

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3203

October 9, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

I write to express concerns about troubling deficiencies in how the third round of Farmers to Families Food Box contracts have been rolled out. While I appreciate the changes USDA has made to address the inefficiencies in earlier rounds of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, these changes have disrupted food distribution and caused confusion among many of the food banks and nonprofits that serve the people of New York. Further, despite USDA's efforts to resolve the "last mile" delivery issues present in earlier rounds of the program, I have heard reports from my constituents across the state that vendors are not following through on their commitments to transport food boxes to their final delivery destinations. In the face of rising and persistent hunger exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis, the USDA simply must do better. Therefore, I ask that you immediately address these issues and commit to ensuring any future changes are clearly communicated to all Farmers to Families participants.

Over the past few weeks several food banks in New York reached out to me, alarmed to learn that the third round of Food Box contracts includes county restrictions. Many food banks in New York City serve boroughs that are in different counties. These food banks have developed relationships with clients across the city and their clients depend on these organizations to help them put food on the table. Placing restrictions on where vendors can deliver food boxes means that many food banks either have lost their food box supply entirely, or are receiving boxes for only a portion of the people they serve. Some of these food banks feed thousands of people each week who they will no longer be able to serve due to vendor county restrictions. In order to continue to serve their clients, food banks are scrambling to find new vendors to partner with that are permitted to deliver food boxes in the counties the food banks cover. This change has caused severe turmoil both for the communities that rely on food banks and also for the food banks themselves, who are already stretched thin during this crisis.

The complications caused by the restrictions were compounded by a lack of clear communication from USDA. Food banks were caught off guard by the changes in contracts and the county restrictions. Had USDA better communicated these changes, food banks may have had time to plan for the shift in food box supply, warn their clients about service disruptions, and seek out new partners who were permitted to operate in the counties they serve. Instead, the food banks were given little warning and were left without time to prepare.

I have also heard from New York nonprofits frustrated by how round three vendors are handling last mile delivery. The changes made to the third round of purchases were intended to eliminate last mile issues present in previous rounds of the program. The solicitation for the Basic Ordering Agreements made it clear that vendors, not nonprofits, were expected to cover the expenses and provide the staff necessary to move food boxes to their final destination. In fact, contracts were awarded in part based on the applicants' last mile delivery plans. However, I have heard reports from nonprofits across the state that vendors are not fulfilling their promise to take boxes from "truck to trunk." It appears many vendors did not include the cost of last mile delivery in their contract bids and now having been awarded contracts are not willing to allocate resources for last mile delivery. When vendors do not fulfill their obligation to do last mile delivery, nonprofits are forced to take on extra costs to get food to families in need.

I ask that you address these issues immediately and provide vendors and food banks with the flexibility they need to ensure food is reaching food insecure populations. I also ask that you demand all vendors fulfill their obligation to move food boxes to the final delivery destination so nonprofits will not be required to absorb the cost of last mile delivery. Finally, as you move forward, please ensure any information on program changes are clearly communicated with all program participants.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter and if you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact my staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Charles E. Schumer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator