

House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition Oversight & Department Operations

United States House of Representatives

Hearing

Coronavirus Food Assistance Program's Farmers to Families Food Box Delivery to Nonprofits

Tuesday, July 21, 2020

Cisco WebEx

Statement

Eric Cooper

President and CEO

San Antonio Food Bank

5200 Enrique Barrera Parkway

San Antonio, TX 78227

Dear Chairwoman Fudge, Ranking Member Johnson and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony on our experience with the Farm to Families Food Box Program. My name is Eric Cooper. I am the President and CEO of the San Antonio Food Bank, in San Antonio Texas. I represent one of the food banks in the Feeding America and Feeding Texas networks. We serve a large section of Southwest Texas where we provide food to well over 500 organizations and programs.

At the onset of the COVID-19 Crisis, we went from feeding 60,000 people per week to now feeding 120,000 people a week. The reality of the demand was captured in a photograph in the San Antonio Express News of our April 5th distribution at Traders Village. Over 10,000 families struggling to get food needed help. It has been this unprecedented demand that food banks across the nation have been working hard to feed.

It has taken an unprecedented response to meet that demand and we are grateful to the Companies, Foundations, Churches, and Individuals who have donated and volunteered. Their immediate action helped to bridge the gap until the public support started to arrive. I want to thank our Local Federal Delegation for volunteering at our distributions and advocating for support. Had it not been for the Texas Department of Emergency Management, FEMA, and USDA we would have run out of food.

Meeting this demand has been a daily challenge. Food insecurity is getting worse as unemployment rises across the country as more and more states look at needing to close again. Feeding America's research team has projected an additional 17.1 million individuals will be food insecure in 2020 as a result of the economic fallout from COVID-19.

The San Antonio Food Bank, and the entire food bank network, is grateful for the additional funding for TEFAP, TEFAP Storage and Distribution, Pandemic-EBT, and SNAP emergency allotments provided in the Families First and CARES Act. This has immensely helped food banks and those they serve in communities across the country, and in particular the additional food will help provide a backstop this fall and winter.

Food banks across the country viewed USDA's announcement of the Farmers to Families Food Boxes as an innovative solution to the supply chain challenges many growers and producers are

experiencing due to COVID-19, and a solution that would also help connect additional food with communities in need. USDA took a chance on standing up an entirely new purchasing system in a very fast turnaround time to address the food that many farmers were forced to plow under as buyers cancelled contracts.

However, this haste did cause some unevenness in the bidding and contracting process. Many contractors did not have time to identify and negotiate distribution and delivery agreements with nonprofits ahead of time. This led to some speed bumps once contracts were awarded to avoid duplication of deliveries in certain areas. It also resulted in food banks shouldering more of the distribution burden than USDA had intended. Many food banks have hired additional staff, rented warehouse and refrigeration space, and rented trucks to handle the additional food. Other food banks have not been able to afford to invest in these additional capabilities and have had to turn some of the food offered through the program down due to lack of capacity.

Bolstering TEFAP will also help to offset deep declines in retail and other food donations, especially as food banks face extra costs related to new food delivery models that align with guidance from health professionals. With the increase in food moving through the network from USDA's Food Purchase and Distribution Program and the Farmer's to Family Program, a strain is being placed on the food bank infrastructure.

The San Antonio Food Bank cannot work alone in providing the support our community needs during this critical time. We need an increase in SNAP to help with the increased demand. SNAP has proven to be key to safeguarding the food security of Americans who are low-income in times of need for decades, and its strength is unparalleled. Strengthening SNAP will help make the program even more responsive to the economic downswing the nation is presently facing. It will assist in moving families from our parking lots and into grocery stores.

To meet this increased level of need it is crucial that funding be included in future legislation that increases access to food through SNAP, TEFAP, and child nutrition programs.

On behalf of Feeding America and Food Insecure Families we ask:

- Increase the maximum SNAP benefits for all recipients by increasing the thrifty food plan by at least 15 percent for as long as the economy is weak. This will help food banks that are seeing large increases in demand and also will help promote economic stimulus during this economic downturn.
- Increase the SNAP minimum benefit from \$16 to \$30 for the duration of the economic downturn.
- Extend Pandemic-EBT authority provided in earlier legislation to ensure USDA has the authority needed to continue this important program through the summer and into the next school year as needed.
- Provide \$500 million for TEFAP food purchases to follow the increases included in previous legislation as well as funding for storage and distribution needs to help our food bank network continue to meet the unprecedented demand in our communities.
- Provide \$543.25 million for food bank infrastructure capacity needs to support the rental, lease, or purchase of essential assets such as refrigeration and transportation equipment across the network of food banks and partner distribution agencies.

Recommendations for improving CFAP:

We applaud the investment of \$3 Billion to procure surplus agriculture, strengthen food industry vendors, and feed families. Not having a strong distribution plan and allowing awarded

contractors determine who and how much each non-profit 501C-3 challenged the equity and accountability of the Farm to Families Food Box Program.

- **Food Access**: We recommend that USDA expands the reach of the program so that all communities and states are able to participate equitably in the program. Several states were left with few to no food boxes while others received one type of box (i.e. produce) while receiving none of the other varieties (i.e. dairy and meat). This could also create opportunities for national and local partners with experience distributing food.
- **Contractor Support and Compliance**: We recommend that USDA increase technical assistance to contractors to ensure familiarity with USDA contract requirements and successful execution of the contract. Some contractors have experienced difficulties that fall into these common areas:
 - The contractor did not secure agreement with nonprofits for all the food they are contracted to deliver prior to submitting a bid.
 - The contractor does not have the equipment needed to deliver to distribution sites. This negates the ability of the contractor to provide “Truck to Trunk” delivery to distribution sites and means the food bank must take on the expense to do so.
- **Last Mile” Distribution Costs**: We recommend that USDA support contractors in accurately assessing commodity and delivery costs. Many contractors may not have known the true distribution costs in the initial plans submitted to USDA; allowing consideration of additional expenses will help contractors either shoulder more of the distribution costs as USDA intended in the RFP or compensate non-profits for the last mile delivery to clients. This will increase the reach of the program.
- **Local Coordination**: We recommend that USDA encourage contractors to strengthen coordination with food banks and other nonprofits. We have seen many instances where contractors do not coordinate among the “network” of nonprofits for delivery, resulting in some smaller nonprofits receiving food they cannot safely distribute or store and then asking the food bank to urgently pick up perishable food that has not be handled according to proper food safety guidelines.

Closing Ask of USDA/Congress:

- We encourage the Committee on Agriculture along with USDA to ensure the Farmers to Families Food Box Program can provide a nationwide resource to individuals during this crisis and can provide food to communities in need through all four phases of the program (May-December) as announced by USDA in April.
- We also encourage USDA and Congress to continue the success of other USDA food purchase programs like the Food Purchase and Distribution Program, which has provided over two billion pounds of nutritious food to food banks over the last two years. Unfortunately, this food is slated to end in December 2020, creating a very large “commodity cliff” that will result in a significant reduction in food purchases for food banks. We believe another year of a planned food purchase program would provide US growers and producers as well as food banks certainty and a steady supply of food to assist families and individuals in need.

Thank you again for allowing me to give written testimony on our direct experience. We are grateful to the Committee and USDA for making sure families are nourished.

May God bless you all for serving our great nation in this time of need!