

**HUNGER AMONG VETERANS AND
SERVICEMEMBERS: UNDERSTANDING THE
PROBLEM AND EVALUATING SOLUTIONS**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NUTRITION, OVERSIGHT, AND
DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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HUNGER AMONG VETERANS AND SERVICEMEMBERS: UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM AND EVALUATING SOLUTIONS

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NUTRITION, OVERSIGHT, AND DEPARTMENT
OPERATIONS,
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 12:00 p.m., via Zoom, Hon. Jahana Hayes [Chairwoman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Members present: Representatives Hayes, McGovern, Adams, Rush, Sablan, Carbajal, Lawson, Kuster, Panetta, Bishop, Bacon, DesJarlais, Baird, Jacobs, Cammack, and Letlow.

Staff present: Lyron Blum-Evitts, Chu-Yuan Hwang, Katherine Stewart, Caleb Crosswhite, Jennifer Tiller, Erin Wilson, and Dana Sandman.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JAHANA HAYES, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM CONNECTICUT

The CHAIRWOMAN. This hearing of the Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations entitled, *Hunger Among Veterans and Servicemembers: Understanding the Problem and Evaluating Solutions*, will come to order.

Welcome, and thank you to everyone for joining this hearing today.

After brief opening remarks, Members will receive testimony from our witnesses today, and then the hearing will be open to questions.

Members will be recognized in order of seniority, alternating between Majority and Minority Members and in order of arrival for those Members who have joined us after the hearing was called to order.

When you are recognized, you will be asked to unmute your microphone and will have 5 minutes to ask your questions or make a comment.

If you are not speaking, I ask that you remain muted in order to minimize background noise.

In order to get as many questions as possible, the timer will stay consistently visible on your screen.

In consultation with the Ranking Member and pursuant to Rule XI(e), I want to make Members of the Subcommittee aware that other Members of the full Committee may join us today.

I will now begin with my opening statement.

Thank you all for joining me today for this very important hearing which will help our Subcommittee better understand the food security challenges that our nation's veterans and servicemembers face. This conversation is especially significant, given that, tomorrow, we observe Veterans Day, a day for us to honor those who serve and their willingness to protect our nation.

I hope this hearing helps to highlight the reality that too many veterans face when their service has ended. Food insecurity is disturbingly rampant among our veteran population. On average, about 1.2 million households with veterans participate in SNAP each year. Tragically, studies estimate that a substantial portion of eligible veterans, as high as 60 percent, do not participate in the program.

Food insecurity particularly impacts veterans who have recently left service, had lower final pay grades, or live in rural or low-income areas that have limited access to food. Their hunger can also be exacerbated by mental and physical health challenges, including service-related disabilities. It is unacceptable that in America today we cannot ensure that veterans do not struggle with food insecurity after the completion of their service.

This problem does not spare our Active Duty servicemembers either, who, despite working every day to serve this country, face the same challenges with food insecurity. According to USDA, 22,000 SNAP households included servicemembers in 2019, and it is likely that that number is only the tip of the iceberg, as many military families face barriers to accessing SNAP.

Servicemembers and veterans who face different barriers and situations—I am sorry. Servicemembers and veterans face different barriers and situations that can cause or worsen food insecurity. Some of these barriers are common among food-insecure Americans, while others are unique and may require targeted solutions.

No person should ever go hungry in America. However, it is especially galling to see those who have dedicated their lives to serving our nation struggle to put food on the table.

Today is not a hearing to review or investigate any particular bill or piece of legislation. But, rather, we will gather information from the witnesses in our efforts to search for solutions to ensure no veteran or servicemember feels the sting of hunger.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our veterans and servicemembers. Please let me extend a heartfelt thank you and the gratitude of myself, and I am sure every Member of this Subcommittee, today and every day for all you have done.

We look forward to hearing from each of you and are committed to working to address this important issue.

[The prepared statement of Mrs. Hayes follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. JAHANA HAYES, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS
FROM CONNECTICUT

Thank you all again for joining me today for this important hearing, which will help our Subcommittee better understand the food security challenges that our nation's veterans and servicemembers face.

This conversation is especially significant given that tomorrow we observe Veterans Day, a day for us to honor those who have served for their willingness to protect our nation.

I hope this hearing helps to highlight the moral dissonance between rhetoric about honoring veterans, and the reality far too many face when their service has ended. Food insecurity is disturbingly rampant among our veteran population. On average, about 1.2 million households with veterans participate in SNAP each year. Tragically, studies estimate that a substantial proportion of eligible veterans—as high as sixty percent—do not participate in the program.

Food insecurity particularly impacts veterans who have recently left service, had lower final paygrades, or live in rural or low-income areas that have limited access to food. Their hunger can also be exacerbated by mental and physical health challenges, including service-related or exacerbated disabilities. It is unacceptable that in America today—a country that spends \$725 billion on national defense—we cannot ensure veterans do not struggle with food insecurity after their service.

Make no mistake—this problem does not spare our active duty servicemembers, who, despite working every day to serve our country, are too often unsure of where their next meal will come from. According to USDA, 22,000 SNAP households included servicemembers in 2019. And it is likely that that is only the tip of the iceberg, as many military families face barriers to accessing SNAP.

Servicemembers and veterans, while related populations, face different barriers and situations that can cause or exacerbate food insecurity. Some of these barriers are common among food-insecure Americans, while others are unique and may require targeted solutions.

No person should ever go hungry in America. However, it is especially galling to see those who have dedicated their lives to serving our nation be left behind as they struggle to put food on the table. Today, we will search for solutions to ensure no veteran or servicemember feels abandoned by the country they served when they are in a time of need. To all our brave veterans and servicemembers, please let me extend thanks for your service from every Member of this Subcommittee, today and every day.

