

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 23, 2024

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Secretary Vilsack,

We are deeply concerned about the crisis unfolding with the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) program. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) must take immediate action to install solutions for the short-term, long-term, and retroactively, to restore food deliveries and engage in meaningful consultation with impacted Tribes. For the past several months, Tribal families have experienced extreme disruptions in food deliveries – only receiving partial deliveries, or no deliveries at all. We appreciate the steps that the Department is taking to address the situation thus far, but more must be done to quickly restore food deliveries.

As you know, the FDPIR provides food deliveries to income-eligible households living on Indian reservations and to Native American households residing in designated areas. Families that participate in this program do so at the expense of being eligible to participate in other federal food assistance, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Further, many Tribal households choose to participate in FDPIR over SNAP because they do not have access to grocery stores so families have limited options for assistance should they face delays in their FDPIR deliveries.

In March 2024, USDA consolidated the food delivery contractors to one sole-source contractor, Paris Brothers, Inc. in Kansas City, MO. Since that change went into effect on April 1, 2024, participating Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) began to experience “[s]poradic deliveries, or incorrect orders and compromised best if used by dates.”¹ Participating households have not had consistent food deliveries for over four months. This is unacceptable.

According to the National Association of Food Distribution Programs on Indian Reservations, most of the 100+ ITOs nationwide have experienced some type of delivery disruption since April 2024. To fill the gaps, some Tribal families are working with local food banks to provide basic necessities. Some Tribal governments are even using emergency funds to purchase food for impacted families without assurances that they will be reimbursed.

Food security among Tribal communities has been a persistent issue for decades. This is particularly impactful to children during the summer months when they are more likely to experience the “summer slide” – a period of learning loss and regression due to a lack of sufficient resources. The lack of consistent food deliveries because of USDA’s consolidation will only further steepen learning gaps and compromise children’s education in the fall.

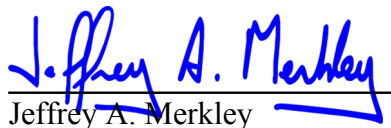
We appreciate that USDA is hosting weekly calls with impacted ITOs, but delays persist and there is no timeline to resolve this issue and fully restore on-time food deliveries. Tribal

¹ Lohnes, Rena; Greene Trotter, Mary (National Association of Food Distribution Programs on Indian Reservations). Letter to Secretary Tom Vilsack. 31 July 2024.

leadership, low-income families, and the community-at-large have been diligently working to fill the gap; however, USDA must take immediate action to restore full operation of the FDPIR program and end the uncertainty looming over countless families. We urge the USDA to engage in emergency tribal consultation and restore food deliveries and operation of the FDPIR program. USDA must promptly establish plans to prevent a situation like this from occurring in the future.

Thank you for your attention on this urgent matter and we look forward to your prompt response to our concerns and the concerns of Tribal communities across the country.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Markwayne Mullin
United States Senator



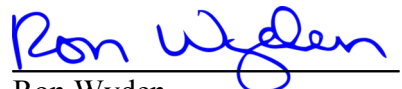
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