

Testimony of Mary Greene Trottier
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Introduction

Chairman Cole and members of the Committee, my name is Mary Greene Trottier. I am a member of the Spirit Lake Sioux Nation and President of the National Association of Food Distribution Programs on Indian Reservations (NAFDPIR). I also serve as the Director for my Food Distribution & CSFP program in Fort Totten, North Dakota, where we regularly serve approximately 850 people through FDPIR each month. This program is a critical part of our food security safety net in my community, and I would like to thank the Committee for asking me to testify about this important program that is a vital source of food for our community members.

About FDPIR

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) provides both food assistance and nutrition education to nearly 100,000 people across Indian Country each month. The program employs Tribal and local community members in over 100 Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) who administer the program locally for citizens of 276 different Tribes. While over half of FDPIR participants are working men and women, many of whom have young children at home, FDPIR also services a significant number of elders – nearly half of FDPIR households have members over the age sixty who rely on our program for delivery services.

The ITO program managers who administer this program across Indian Country have been working with their Tribal leadership for decades. This program began in the 1970s. The original purpose of the program has never changed – namely, to improve the quality and nutrition of the products offered in this critical feeding program within Tribal communities.

The program began in the 1970s because the predecessor program to what we now call SNAP was found to be inadequate to reach our communities, many of which still, to this day, suffer from not having SNAP vendors within any reasonable distance to our communities. SNAP is an important tool in the feeding program toolbox, but it is not meaningful if you lack meaningful access to a full-service grocery store or even a convenience store with the full array of food options on its shelves. Because that structural reality still exists in most Tribal communities, having FDPIR is a critical stopgap and lifeline to provide food to those with limited or no access to stores or transportation. The other

important tool that FDPIR incorporates into its delivery is nutrition education opportunities for participants to the extent we are able given our very limited nutrition education funding.

We offer year-round fresh fruits and vegetables in the food package and a growing variety of traditional and culturally appropriate foods, including wild rice, bison, salmon, blue cornmeal, lamb and mutton, catfish and more. These foods are scientifically and nutritionally and culturally sound and offer a deep connection to our Tribal participants with their own cultures. In addition, to the extent we can access these culturally appropriate foods from Tribal food producers, we then can in turn support Tribal food economies and those food producers who also have challenges in accessing remote marketplaces.

Current Problems

I wish I could report today that the problems we are experiencing are over. They are not. I also wish I could report today that the problems we are experiencing were “black swan” events – events no one saw coming that no one could have prevented. For me, both as the director of my Tribe’s program but also as the national president of the NAFDPIR organization, we saw this coming and have talked openly about this possibility for over 10 years, through three administrations.

NAFDPIR started meeting regularly with USDA in Tribal consultation since the last two years of the Obama administration. Secretary Vilsack and his team were instrumental in putting those consultation meetings on the schedule and were committed to launching those meetings. Prior to his administration, those meetings – in officially recognized consultation – were non-existent. The only way we got changes in the FDPIR program were to continually bring up problems and never give up in discussion of the path forward to meaningful changes.

To their credit multiple presidents have kept the conversations going. In fact, we have an emergency consultation meeting about the issues we are talking with you about today – it is scheduled for tomorrow. I will be there.

What brings us here today is a set of events that the NAFDPIR organization warned about all the way back in the Obama years – and throughout the Trump years – and recently. We requested a “contingency plan” over 10 years ago. Our request for a contingency plan was grounded in our own experience that periodically this program suffers from uneven delivery systems, transmittal of expired foods, lack of funding necessary to improve our Tribal warehouses, lack of funding to bring new FDPIR program sites into the program, and lack of appropriate levels of funding to keep addressing the amount and types of foods our program participants need.

I am not going to sit here and tell you that money will solve all these problems or that money will fix the current problem we have before us. But I will tell you that money is the chronic problem that faces this program and until we are honest about that and truly work

together to improve and properly resource FDPIR, we will likely keep running into these types of problems.

This situation, in my humble opinion, was caused by a series of events that could have been avoided. Let me explain why I say that:

- The **FDPIR program funding levels**, adjusted for inflation, have been flat since the 1970s. Everyone in this room knows that the cost of food has changed substantially since the 1970s.
 - We should all think about that situation long and hard – a dozen eggs in 1970 cost \$.60 vs. \$4.00+ in 2024.
 - A can of soup cost \$.12; in 2024 it can cost almost \$2.00
 - And on and on....
 - The average cost of a box of food for FDPIR program participants in 2024 hovers around \$70.00...which is the equivalent of 35 cans of soup....monthly.
 - Nobody can feed their families for that much. It is impossible.
 - Food inflation is real.
 - Yet – FDPIR program managers and the participants they serve, make it work – month after month and year after year.
- We have program sites that have been waiting to become sites for years and years, but we can't bring them on as **new sites** – even though the people need access to the foods – because there isn't enough money to bring the sites on.
- The NAFDPIR program managers, from day one of our Tribal consultation events with USDA, have asked FNS for a **contingency plan** to have on the shelves that would “kick in” the minute we experienced shortages or disasters, or some other emergencies calling for modifications in delivery, transportation, food purchases, or program participation levels. We have never been granted a contingency plan. This current situation brings home to me that we need a contingency plan. God help us if we ever need to use it – but at least we (all of us) would have it in place as a starting point to make sure our people are fed.
- The **current problem** – we saw it coming
 - As early as February or May of 2024, NAFDPIR program managers began seeing problems in delivery of food. We were alerted by Paris Brothers and we, in turn, alerted the FNS.
 - We were told to not order food in April. We didn't. It didn't matter. We still had problems in the delivery system.
 - Paris Brothers has been as transparent as we could hope for in alerting the program sites to the problems they were seeing – but we have no idea what FNS did with that information. All we know is that we passed that information on to our front-line FNS program people.
 - Somewhere along the way, the problems deepened. And now here we are. What I can tell you is that I do not believe that Secretary Vilsack knew of this problem until late June or even early July – but by then we had at least 4-5 months of problems that were already happening. My question is this: why