We look forward to hearing more from each of you today and we are committed to working to address this important issue.

The CHAIRWOMAN. I would now like to welcome the distinguished Ranking Member, the gentleman from Nebraska, Mr. Bacon, for any opening remarks he would like to give.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DON BACON, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM NEBRASKA**

Mr. BACON. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. I will keep my comments fairly short.

I echo your comments about Veterans Day. I thank all our veterans who are listening, and I am one myself. It is about six percent of our population, our veteran community. And there are always going to be problems in the world. We need people to serve to defend this great country, and we thank those who have. I appreciate that.

And referencing one of the Chairwoman's comments, I am also concerned we have veterans come out and are having a hard time making ends meet. I think we should be trying to do everything we can to help transition these folks with trades, with such a shortage of trade programs right now, whether it is truck drivers, welders, carpenters, there are opportunities to put our veterans into these really great-paying jobs. And so I support a lot of programs to help with making that connection.

And when it comes to our servicemen and -women who may be needing SNAP, I really would like to hear from the military itself: is this really a problem? We could have one of our chief master sergeants of the Air Force or the equivalent in the Army or Navy just to hear from them, what are they hearing with their E-1s, E-2s, and E-3s in this area? Or we could have someone from the personnel like the A1s or the J1 from the Joint Staff, just to give us the ground-level truth of what the military is seeing here, because

if this is a more rampant problem, well, the military needs to address it.

And in the HASC, (House Armed Services Committee), we can adjust pay levels to make this right. And there has been some discussion about doing that, but this is really an area where the HASC and the Military Personnel Subcommittee probably needs to be boring into get the ground truth and then find solutions within the military to solve.

So, with that, I will yield back. I look forward to hearing what our panelists are saying.

By the way, I did try to invite someone from DOD here, and they did not take the invite, but I think it is important to get their perspective on this.

So, with that, I yield back, and I thank you, Madam Chairwoman, for the opportunity.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you. Thank you, Ranking Member.

And we will continue to look for solutions to get the information that you are seeking. I do believe that DOD has a policy that they don't testify on mixed panels, so we will collect information from this group and see what we can do moving forward.

I am not sure if the Chairman or the Ranking Member are here and would like to offer any opening statements. I don't see either Chairman Scott or Mr. Thompson, so I will move on.

The chair would request that other Members submit their opening statements for the record so witnesses may begin their testimony and to ensure that there is ample time for questions.

Without objection, the chair is authorized at any time to declare the Subcommittee in recess, subject to the call of the chair.

And now I will introduce the witnesses.

I am pleased to welcome such a distinguished panel of witnesses to our hearing today. Our witnesses bring to our hearing a wide variety of experience and expertise, and I thank you all for joining us.

Our first witness today is Mrs. Mia Hubbard, who is the Vice President of Programs for MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger. She provides leadership for MAZON's advocacy, grantmaking, and strategic program efforts, and has been with the organization since 1993.

Our next witness is Ms. Denise Hollywood, the Chief Community and Program Officer for Blue Star Families, a nonprofit that serves military families. In her role, Ms. Hollywood manages membership and volunteer programs, program design and delivery, policy decision and evaluation, and more. She received her Air Force commission from Cornell University and proudly served for 20 years.

Our third witness is Dr. Nipa Kamdar, a nurse practitioner and nurse scientist, who has published several peer-reviewed studies on food insecurity affecting veterans. She is employed by the Veteran Health Administration and holds a faculty appointment at Baylor College of Medicine but is testifying today as a private citizen.

I hope I said your name right.

Our final witness today is Mr. Tim Keefe. He is a veteran who served in the United States Navy. After being injured at work and completing all measures included in the workers compensation process, Mr. Keefe found himself unable to return to work and fell

on hard times. SNAP has served as a lifeline for him, as it does for many other veterans in similar situations.

Welcome to all of our witnesses.

We will now proceed to hearing your testimony. You will each have 5 minutes. The timer should be visible on your screen and will count down to zero, at which point your time has expired.

Mrs. Hubbard, please begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF MIA HUBBARD, VICE PRESIDENT OF PROGRAMS, MAZON: A JEWISH RESPONSE TO HUNGER, LOS ANGELES, CA

Mrs. HUBBARD. Well, thank you, Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and the distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today representing MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger.

Let us step back for just a moment and reflect on how absurd it is that we actually even need to discuss this problem, one that should never have been allowed to happen in the first place, let alone to persist with little to no attention or action to address it. There is simply no reason that military families and veterans should experience the painful reality of hunger.

As I will share with you, there are several straightforward actions that Congress, the Administration, and Federal agencies can take to address this preventable problem.

MAZON's work is grounded in Jewish values: to pursue justice and to respect the inherent dignity of every person. We are guided by a central belief: Regardless of a person's circumstance, no one deserves to go hungry.

We have made it a priority to spotlight issues of the populations where large organizations and the government have yet to turn their focus. For nearly a decade, we have diligently led the national efforts to call attention to and address military and veteran food insecurity.

In 2012, when we first became aware of the alarming number of military families struggling with food insecurity, we made it a priority to understand the issue and explore policy solutions. We thought it would be a quick fix, but here we are, nearly a decade later, facing a crisis.

Time and again, my colleagues and I have been criticized, dismissed, ignored for raising this issue, both by policymakers and, frankly, by some in the anti-hunger community. We recognize this is an issue that is often hidden, which is understandable since struggling military and veteran families do not want to call attention to their situation. But it is a crisis nevertheless, and we, therefore, call on you to immediately advance policy solutions.

Your leadership and that of the Administration and agency officials is urgently needed to chart a different course. Military and veteran families have been allowed to go hungry on your watch, and your inaction has allowed this situation to persist for years and to grow worse over the course of the pandemic, which has contributed to the worsening of diet-related diseases, loss in productivity, and even spikes in suicide rates.

While this hearing and my testimony will address the issue of food insecurity for both currently serving military and veteran fam-

ilies, we must be clear that these are two different populations with distinct challenges, needs, and opportunities for policy change, so my proposals are twofold.

For military families, Congress and the Administration must support and prioritize inclusion of a full military family basic needs allowance provision in the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 4350).

In 2019, following years of responding to objection about military families' access to SNAP, my colleague, Josh Protas, MAZON's VP of Public Policy, devised and created this proposal to address those objections, and it has worked. The proposal now has broad bipartisan support in both the House and Senate, as well as support from countless military service and anti-hunger organizations across the country. We just need your help to get it across the finish line.

In addition, the Administration must take executive action to ensure that servicemembers' basic allowance for housing does not count as income in determining eligibility for Federal food programs.

Congress must study and document, in collaboration with the Administration, the full scope of military hunger and publish comprehensive data. And Congress should reexamine military pay levels, acknowledging that the composition and needs of America's military has changed significantly over time and that changes to pay and benefits have not responded adequately.

For veterans, Congress must protect and improve SNAP and encourage the VA to connect veterans to this essential program. Success should not be measured by how many food pantries operate at VA centers; but, rather, how many food pantries are unnecessary because veterans are getting the access to SNAP.

We should integrate information about Federal food programs into the Transition Assistance Program and the new Solid Start veteran suicide prevention program.

And, finally, we should listen to the voices of veteran and military families. Real stories from people like our witness who we will hear from today, Tim Keefe, are essential to understanding the needs and barriers so that we can craft the right solutions.

For MAZON, this is a matter of mission readiness, troop retention, and future recruitment. And, as policymakers, your role is essential and urgent.

We welcome the opportunity to work with you on advancing these recommendations, and I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mrs. Hubbard follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MIA HUBBARD, VICE PRESIDENT OF PROGRAMS, MAZON:
A JEWISH RESPONSE TO HUNGER, LOS ANGELES, CA

Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today representing MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger at this hearing on the topic of hunger among veteran and military families. Let's take a step back for just a moment and reflect on how absurd it is that we need to discuss this problem—one that should never have been allowed to happen in the first place, let alone to persist for many years with little to no attention or action to address it by our military leaders and public officials. *There is simply no reason that military families and veterans should experience the painful reality of hunger.* As I will share with you, there are

several simple, straightforward actions that Congress, the Administration, and Federal agencies can take to make a meaningful difference in addressing this preventable problem.

Fundamental to all of these actions is the basic recognition of the hardships that far too many of our military and veteran families must endure. MAZON has diligently led the national efforts to call attention to and address military and veteran and food insecurity for nearly a decade. During this time, there has been far too little acknowledgment, analysis, and action in response to these problems. More frequently, leaders look the other way, failing to even dignify the suffering of those who bravely serve our country because the reality of this problem is inconvenient, uncomfortable, and embarrassing to our nation. Even worse are attempts to blame the problem on the veteran and military families who struggle with food insecurity. Members of Congress, Committee staff, and Pentagon leaders have repeatedly told MAZON to stop pushing this issue because, as they claimed to us, “this is just an issue of personal financial mismanagement.” Or: “People are in this situation because they don’t know how to budget their money and make foolish purchases that put them in financial trouble.” Enough is enough! We need to stop the wrongheaded accusations, harmful myths, and misinformation that pervade much of the public discourse about safety net programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the specific reality of food insecurity for far too many of our veteran and military families.

Your leadership—and that of the Administration and agency officials—is urgently needed to chart a different course, one that starts with acknowledging this problem and owning that this is *your responsibility*. ***Military and veteran families have been allowed to go hungry on your watch.*** Your inaction has allowed this situation to persist for years and to grow worse over the course of the pandemic.

So, I urge you: make a change and muster the political will to act to end this solvable and unfortunate problem. Drop the empty platitudes of how much you love the troops. Instead, back up the rhetoric and prioritize support for those who bravely serve or have served and yet struggle amidst hardship. Don’t wrap yourselves in the American flag to proclaim your patriotism and thank veteran and military families for their service if you won’t have their backs in a time of real need.

In *Deuteronomy* 15:7–8 we are commanded, echoing a directive and basic value that is shared across all faith traditions:

“If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the L-rd your G-d is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.”

All of the witnesses here today are imploring you to look, to acknowledge that there are needy veteran and military families among us, and to act. And we are reminding you, as leaders of our country, on behalf of all of us, as a fulfillment of our collective responsibility to care for one another, to generously open your hearts, extend your hand, and provide for what is badly needed by our struggling military and veteran families.

Background

Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart the responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst, without judgement or precondition. For over 36 years, MAZON has fought to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds, and for nearly 10 years, we have prioritized addressing the long-overlooked issue of food insecurity among military and veteran families. MAZON’s groundbreaking project, *This is Hunger*, centered around the stories of real people who have struggled with hunger also includes powerful accounts from veteran and military families who faced food insecurity; you can find some of these stories included in the addendum at the end of this testimony.

This is not MAZON’s first time appearing before Congress on this topic. Nearly 6 years ago, Abby J. Leibman, MAZON’s President and CEO, spoke as a witness before the House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition to discuss the problem and propose solutions to military and veteran hunger.¹ In 2015, MAZON sponsored the first-ever Congressional briefing on the issue of veteran food insecurity. Also in 2015, I had the opportunity to testify about military and veteran

¹U.S. House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, Testimony of Abby J. Leibman, Jan. 2016, https://republicans-agriculture.house.gov/uploadedfiles/ajl_final.pdf.

hunger before the National Commission on Hunger established by Congress.² In January 2018, MAZON coordinated and moderated a Congressional briefing, “Veterans in the Farm Bill.”³ In 2020, Josh Protas, MAZON’s Vice President of Public Policy testified before the House Veterans Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity about veteran hunger.⁴ Earlier this year, Ms. Leibman participated in a Congressional roundtable hosted by the House Rules Committee entitled “Examining the Hunger Crisis Among Veterans and Military Families.”⁵ Each of these occasions shined a more prominent spotlight on these long-ignored issues and resulted in incrementally positive steps, including Federal agencies collecting new data about and addressing veteran and military food insecurity.

The world has changed so much since MAZON first brought Congressional and public attention to these issues nearly 10 years ago, but our institutions have moved too slowly and there has been too little progress during the intervening time to adequately address military and veteran hunger. In some ways, the problems have grown worse; veteran and military families were severely impacted by COVID-19 and the resulting economic downturn. Food insecurity exacerbated in these populations during this time, contributing to the worsening of diet-related chronic disease, lost productivity, and even spikes in suicide rates.

Some positive steps, through both programmatic and policy change, have helped. Most notably, the recent adoption of the Hunger Vital Signs screening tool at all VA outpatient facilities as well as increases to SNAP benefits through the temporary boost included in COVID-19 relief legislation and the recent update to the Thrifty Food Plan by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have been very helpful.

However, while most of the suggestions and recommendations made by MAZON in recent years continue to be relevant, and often urgent, they remain unfulfilled.

As such, my statement today includes citations and links to reports and testimonies offered by MAZON’s leadership at previous Congressional hearings exploring the topics of food insecurity among veteran and military families. By calling renewed attention to these resources, which include extensive information, historical context, and details about the challenges and opportunities, MAZON hopes to highlight our previous policy and programmatic recommendations and urge you to carefully consider them as the foundation of a more comprehensive approach to ending military and veteran hunger.

While this hearing and my testimony address the issue of food insecurity for both currently serving military and veteran families, we must be clear that military families and veteran families are different populations, each with distinct challenges, needs, and opportunities for policy change. There are some overlapping areas of concern around the transition period, but generally, the circumstances and need for solutions look different for each population. In addition, this testimony does not address all military populations facing food insecurity, particularly among the National Guard and Reserve components, and these issues warrant additional attention and investigation. Further, because of the way that Congress handles authorizations and appropriations for the U.S. Coast Guard, separate legislative actions are needed to address the challenges of food insecurity among Coast Guard families. This problem received media coverage during the last Federal Government shutdown, when food pantries quickly popped up at numerous installations to support Coast Guardsmen and Guardswomen who missed their first paychecks and found it difficult to make ends meet and feed their families.

Hunger Among Currently-Serving Military Families

Across America, food banks have experienced unprecedented demand. Families struggling to put food on the table during the COVID-19 pandemic turned to food pantries, charities, and Federal benefits as they endured the painful reality of hunger. Among those who sought—and continue to seek—help are military families unsure from where their next meal will come. Servicemembers who enlisted to fight

²National Commission on Hunger, *Testimony of Mia Hubbard* (<https://mazon.org/wp-admin/upload.php?item=2128>), June 2015.

³“Bipartisan Group of Representatives Holds Congressional Briefing on Veterans in the Farm Bill.” U.S. Representative Chellie Pingree, 19 Jan. 2018, <https://pingree.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=174>.

⁴U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, *Testimony of Josh Protas*, Jan. 2020, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20200109/110350/HHRG-116-VR10-Wstate-ProtasJ-20200109.pdf>.

⁵U.S. House Committee on Rules, *Testimony of Abby J. Leibman*, May 2021, <https://mazon.org/wp-content/uploads/MAZON-Written-Testimony-for-5.27.21-House-Rules-Cte-Roundtable.pdf>.

for our country already sacrifice so much and are struggling to feed themselves and their families.

This is not a new problem. Sadly, even before the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic crisis, military families faced food insecurity. These currently-serving members of the Armed Forces—often junior enlisted servicemembers (typically enlisted ranks E-1 through E-4) with multiple dependents—have turned in desperation to emergency assistance for years, surviving with the help of the food pantries that operate on or near every military installation in the United States. At Camp Pendleton alone, there are four food pantries serving the base community, each one routinely assisting hundreds of military families each month. Due to the lack of transparency from the Department of Defense (DOD) in collecting data on food insecurity among servicemembers and their families and its reluctance to publicize any information they do have, the true scale of this crisis is unknown. However, the data that are publicly available from both government and military interest group surveys indicate that the scope of the crisis is broad and affects military families across the country.⁶ This matches anecdotal accounts reporting increases in the number of military families seeking assistance to put food on the table.

Key findings from MAZON’s extensive work on this issue are highlighted in our report, “Hungry in the Military: Food Insecurity Among Military Families in the U.S.,” published in April 2021.⁷ They include:

- Addressing military hunger is a matter of readiness, retention, and recruitment.
- Food insecurity among military families disproportionately impacts military families of color and failure to address it adds to the challenges around racial equity in the military and the lack of diversity among officer and leadership ranks.
- There is a correlation between food insecurity and negative mental health outcomes, including suicide; responding to military food insecurity is a critical action as part of the effort to address the crisis of increasing rates of military suicide.
- At least part of this problem stems from an unintended barrier to assistance for struggling military families by counting a servicemember’s Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as income in determining eligibility for Federal nutrition programs like SNAP.
- Junior-enlisted members are more diverse in race, ethnicity, and gender than higher military ranks. They also support families at much higher rates than previous cohorts of junior-enlisted servicemembers. The DOD has not adequately adjusted the base salary to reflect the reality of our modern military force.
- The circumstances that give rise to food insecurity among military families are complex, yet simplistic responses based on unfounded stereotypes are often pursued in lieu of more meaningful solutions.
- In the last year, COVID-19 exacerbated the unique financial challenges of military families, such as high rates of spousal unemployment, lack of access to affordable childcare, and costs associated with frequent relocations.

Hunger Among Veteran Families

MAZON was proud to recently sign a Memorandum of Agreement with the Veterans Health Administration to work collaboratively to address veteran food insecurity. While we are excited about this opportunity to provide input and collaborate on innovative program ideas and solutions, the limited commitments to date by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and slow pace of response to a preventable crisis with multiple negative consequences is deeply distressing. Additionally, the sporadic oversight by Congress combined with a lack of urgency to hold Federal agencies accountable to a proactive, robust, and measurable solution to end veteran food insecurity must be rectified. There is great bipartisan concern expressed in Congress about veteran food insecurity, but the commitment to mandate and provide funding for proven solutions has unfortunately not matched the lofty rhetoric.

Recent research emphasizes the urgent need for more proactive responses to prevent and address veteran food insecurity and highlights particular challenges.

⁶McFadden, Cynthia, *et al.* “Why Are Many of America’s Military Families Going Hungry?” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 14 July 2019, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/why-are-many-america-s-military-families-going-hungry-n1028886>.

⁷Leibman, Abby J., and Josh Protas. “Hungry in the Military: Food Insecurity Among Military Families in the U.S.” MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, Apr. 2021, <https://mazon.org/wp-content/uploads/MAZON-Military-Hunger-Report-April-2021.pdf>.

- Calling attention to the significant SNAP participation gap among veteran households, a recent study noted that among food-insecure veterans, less than $\frac{1}{3}$ were in households receiving SNAP; among veterans in households with incomes below the poverty threshold, only about four in ten were SNAP-recipient households.⁸
- Between 2005 and 2019, [working-age] veterans were predicted to be 7.4 percent more likely to live in a food-insecure household than nonveterans. The elevated risk is concentrated among veterans whose most recent period of military service was during the pre-9/11 Gulf War era (August 1990 to August 2001) and the interwar period between May 1975 and July 1990.⁹
- A new study found that veterans with PTSD and/or a history of military sexual trauma are at significantly increased risk for food insecurity. Of women veterans who were food-insecure, nearly half (48.9%) had a history of military sexual trauma.¹⁰

It is time to recalibrate the Federal Government’s goals and priorities to provide a comprehensive response to veteran food insecurity. The VA’s news and partnership email updates are well-intentioned, but the focus is too often on supplemental help, like veteran food distributions or food pantries organized by VA facilities and community partners, rather than connecting veterans with needed, long-term government support. The implicit abdication of responsibility by the government to the charitable sector is unsustainable and dangerous as it shifts attention away from the need to strengthen and improve access to SNAP and other Federal programs that serve as the most effective, frontline response to veteran food insecurity.

Success should be measured *not* by how many food pantries operate at VA centers, but rather by how many food pantries become unnecessary due to veteran households receiving the support they need and are entitled to through programs like SNAP.

In addition, we are particularly concerned about the impacts of racial injustice on veterans and the ongoing tragedy of heightened suicide rates among veterans. While there is growing public awareness and concern about both, few viable policy proposals exist to address either. The disproportionate impact of food insecurity on households with veterans of color highlight racial inequities that are perpetuated through public policies and program implementation. Closing the SNAP participation gap for veterans and improving the program to better reach and serve food-insecure veterans of color not only signals a commitment to meaningful efforts to address racial justice—it concretely contributes to efforts to achieve greater racial equity in Federal policy.

As noted by Dr. Thomas O’Toole during his testimony before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity on January 9, 2020, a growing body of research sheds light on the relationship between food insecurity and risk factors for poor mental health and suicide.¹¹ A new study, “Association between Food Insecurity, Mental Health, and Intentions to Leave the U.S. Army in a Cross-Sectional Sample of U.S. Soldiers” by researchers at the USDA Economic Research Service and the U.S. Army Public Health Center offers additional insight about linkages between food insecurity, mental health, and military service.¹² To achieve the VA’s stated top clinical priority to end veteran suicide and implement a comprehensive public health approach to reach all veterans, the VA must bolster their leadership and implement a robust effort to address veteran food insecurity through proactive SNAP outreach to veterans, both within and outside of the VA system.

Additionally, a recommendation made by Dr. Colleen Heflin during her testimony at the May 27, 2021 House Rules Committee roundtable examination of the hunger

⁸Pooler, Jennifer, *et al.* “Issue Brief: Veterans and Food Insecurity.” *IMPAQ International*, Nov. 2018, <https://impaqint.com/sites/default/files/issue-briefs/Transitional%20Employment%20Programs%20Overview%20Components%20andModels.pdf>.

⁹Rabbitt, Matthew P., and Michael D. Smith. “Food Insecurity Among Working-Age Veterans.” U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, May 2021, https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/101269/err-829_summary.pdf?v=9153.

¹⁰Cohen, Alicia J., *et al.* “Risk Factors for Veteran Food Insecurity: Findings from a National U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Food Insecurity Screener.” *Public Health Nutrition*, 2021, pp. 1–26., [doi:10.1017/S1368980021004584](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021004584).

¹¹“Statement of Dr. Thomas O’Toole, Senior Medical Advisor Office of the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Operations, Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).” (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20200109/110350/HHRG-116-VR10-Wstate-OTooleT-20200109.pdf>) 2020.

¹²Beymer, Matthew R, *et al.* “Association between Food Insecurity, Mental Health, and Intentions to Leave the U.S. Army in a Cross-Sectional Sample of U.S. Soldiers.” *The Journal of Nutrition*, vol. 151, no. 7, 12 May 2021, pp. 2051–2058, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/nxab089>.

crisis among veterans and military families holds great promise to decrease the risk of food insecurity during the transition from military service to civilian life, when many households are more at risk of food insecurity.¹³ MAZON urges this Subcommittee to explore her suggestion for the Federal Government to provide a targeted transitional benefit to all families leaving military service below a certain rank. Such a benefit would act as a stabilizing mechanism and provide much-needed additional assistance to veterans and their families during a time when they may experience a greater level of financial need. In addition, MAZON supports the distinct, yet often related, recommendations by Dr. Heflin to better protect veterans with disabilities from food insecurity.

Policy Recommendations

We all can agree that those who make great personal sacrifices for our country should not have to struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals for themselves or their families. Therefore, MAZON urges this Subcommittee to consider the following specific policy recommendations to address military and veteran hunger.

To address hunger among currently serving military families:

1. **Congress and the Administration should support and prioritize inclusion of the full Military Family Basic Needs Allowance provision in the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).** In order to reach all military families experiencing food insecurity and provide them with a sufficient level of assistance, it is critical that this Basic Needs Allowance exclude a servicemember's BAH as counted income. Additionally, a similar provision to support low-income Coast Guard families should be separately authorized and funded, as their needs would not be addressed through the NDAA legislation. This targeted and temporary assistance program must be structured in a streamlined and efficient manner to eliminate common barriers to nutrition assistance including shame, stigma, and fear of retribution.

To effectively implement and administer the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance, there must be a permanent single point of contact at DOD to coordinate with other agencies, Congress, and civil society partners like MAZON. The Executive Branch and Congress must continue to emphasize that permanent solutions to military hunger are an urgent national priority and fundamentally influence readiness, recruitment, retention, and morale among the Armed Forces.

2. **The Administration must take executive action to ensure that a servicemember's BAH does not count as income in determining eligibility for Federal nutrition safety net programs.** President Biden and USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack must utilize existing administrative authorities to exclude the BAH as income for all Federal nutrition programs including SNAP, WIC, and free and reduced-price school meals. This action would ensure that military families are not prevented from qualifying for assistance and that there is a clear and consistent consideration of the BAH across all Federal programs that treats low-income military families in a way comparable to civilian counterparts. Now more than ever, struggling military families must be able to access these programs so that they do not have to turn in desperation to food pantries simply because they cannot get the government assistance they need.
3. **Congress must study and document, in collaboration with the Administration, the full scope of military hunger and publicly publish comprehensive data.** Despite strong anecdotal evidence and survey information collected by military service organizations, food insecurity among military families is not adequately documented or monitored by government agencies, and this has allowed the problem to be ignored, obscured, and misrepresented. Data are often withheld from the public or are excessively difficult to obtain. Available data and agency reports are often contradictory, out of date, or simply incomprehensible.

While the recent 13th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation documented SNAP usage by military households, DOD asked the wrong question. Rather than how many servicemembers are accessing SNAP, we must explore

¹³“Written Statement of Colleen Heflin, Professor of Public and International Affairs, Maxwell School at Syracuse University before the Rules Committee, United States House of Representatives, Examining the Hunger Crisis Among Veterans and Military Families.” (<https://rules.house.gov/sites/democrats.rules.house.gov/files/HRDT-117-RU00-WState-HeflinC-20210527.pdf>) 2021.

how many military families struggle without the assistance of Federal safety net programs, quietly visiting food pantries on our military bases.

4. **Congress should re-examine military pay levels, acknowledging that the composition and needs of America’s military have changed significantly over time and that changes to pay and benefits have not responded accordingly.** Policymakers should seek to better understand the unique lifestyle and financial challenges that military personnel with families experience and consider raising the base pay rates for junior enlisted servicemembers.
5. **Anti-hunger advocates, government agencies, community organizations, and media outlets must reset the narrative around hunger and address the persistent shame and stigma that prevent so many Americans—especially members of the military and their families—from seeking the nutrition assistance they need.** Collectively, we must acknowledge that there is often an unspoken stigma associated with applying for and accepting government benefits, particularly among military ranks. Some servicemembers are understandably resistant to ask for help because of the shame of their situation and the fear of retribution. This attitude can persist as a servicemember transitions into civilian life, clearly contributing to the related barriers to assistance among America’s veterans.

The broader anti-hunger community must work together to prioritize a justice-centered approach to ending military hunger that appropriately centers systemic changes and policy priorities. Leaders in government, as well as the media, can play an important role in moving the public’s focus away from charities straining to meet the needs of people facing hunger. This will allow us to ensure that public assistance programs appropriately fulfill our collective responsibility to care for the vulnerable, support people in times of need, and expand opportunities so that all Americans—including all military families—can reach their full potential.

To address hunger among veteran families[:]

1. **Protect and Improve SNAP**

Food insecurity can often trigger a downward spiral of economic hardship and despair, which unfortunately can lead to suicide. Improving access to SNAP for struggling veterans is an important strategy in the campaign to end veteran suicide.

We must work together to ensure that struggling veterans and those who serve them know that SNAP exists, that they might be eligible, and where and how to apply.

2. **Connect Veterans to SNAP**

After years of advocating for mandatory food insecurity screenings at the VA, MAZON was pleased that the VA took our advice and recently began implementing the Hunger Vital Signs screener to identify food-insecure veterans. But the current process is not doing enough. For veterans who screen positive, the VA must provide on-site SNAP eligibility and application assistance. Veteran-specific SNAP enrollment efforts, such as peer-to-peer veteran outreach, can also help to reduce stigma, normalize the idea of getting help from SNAP, and reach the struggling veterans who fall through the cracks—both within and outside of the VA system. It is imperative that we close the sizable SNAP participation gap for veterans.

3. **Federal agencies, including DOD, USDA, VA, and the Department of Homeland Security (agency of jurisdiction for U.S. Coast Guard) must work collaboratively to share data and resources about food insecurity among veteran and military families and work together to proactively find solutions, such as integrating information about Federal nutrition programs like SNAP as part of the Transition Assistance Program and the new “Solid Start” veteran suicide prevention program.**

The VA should work with USDA, veteran service organizations, and community partners like MAZON to develop veteran-specific programs and resources about SNAP and other nutrition programs. Innovative and successful pilot programs, like the Veteran Farmers['] Market Nutrition Program that provides vouchers to veterans with diet-related chronic health conditions to incentivize purchases of fresh produce at farmers markets, should be scaled-up and replicated nationwide.

New and promising initiatives should be explored and supported, such as establishing a targeted transitional nutrition assistance benefit as a way to express gratitude to junior-enlisted military families for their service and provide a temporary measure of assistance for food purchases during an initial designated period when many veterans experience challenges transitioning to civilian life.

4. Listen to Veteran and Military Families

Negative public perceptions of SNAP are only worsened by proposals to restrict the program for only certain Americans. This creates a chilling effect and adds to the stigma that makes veteran and military families and others reluctant to seek help. This Subcommittee should solicit and gather personal stories from veteran and military families who have lived experiences with food insecurity to help inform policy proposals and ensure that they are appropriately suited to the circumstances on the ground. The perspectives from veteran and military families should also be centered in the design of education and training programs for VA, DOD, and other personnel who work with individuals experiencing food insecurity. Such training should recognize and appropriately account for heightened stigma and reluctance to seek or accept help in these populations and promote specifically-designed approaches to build trust and comfort for those in need of assistance.

Hunger among veteran and military families—indeed, all food insecurity—is a solvable problem, and the solution lies in mustering the political will to prioritize and address it. MAZON welcomes the opportunity to continue to work as a partner with this Subcommittee, others in Congress, all relevant Federal agencies, military service organizations and veteran service organizations, and other community partners to build this political will and support those who have bravely served our country. No servicemember or veteran should ever have to worry about being able to feed themselves or their family. We owe them much more than the half-measures and broken promises of our policies and programs to date.

Hungry military and veteran families cannot eat another report or hearing transcript.

MAZON urges this Subcommittee to immediately identify concrete steps that Congress and the Administration can take now to end the crisis of military family and veteran food insecurity. We stand ready with suggestions and with resolve to work in partnership.

Addendum

MAZON's groundbreaking project, *This is Hunger*, centers around stories of real people who have struggled with hunger. Included in this powerful, immersive exhibition are stories of real veteran and military families who faced food insecurity. Below are some of these stories.



Ashley from San Diego, California

“If they separated base pay from allowances, that would help our circumstances, because we could then go back and apply for food stamps, and more than likely be approved because they would only be considering the base pay. That would free up our food budget because we could actually buy some of the things we don't get to have regularly because they are expensive. I could afford to feed my family more healthy, homecooked foods. Because it is cheaper just to open up a box of mac & cheese instead of buying all the ingredients separately and making a healthier version of it. So they would be better fed and have better choices. And then in turn some of the debt that we still have would be able to be paid off, so that we could get off of food stamps and still afford to have better quality food, but not having to forego other bills in order to do that.

* * * * *

Standing in the line at the food pantry with all the other families, it's just more sad than anything. You look around and see so many people in the same boat as you. You don't know why they're there or anything like that, but there's obviously a need for them to be there.

Some food pantries are just helping anyone; some are only for military. But it is really sad to see how many people, especially how many military families, need help. And I come across military families quite often who don't even know that there are services that they can utilize. They've been struggling for months, and they don't know that there is a source out there that could potentially help them, because it's not directly affiliated with the military. The military doesn't have any say in putting that information out there. So really the only way the military families can find out about any food pantry programs is through word of mouth."



Rebecca from San Diego, California

"I heard a Sergeant Major in the Marine Corps say, 'oh my Marines won't mind taking these cuts, they are better doing more with less, the families will learn to adapt.' I wanted to smack him. The upper echelon of the military doesn't understand what the enlisted go through.

A lot of families that weren't struggling before

have started struggling when the military started cutting benefits a few years ago. Medical benefits were cut, salary increases for being stationed in more expensive places were pretty much been eliminated, and the BAH was reduced. Plus, prices in general have gone up and salaries for enlisted stayed pretty much the same. And in our case, while we've always lived by a strict budget and plan, we certainly didn't plan on having twins when we planned on one more child. And we certainly didn't plan on one of them developing autism and extenuating medical problems, and things like that.

When my husband's Command found out that he didn't have the money to pay for all the extras he was expected to—tickets for this, someone's retirement, *etc.*—they called our finances into question. They couldn't understand how an E-6 Staff Sergeant wouldn't have the money, unless he was being irresponsible. I think the military really needs to look at some of their stellar Marines and ask why those families can't make ends meet.

Before we moved to California from North Carolina, we were doing well. We could save. But the same amount of food that costs \$250 in North Carolina costs \$800 here. The medical benefit is different and we're required to take out additional health insurance for our kids. In the year we've been here, we've had to use our savings to pay our bills and make up the difference between the higher cost of living here and my husband's paycheck, which is the same as it was before.

