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February 3, 2021

The Honorable Kevin Shea
Acting Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Acting Secretary Shea,

As the United States continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, as many as 29 million Americans continue to face hunger and food insecurity.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this existing problem and I have been deeply concerned by reports of shortages of kosher and halal food available to the many observant individuals and families in New York State and throughout our country. I believe that The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box program should be more cognizant and culturally sensitive to our citizens with restrictive diets due to religious beliefs. I am writing today to inquire how the USDA will make sure that federal feeding programs are equitable and accessible for those with culturally or religiously sensitive diets.

In the four rounds of the Farmers to Families Food Box program, over 132.8 million food boxes have been shipped throughout the United States.² During the beginning rounds of this program, when there were separate boxes for each food category, it was more accessible for kosher and halal families to use this program. However, in late summer the boxes were designed to be exclusively mixed packages, eliminating them as an option for these families. I am asking that the USDA reassess this policy to ensure that all families can benefit from this and future programs.

Neighborhoods with large Orthodox communities were already experiencing high concentrations of poverty and hunger before the pandemic started. In the five boroughs of New York City alone, there are more than 500,000 people living in poor or near-poor Jewish households. Americans of all backgrounds and faiths are experiencing increased hunger because of the pandemic, and many programs have been put forth to alleviate some of these issues. However, many in the Jewish and Muslim community only eat kosher or halal food, and have not been able to benefit from these programs because they do not provide these options.

I ask that you provide an update on the purchase and distribution of kosher and halal food in the Farmers to Families Food Box Program and TEFAP, and provide what input and feedback USDA has received from Jewish and Muslim communities when determining which products to be included in these programs. Thank you, and I look forward to your timely response and attention to this matter.

Sincerely



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

¹ <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/01/22/biden-administration-expands-p-cbt-benefit-millions-low-income-and>

² <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/farmers-to-families-food-box>

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