

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 26, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write in regards to your efforts with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to support the needs of food insecure communities due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and express serious concern towards the changes in Round 3 of the Farmers to Families Food Box program. We are disappointed to learn that multiple Maryland vendors and municipalities did not receive sufficient support from the program's third round. We urge the Department take immediate action to remedy this as it impacts the food sources of thousands of Marylanders.

The number of Marylanders struggling with food insecurity has significantly increased due to the pandemic. Nearly 1 in 4 Marylanders faced food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic, and now almost an additional 1 million due to the pandemic – of which nearly 339,000 are children. As a result of the pandemic, there has been a 25% increase in participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and there is a higher need for food security support than SNAP can capture. Unfortunately, the lack of vendor contracts through the third round has dire consequences for the state.

The USDA touts the success of the Farmers to Families Food Box program as it has delivered over 100 million food boxes to date, ignoring evidence that Round 3 changes to the program have caused a drastic decrease in vendors and slowdowns in food box availability and delivery. Data from USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) shows a 74% decrease in food box invoices nationally over the course of Round 3, and the Department awarded contracts to only 50 vendors across the nation. This decrease in contracts has a direct negative impact on the food insecure people of Maryland.

As the pandemic continues, it is essential that Maryland residents have access to products that support a nutritionally complete diet. Local governments have implemented robust food security operations, including distributing meals, utilizing the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, and increasing local food system resilience. They have determined the communities with the highest need, identified community partners that successfully distributed perishable foods, and served as a liaison between vendors and community sites. Counties across the State have seen their access to food boxes cut by tens of thousands *per week* since the beginning of Round 3. For example, Montgomery County, Maryland was previously receiving 26,000 food boxes per week

and once Round 3 started they are now only receiving 3,000 food boxes per week. Baltimore City, Maryland currently has no access to food boxes.

Without this third round of contracts to Maryland vendors, cities across Maryland are now facing a widening gap of food insecurity that the food box operation aimed to prevent. Given how vital this program was, we urge you to provide additional information regarding the selection process:

- How was it determined the overall number of boxes that a State would receive for the third round?
- How were the jurisdictions selected to receive the boxes within the State of Maryland?
- For the vendors that were approved, how was it decided which would be receiving contracts?

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not express our very serious concerns with your attempt to require that self-promoting letters from the President be included in each box. This is a highly inappropriate and blatantly political use of taxpayer dollars.

Thank you for considering our concerns regarding the third round of the Farmers to Families Food Box program, and we look forward to working with you to protect vulnerable populations from food insecurity during this challenging time.

Sincerely,

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ Steny Hoyer
Member of Congress

/s/ Kweisi Mfume
Member of Congress

/s/ C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger
Member of Congress

/s/ David Trone
Member of Congress

/s/ Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

/s/ Anthony G. Brown
Member of Congress

/s/ Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

/s/ John P. Sarbanes
Member of Congress