is a big one – spanning from overseeing traditional farm and conservation programs to promoting agricultural trade, and from administering national forests and grasslands to developing the economies in rural communities. Perhaps one of your greatest responsibilities is to increase food security and reduce hunger in America. As champions of that work, we urge you to reconsider your recent decision to cancel the Farmers to Families Food Box Program.<sup>1</sup>

On April 17, 2020, during the onset of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and only a month after Congress passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (the Act), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced it would exercise authority granted to it by the Act to establish the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (the program).<sup>2</sup> Per USDA, the program was designed to respond to market disruption caused by COVID-19 and feed hungry communities. In one short year, and under several different authorities and bipartisan relief packages from Congress, the program has delivered more than 157 million boxes of fresh produce, dairy, and meat to communities in all 50 states and multiple tribal nations and territories.

The Farmers to Families Food Box Program fits perfectly at the nexus of many vital issues: supporting American farmers and ranchers and the food supply chain; reducing barriers to nutritious foods for vulnerable populations; preventing food waste and loss; and leveraging the power of local communities to step up and meet the needs of their neighbors.

In Florida, at the onset of the pandemic, many producers disced up full fields of cabbage, squash, cucumbers, broccoli, and other produce they could no longer afford to harvest, and some producers lost over 50% of their normal customer base. At the development of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, farmers in the region eagerly participated as it provided direct relief and support, particularly to small and medium-size fruit and vegetable growers. For example, L&M Farms in Palatka, Florida supplied more than 600,000 boxes of fresh produce – the equivalent of 9 million pounds of food – to those in need.

In Minnesota, the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA) distributed 75,710 boxes to 30,300 families and more than 81,350 individuals in 26 communities across seven counties. Other non-profit organizations like AEOA, food banks, and faith-based organizations utilized

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<sup>1</sup> [Interview](#) with Thomas J. Vilsack, Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Apr. 14, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Act of Mar. 14, 2020, [Pub. L. No. 116-127](#).

their existing networks and contacts to distribute more than 955,576 food boxes to families across the state. We are well aware that organizations like these are better situated than the federal government to pinpoint families in need during times of disaster or emergency.

In Kansas, Topeka Rescue Mission Ministries (TRM) distributed more than 104,420 food boxes, serving more than 2,697 individuals each week, across 911 households in eight counties. TRM's distribution sites also aim to address root causes of food insecurity and strengthen neighborhoods and communities. For example, volunteers at one of the TRM distribution sites noticed the sudden absence of a man who regularly traveled to the site to receive food boxes. The volunteers asked other neighbors of the man's whereabouts and discovered he had a life-threatening stroke. The volunteers began regularly checking on the man, delivering food boxes to his door, assisting him with other physical needs as he recovered, and ensuring he had supports in place.

In Iowa, the Northeast Iowa Food Bank distributed more than 62,000 food boxes, equating to nearly 1.2 million meals. While supporting all vulnerable Iowans is critical during this difficult time, the Northeast Iowa Food Bank used the program to ensure rural communities that are often underserved had access to meals; 34 percent of the boxes were distributed through its innovative Mobile Food Pantries to 15 surrounding rural communities. The Northeast Iowa Food Bank has proven to be a lifeline for Iowans in need and the Farmers to Families Food Box Program has helped the food bank, and others like it, sustain those it serves.

We realize the program has its own set of challenges; it was speedily established in response to a quickly developing pandemic where people were hungry, grocery stores were short of food, and suppliers and transporters were losing business. As a result, the first round of the program looked significantly different than the most recent round. In the first round, the price of a box was as high as \$105;<sup>3</sup> there was an inadequate accounting of where the boxes were delivered; and a limited group of only known organizations received boxes for distribution. After stakeholder and congressional input, and boots-on-the-ground efforts to distribute boxes, adjustments were made to ensure each round was significantly more effective than the round before it. In the fifth round, the average price of the box was \$30;<sup>4</sup> the contents of the box provided diet variety, including produce, meat, and dairy; contract components encouraged boxes be delivered to last-mile, rural communities and other food deserts; and there was clear guidance for tracking the boxes.

We are concerned that USDA intends to eliminate the Farmers to Families Food Box Program – a program that so tangibly supports the entire supply chain – from producer to consumer, and from farm to food bank – amid an ongoing pandemic. We are equally concerned that altogether eliminating the program without any real alternative to feed hungry communities during a pandemic will create further unrest for those very communities who have already been impacted by the pandemic. Replacing the Farmers to Families Food Box Program with The Emergency Food Assistance (TEFAP) produce boxes is no real alternative. In Kansas and several other states where all TEFAP and entitlement funds are usually allocated, no funds would be left for TEFAP produce boxes. Even if funding became available, regulations surrounding TEFAP would disqualify many non-profit organizations, including several organizations participating in the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, from distributing food directly to at-risk communities. Further, TEFAP boxes would be limited to produce only and would not include or reflect the diversity of agricultural commodities in the region, such as meat and dairy – outside of a separate and yet-to-be-seen Dairy Donation Program as authorized by Congress.

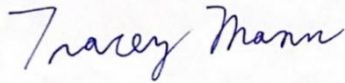
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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Farmers to Families Food Box* (Apr. 14, 2020), available at <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/farmers-to-families-food-box>.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

We urge you to continue the Farmers to Families Food Box Program to address pandemic-era food and nutrition insecurity in concert with existing federal nutrition programs. At the very least, we ask that you review the program in its most recent form, utilize the nearly \$1 billion left in authorized but unspent funds for the program, and employ other authorities to continue the program before cancelling it without substantive alternatives.

Sincerely,



Tracey Mann  
Member of Congress



Frank D. Lucas  
Member of Congress



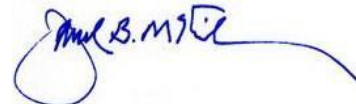
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