

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 3, 2021

Acting Secretary Kevin Shea
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Acting Secretary Shea,

We write to express concern regarding reports we have received from the New Hampshire Food Bank that the products provided through the Farmers to Families Food Box program continue to fall short of meeting nutritional standards and are not suitable to serve to families in need of assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The intent of the Farmers to Families Food Box program is to provide fresh produce, dairy and meat products from American producers of all sizes to food banks, community and faith-based organizations and other non-profits serving Americans in need.

In rounds one and two of the Farmers to Families Food Box program, the New Hampshire Food Bank received high quality food from local distributors chosen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Food provided by local distributors in these rounds included lean cooked chicken breast, fluid milk and a variety of dairy and fresh produce. Additionally, the convenience of working with local, New England-based distributors through this program alleviated added logistical complications for the New Hampshire Food Bank and ensured the timely delivery of food to hungry families across our state.

Unfortunately, the distributors awarded subsequent contracts in the following rounds of the Farmers to Families Food Box program failed to meet these same standards. In round three of the program, the USDA awarded the contract to a different distributor, Vincent Farms, instead of the proposal submitted by the New Hampshire Food Bank and Costa Fruit & Produce. The product provided to the New Hampshire Food Bank in round three by Vincent Farms was of enormously inferior nutritional quality and included, for example, low-quality scrapple as the protein. Upon receiving alarming reports of the poor quality of food provided in round three, we promptly raised these concerns with the USDA on October 29, 2020 and requested that the agency launch an immediate investigation into this matter.

In round four of the program, the USDA awarded the contract to Lancaster Farms, a Maryland-based distributor. While the product provided by Lancaster Farms was of higher quality and a drastic improvement from round three, the New Hampshire Food Bank shared that working with a long-distance distributor in the face of inclement weather during the winter months created significant challenges for efficient food delivery. For example, in December, the distributor was unable to meet a delivery deadline due to inclement weather and a mobile food pantry scheduled to serve families in Colebrook, New Hampshire was cancelled. As a result, hundreds of families in rural New Hampshire were unable to receive assistance they were relying on.

After facing continued challenges with the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, we were alarmed to hear that now, in the fifth round, the New Hampshire Food Bank is again receiving food that falls short of nutritional standards we must be meeting during the pandemic. Produce Alliance, LLC, based out of Illinois, received the contract for the fifth round. The New Hampshire Food Bank has once again expressed concern with the nutritional value of the products being provided.

We urge the USDA to prioritize local distributors in future rounds of the Farmers to Families Food Box program and to consider the joint proposals submitted by food banks, community and faith-based organizations and nonprofit organizations during the solicitation process. Additionally, we request an update on the USDA's compliance with provisions included in the most recent COVID-19 relief legislation requiring the agency to conduct a preliminary review of actions necessary to improve COVID-19-related food purchasing, including reviewing coordination, specifications, quality, and fairness of purchases and the degree to which local purchases of food were made. We also request that the findings of this preliminary review related to the Farmers to Families Food Box program be shared with our offices.

In the midst of a global pandemic and while families are experiencing food insecurity at incredible rates, it is essential that the food provided by the U.S. government to our local food banks and other entities is reliable. Now more than ever, keeping families fed and safe should be our top priority. Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress



Chris Pappas
Member of Congress