

March 17, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I am writing today to urge you to make providing healthy, American-grown, fruits and vegetables to Americans the central focus of any program implemented as a successor to the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. On March 8, 2021 the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) announced they were seeking comments on the development, coordination, and implementation of a new food purchase and distribution program.¹ USDA has stated that this program is intended to provide additional aid to nonprofits serving Americans in need of nutrition assistance. While the Farmers to Families Food Box Program had a number of issues, it was very successful in one regard, which was providing hungry families with healthy and nutritional fruits and vegetables. This potential new program has the unique opportunity to not only combat food insecurity, but also nutrition insecurity, while simultaneously supporting the American fruit and vegetable market while American farmers and citizens are still reeling from the health and economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

Eating fruits and vegetables is an important part of a healthy diet and provides us with the vitamins and minerals that we need such as vitamins A, C, and E, magnesium, and zinc.² Not only that, fruits and vegetables are low in fat, salt and sugar, and high in fiber. These characteristics all lead to good health benefits such as reducing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and obesity, all of which lead to higher incidence of severe coronavirus symptoms. In fact, the recently released Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), 2020-2025 report reaffirmed the importance of fruits and vegetables in American diets by stating that nutrient-dense foods such as vegetables (of all types) and fruits are core elements of a healthy dietary pattern.³ The DGAs recommend that Americans should make half their plate fruits and vegetables, which equates to two and half cups of vegetables and two cups of fruits per day. However, despite being an important part of a healthy diet, more than 80 percent of Americans have dietary patterns that are low in fruits, and 90 percent are low in vegetables.³ In the middle of a global health crisis, ensuring that American's are able to meet these scientific recommendations should be of utmost importance.

Outside of providing Americans with the nutrients they need, making fruits and vegetables a crucial aspect of this new program will also strengthen the American fruit and vegetable market. Millions

¹ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/content/usda-seeks-comments-food-purchase-program-will-host-listening-session>

² <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/what-should-you-eat/vegetables-and-fruits/>

³ https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans-2020-2025.pdf

upon millions of pounds of fruits and vegetables were either dumped, plowed over, or generally wasted due to the breakdown of the food supply chain caused by mass school, restaurant, hotel, and entertainment venue closures over the course of this pandemic. While payments from programs such as the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) helped offset some losses, they did not make farmers whole and they did not put food into the hands of consumers. Thanks to the vast geographical makeup of the United States, American farmers are able to produce a wide variety of the healthy nutritious fruits and vegetables that help us meet our dietary needs such as spinach, tomatoes, strawberries, carrots, and oranges. Here in New York, our farmers are top producers of fruits and vegetables such as apples, cabbage, onions, snap peas, and grapes. Not only will including healthy options such as these in the new program lead to better health outcomes for American consumers, but will also lead to better financial outlooks for our American farmers by strengthening both our local food systems and our diets.

The Biden Administration and the new leadership at USDA has made battling food insecurity and providing assistance to our nation's farmers a top priority. The new food purchase and distribution program that is being considered can tackle both of these commitments simultaneously by providing the nutritional intake that Americans need for their diet with American grown fruits and vegetables. Thank you for your careful consideration to this request and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator