Highlights of GAO-21-353, a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions in the U.S. food supply chain and contributed to a national hunger crisis. In response, USDA implemented the Food Box Program in May 2020. USDA directed a total of \$6 billion in congressional appropriations to the program, which lasted 1 year. The program included organizations such as food banks, which received food boxes; contractors that purchased and delivered the food; and food producers, such as farmers and ranchers.

The CARES Act contained a provision for GAO to conduct monitoring and oversight of the use of funds related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report examines the extent to which USDA collected and analyzed data on participants in the program, including data necessary to assess performance in meeting program goals.

GAO analyzed information from USDA's website, database, and departmental guidance. GAO also compared USDA's efforts to collect and analyze data on the program against federal guidance, USDA's strategic plan, and documents that include lessons learned. GAO also interviewed USDA officials.

### **What GAO Recommends**

GAO recommends that USDA apply the lesson learned from the Food Box Program regarding collecting and analyzing data to assess program goals to current and future emergency food assistance programs. USDA agreed with the recommendation.

View GAO-21-353. For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morriss@gao.gov.

#### September 2021

## **USDA FOOD BOX PROGRAM**

# **Key Information and Opportunities to Better Assess Performance**

#### What GAO Found

Through contractors, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farmers to Families Food Box Program purchased fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, and meat products from producers and delivered them to recipient organizations, such as food banks. USDA's goals for the program included providing food to those in need, helping contractors retain jobs, and supporting producers. USDA collected large amounts of data and analyzed various data on deliveries to recipient organizations—that is, total number of food boxes delivered to each state and per million people in each state—and determined that the program met its goal of providing food to those in need. GAO further analyzed USDA's data and found that 243 contractors delivered more than 176 million food boxes to recipient organizations across the U.S. and territories by the end of the program (see figure). GAO's analysis also found that food boxes were delivered to nearly 78 percent of all U.S. counties, including to more than 89 percent of counties where at least 20 percent of the population lives in poverty.

# Number of Food Boxes Contractors Delivered to Recipient Organizations for the Food Box Program



Sources: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-21-353

USDA could not analyze the program's performance in meeting its other two goals: (1) helping contractors (i.e., distributors of goods) retain jobs and (2) helping food producers faced with declining demand—because USDA did not systematically collect the necessary data. For example, USDA did not collect data on (1) the number of jobs contractors might have lost but ultimately retained as a result of participating in the program and (2) the number, category, and size of participating producers or whether the pandemic had reduced demand for or sales of the type of product the producer provided for the program.

USDA officials acknowledged that a key lesson learned during the implementation of the Food Box Program was the need to collect and analyze such data but that the department did not have time to do so. Federal guidance expresses the importance of balancing speed with transparency, and states that federal managers should use data and evidence to achieve program goals. By applying this lesson learned to current and future emergency food assistance programs, USDA would have greater assurance that it can assess program effectiveness even when it must move quickly in implementing a program.

United States Government Accountability Office