

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 8, 2025

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your continued work to address the dire nutritional needs of Native American communities. As you implement the new Child Nutrition Programs Tribal Pilot Projects, which I authored, I respectfully urge you to prioritize tribal input and address the concerns outlined below.

As you know, Native Americans are more likely to experience poverty, food scarcity and nutrition-related health conditions. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one in four Native Americans experiences food insecurity, compared to one in eight Americans overall. Tribal communities often live in areas with low or no access to fresh foods, compared to other racial or ethnic groups. That is why I was pleased to secure the Child Nutrition Programs Tribal Pilot Projects from my bill *H.R. 1589 the Tribal Nutrition Improvement Act* in section 758 of the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024* (P.L. 118-42). In addition, I was pleased to see the recent Request for Information in the Federal Register to inform the agency's development of the pilot program.

My office compiled the following concerns after numerous meetings and discussions with tribal and nutrition-focused stakeholders from the beautiful third congressional district of New Mexico.

- **Grant Complexity and Technical Assistance:** Tribal communities raised concerns about cumbersome federal grant requirements (e.g., inspection, reporting, reimbursement delays, and match funds). For Santa Clara Pueblo, the administrative burden is high, with cooks often doubling as administrators and dealing with extensive paperwork. The chefs in the kitchen should be able to focus on cooking nutritious foods, not performing multiple jobs. As the pilot program begins, these tribes will need access to better technical assistance and support to build infrastructure, capacity, and knowledge to operate these nutrition programs effectively.
- **Cultural Relevance and Food Procurement:** We all know the value of reviving crop cultivation and traditional knowledge of food preparation. Tribes must be able to integrate local, culturally significant foods as they operate child nutrition programs. However, procurement processes and stringent requirements can make it difficult to include cultural and healthier foods. For example, Jemez Pueblo noted that foods like bison, venison, cauliflower soup, and lentil soup should be easier to procure. As the U.S. Department of

Agriculture (USDA) implements the pilot program, it should make sure that tribes can easily procure culturally relevant and locally grown foods.

- **Uncertainty of Continued and Limited Funding:** Tribes and other stakeholders raised concerns about the sustainability of funding, particularly with the introduction of pilot programs. Tribes worry that new funding might replace or reduce existing funding streams, rather than supplement support. In addition, tribes expressed concerns about the grant amounts (i.e., \$10,000–\$100,000), which are insufficient to run school food programs. As I work to encourage Congress to sustain funding for the program, USDA should consider requesting additional funding for this initiative in the President’s next budget request.
- **Operational Costs:** High food and transportation costs, as well as fluctuating food prices, create instability for running these programs. Tribes often end up buying lower-quality food to manage costs, which could negatively affect the nutritional value of meals for children. USDA must consider these challenges and streamline the administrative burdens tribes face.
- **Educational Opportunities:** Many tribal communities are eager to incorporate food sovereignty principles into educational programs. This could mean involving children in the growing, harvesting, and preparation of culturally relevant and nutritious foods. Learning about traditional foods can strengthen Indigenous identity and help children reconnect with their land, community, culture, and language. However, the burden of compliance and strict regulations around food production and safety can make it difficult to engage children in these educational experiences. For example, Santa Clara Pueblo shared the barriers to incorporating children into cultural practices such as animal raising. USDA must provide flexibility for tribes to incorporate children in more onsite nutrition education.

I appreciate USDA’s efforts to combat food insecurity in tribal communities. USDA must prioritize tribal input and address the concerns outlined above in their implementation of the pilot program. As such, I request answers to the following questions about USDA’s plans regarding the pilot program:

- What gaps exist in outreach to tribal communities and what steps will USDA take to close these gaps? Specifically, how will you make sure the Request for Information is sent to tribes and tribal organizations of all different sizes and capacities to make sure the input is reflective of all of Indian Country?
- Given the limited funding and timeframe for pilot project implementation, what specific actions will USDA take to ensure the continued availability of funding for this project?

Thank you for your time and consideration of my request.

Sincerely,



Teresa Leger Fernández
Member of Congress