

Championing Culturally Attuned Food Pantries and Diversified Food Sourcing

Testimony to the USDA Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers

My name is Emily Rios and I am the Managing Director of Community Services at Asian Americans for Equality, also known as AAFE. AAFE is a fifty-year-old community development organization based in NYC that empowers underserved communities through affordable housing development, social services, small business services, homebuyer assistance, and mutual aid—including food pantries.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to be here today in beautiful Tarrytown, and to share with you our experiences as a food pantry provider forging ties with locally based minority farmers.

First, we'd like to express our gratitude for the USDA's impactful support of our food access efforts—through which we feed over 5,300 households each year, totaling over 140,000 pounds of food distributed. Our multilingual food pantries in Chinatown, the Lower East Side, and East Harlem provide culturally attuned produce to AAPI older adults—familiar foods that they know how to cook and enjoy eating. We pioneered our food pantries during the pandemic to combat rampant food insecurity in the communities we call home, especially among older adults. In NYC, 42% of AAPI seniors are poor or low-income, making them the city's poorest seniors. And while food pantries are available, they often fail to provide produce that are culturally relevant to their recipients, leading to severe food waste.

This is where we come in. Working with local Asian produce providers, we've initiated a new model of food pantries that represents the people they serve while prioritizing locally sourced produce and environmental sustainability. Working with the USDA, we've been able to connect with minority farmers and enhance our culturally attuned produce offerings. And in turn, we've been able to connect on a profound level with our clients, simultaneously building community resilience while promoting food access.

Accessing this produce, however, has been an ongoing challenge—a need that we'd like to shine light on and work with you to address. The USDA's support of our efforts has been an incredible step toward enriching the food pantries that thousands rely on each month. Let's sustain this progress towards greater accessibility to continue combating food insecurity. The expansion and variation of funding streams for individual community-based organizations with unique roots in underserved communities will crucially amplify the reach of culturally sensitive food pantry efforts. And upstream, the diversification of crop variety to include produce relevant to different cultures will broaden options for providers serving similarly diverse populations.

Together, we can ensure that no underserved families go hungry, and that they feel truly connected to the foods they have access to—providing security and a sense of community essential to thriving in the long-term. Thank you, everyone, for all your efforts in bringing this vision to reality.