

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

December 10, 2020

The Honorable Greg Ibach
Undersecretary
Marketing and Regulatory Programs
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Mr. Bruce Summers
Administrator
Agriculture Marketing Service
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Under Secretary Ibach and Administrator Summers:

We write to request a meeting between United States Department of Agriculture and the Massachusetts congressional delegation regarding the fourth round of distributions under the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (the “Program”), and any potential future rounds of the Program.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an increase in food insecurity across the United States, and the Program has played an important role in our response to it. Authorized by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, the Program purchases and distributes agricultural products to people in need. In Massachusetts, the food-insecurity rate has increased by 53% during the pandemic, with one in seven residents lacking access to enough food for three healthy meals per day, and one in five children living in food-insecure households.¹ The Program got off to a challenging start in Massachusetts, with the Northeast receiving only 4% of the Program’s total first-round contracts.² Nonetheless, our schools, food banks, and the families they serve have come to rely on the food boxes that they received in the Program’s first, second, and third rounds.

However, in the most recent round, the Program has struggled to meet the needs of Massachusetts residents. In recent weeks, we have received reports that the Northeast Region’s new fourth-round contractor, Whitsons Culinary Group, is now unable to service many of the same Massachusetts schools and food banks that received food boxes in the Program’s prior rounds. In our conversations with Whitsons, we learned that regional needs not only vastly

¹ Greater Boston Food Bank, *The Greater Boston Food Bank Mobilizes Eastern Massachusetts Residents to Take Action During Hunger Action Month* (Aug. 2020), <https://www.gbfb.org/news/press-releases/hunger-action-month-2020/#:~:text=Overall%2C%20the%20food%20insecurity%20rate,three%20healthy%20meals%20a%20day>.

² Emilie Munson, *Northeastern companies received just 4% of Food Box funds to feed the hungry*, Times Union (May 29, 2020) <https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/Northeastern-companies-received-just-4-percent-of-15301040.php#:~:text=Davis%20homicide%20case-,Northeastern%20companies%20received%20just%204%25%20of%20Food,funds%20to%20feed%20the%20hungry&text=WASHINGTON%20%E2%80%94%20A%20new%20federal%20program,tens%20of%20thousands%20of%20boxes>.

outweigh its contracted capacity, but also that, as of December 3, 2020, it has a waitlist of 21 organizations—many of which are previous food box recipients now without a supplier. Food banks have also reported that some of the Whitsons’ food box content has fallen short of meeting nutritional and quality standards. Further compounding the problems, USDA provided recipient organizations with almost no warning of the transition in vendors, and Whitsons provided minimal notice to many schools and food banks that its distributions would be greatly reduced or stopped entirely. This forced food banks to scramble to purchase agricultural products for the families they serve.

American families must always have access to basic necessities, but never more so than during this pandemic. To ensure their needs are being met and that the Program is effective, USDA must engage in effective oversight of it, including seeking feedback from the Program’s contractors and recipients. We further request a meeting with USDA to discuss the challenges that food box recipients and distributors are facing in Massachusetts.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress

Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress

Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress

Katherine M. Clark
Member of Congress

William R. Keating
Member of Congress

Joseph P. Kennedy III
Member of Congress

Seth Moulton
Member of Congress

Lori Trahan
Member of Congress