anyone down the chain at FNS didn't alert the Secretary as to what was happening. We believe at NAFDPIR that if the Secretary and his immediate team knew, he would have done something because the minute we found out that he was aware of the problem, we saw him immediately jump into the middle and start offering solutions.

- At one point, we took pictures of totally empty shelves in several of our FDPIR program sites – no meat, no other protein, no grains, no fish, no bison, no rice, no canned goods.
- The entire system fell apart.
- While I am sure there is enough **blame to go around** for everyone to take a piece of the blame...what I also know is that won't help the participants in my community that I must look in the eye and tell them they will just have to wait a bit more for food.
- What I also know is that we still have problems – there are **still gaps in deliveries** and we still have program sites that are without adequate food on their shelves. After the Secretary became aware and options were identified for us to “fill the gaps” we still have gaps, and I think it will likely take months to get us all fully back on track and back to “normal”.

Questions remain

I'm not here today to rehash the problems that led us to where we are today – or to play a blame game with anyone. I think there is enough blame to go around for everyone. What I am here today to ask you to do is to look long and hard at this program and ask yourselves a few questions:

- Why is FDPIR at flat funding levels and has been for decades?
- Why are we having program sites we cannot bring on because there isn't enough money to bring them on? These are people – our elders and our families and children - who need to be fed in some of the most remote locations in the country.
- Why is there no contingency plan in place for food shortages not caused by FDPIR program sites or Tribes or the participants themselves? When can NAFDPIR expect to have the first meeting with FNS to start crafting a contingency plan, so we never have to be here again?
 - We didn't cause this problem we are here discussing today – but the contingency plan we asked for over 10 years ago would have allowed all of us here today to be more prepared to deal with this emergency.
- Why is there no plan to make sure that FDPIR has full visibility all the way into the Secretary's office so that never again do we get buried under other programs when we are unique among all feeding programs?
- Can I rely on everyone in this room to help NAFDPIR get the program changes in place we have been asking for, for over a decade - - like being able to use FDPIR and SNAP simultaneously? Like being able to use our warehouses to house other donated foods or foods from our communities so that we can have dual purpose

locations to stage food – we have asked for that for over 10 years and have yet to have it approved?

- Can someone help me understand why Tribal governments are not listed among the eligible TEFAP program sites? States are and food banks are, but Tribal governments are not. That is wrong. That needs to be fixed.

I'm not here today to talk about 638. What my personal opinions are about 638 are mine. I cannot speak to what other FDPIR program sites feel about 638. I do know one thing. That CBO – in a process that I don't truly understand – has determined that the # of participants in FDPIR will go down to 40,000 and the cost of food will go dramatically up if Congress moves to 638 of FDPIR. I can tell you that any move that diminishes the # of people served (when we already know that we don't even serve the full number of people who need our program) or that drives up the cost of food (when we already know that food costs too much), needs a lot more examination into the money. Or we will be right back here again.

My 2021 Testimony

Not too long ago – in 2021 – I was here testifying about the pandemic impacts on FDPIR. I talked at length about supply chains and the overall US food system and how FDPIR felt those impacts as well. During the pandemic we saw rising numbers of participants and related strains on inventory. The food deliveries impacted canned goods, proteins, and fresh produce. Delivery companies could no longer fill trucks or justify expenses to go to our sites.

During the pandemic, USDA moved into a Farmers to Families Food Box program and FDPIR recognized that program right away - - why? Because NAFDPIR had been asking for that type of program for years.

I was able to remind everyone during that testimony that to move to a **disbursed warehouse and delivery system** - - with multiple warehouses regionally located around the country in closer proximity to our Tribal participants and our remote locations - - was a win for the federal government (lowering the cost of delivery) while also being a win for our participants. Food would travel shorter distances, we could augment food deliveries with locally purchased food product, we could simultaneously open new markets for Native producers, and food would arrive in fresher condition and not expired. Why can't we talk about that now?

Conclusion

Let me again remind everyone here.

Our program sites are among the most remote sites in the United States. We feed some of the most vulnerable people in the United States who have, in most cases, extreme limitations on their ability to access food.

NAFDPIR predicted that at some point we would find ourselves here – experiencing food shortages. We never wanted it to happen – but we also knew that our supply chains and our communities we feed are impoverished and remote.

Let us all decide here today that we will work together to solve these problems – right the ship – and fix the long-standing concerns that NAFDPIR has warned FNS of for years and years.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing me to testify today. I am happy to take any questions you might have.