We used up the last of our saving a few months ago so we could buy school supplies for the kids. I did the worksheet to apply for food stamps and we were above the income limit. They don't consider many things, like our extraordinary medical costs. We've cut out everything we can from our budget. My husband wears shoes with holes and faded uniforms, even though it's against the rules. But what can we do if we don't have the money? I don't refill my medication regularly. We are eating less healthy. My husband and I are down to a meal or two a day. The only way we can make it is to go to the food distributions, but that's not how I want my kids to remember how mom and dad provided for them. I'm gonna do what it takes to take care of my kids. Period. End of story. But there is a backlash that comes when using any programs, like FSSA. Don't get me wrong, if there was a death in the family, nobody thinks twice about you getting assistance from Navy-Marine Relief for that. That attitude needs to change. Definitely.

I'd love to be in a position where we didn't have to use those types of services. If I could work, it would be different. But doing a regular job is not an option with a moderate to severely autistic child. What I'd earn wouldn't offset the cost of specialized home care. I'm looking for a way to make extra income at home. Maybe I'll become a notary because you know how hard it is find a notary?"



Astrid from San Diego, California

"I'm from Haiti and my husband is from Columbia. We have a daughter who's 12 and a son who's 9. My husband has a degree in engineering and a MBA. I was a fashion designer before I had kids. We're just a regular family I think.

After 9/11, my husband joined the Navy because America 'opened its doors' to him and he wanted to do something in return. But the person I married isn't the person my husband is today. He has been deployed four times and when he returned from Iraq, he was different, like so many guys. Aggressive, broken. The military doesn't try to mend them; they give them free tickets to LEGOLAND as if that is going to make the hurt go away. I don't think my children need to go to LEGOLAND anymore. They

need a good stable food allocation, but that's not possible anymore on the salary of a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy.

Military salaries haven't kept up with the economy. Food and gas prices have skyrocketed and we've already cut what we can from our monthly budget, mainly groceries. I shop at the 99¢ store and garage sales. We've moved out of military housing to a cheaper rental and have an extra \$120 a month from our BAH to spend on essentials. But my daughter needed braces and they cost \$2,000, which has been a big dent in our budget. My husband went back to school a year ago to get a doctorate to teach in the military, and that's another \$600-\$700 a month because the military doesn't pay for a Ph.D. So, we have to rob Peter to pay Paul.

It's a vicious circle. We don't qualify for food stamps because of my husband's rank and income, but his salary isn't enough, especially for the job he does. I know that the Navy says that there's support for spouses through Fleet and Family, but showing me how to rewrite my résumé doesn't pay the bills. And if I work, who is going to pick up the kids when my husband is deployed or off on other missions at sea? I've seen so many military families disintegrate, and so many children fall into drugs, because their parents aren't around.

I've started looking at how to make up the difference in our expenses and what my husband gets paid. He's is going to transfer his GI benefits to me so I can go back to school and learn something where I can have flexible hours and still be there for my kids. We're making every effort to give our kids the best. We make sacrifices. I go to the food distributions not by choice, but to make sure my children have every single thing they need. When I first heard about the civilian-run food distribution from a friend, I felt so ashamed to go. I thought 'oh my god everybody is gonna know I don't have money,' or that 'I'm gambling away at a casino.' But the volunteers at the distribution made me feel so special. Why do people outside the military know that military families are needy, but the DOD and Congress don't seem to?"



Gabriel from San Diego, California

“After I got my B.A. from Houston State University I went to work in personal finances. I taught people how to get out of debt, apply for retirement, things like that. I really liked that job, but I always wanted to serve my country, so a year and a half ago I join the Marines. I’m a Corporal based in Camp Pendleton.

I work in ground support for all the Marine helicopters. It’s the equivalent of a logistics manager for a company like Amazon. In the civilian world, that person with a degree like mine, would get paid about three times more than I am. I like being in the Marines, but with a wife and child, and another one on the way, my paycheck of less than \$2,000 a month isn’t enough to make ends meet. It was easier when my wife worked in insurance, but the cost of day care is so high that it doesn’t make sense. Anyway, we sacrifice for the United States, why shouldn’t my wife stay home to take care of our child?

We’re on a strict budget and pinch pennies where we can, but I can’t cut the gas to go to work, the

car insurance, and the dry cleaning for my uniforms, which has to be done so I pass inspection. We don’t even have the money to buy our 2 year old daughter a bed, so she’s sleeping on an air mattress on the floor.

I’m doing all I can and serving my country, and I have to worry about how I’m going to buy food? I am not ashamed to say, ‘hey I need help’ to be able to feed my family. We got WIC when our daughter was a baby, but recently when we applied for food stamps we were denied because our BAH counts as income. The only reason we are even getting by is because our neighbor told us about the food distributions. We’re going twice a month and it saves us about \$200 on groceries. That means I don’t have to put things such as shampoo and soap on a credit card. It stresses me out when I have to. I won’t get sucked in by the credit card companies who say, ‘oh purchase whatever you want and you’ll have no interest for 12 months,’ but afterwards you’re hit with a huge debt.

I don’t think the government protects military families enough because so many of us need to go to a food distributions run by outside groups. There’s a real disconnect between the command and the troops. I went to my commander asking about assistance and he didn’t tell me there was a food distribution on base or tell me about FSSA. He sent me to the Navy-Marine Relief Society and all they did was show me how to do a budget. But that was no help because I already knew how to do a budget; I’m a certified financial counselor. I even teach other Marines how to manage their money. I know the Navy-Marine Relief sometimes give one time loans, but that won’t help me with monthly expenses.

I don’t really know how you go about fixing the problem, but it would really help if the military paid us more or the Commissary was less expensive, and if the housing allowance was not considered part of our paychecks. We are the only job where we have to give up our lives to protect the Constitution of the United States, so shouldn’t the government make sure we can properly feed our families?”

Judith from Phoenix, Arizona

“When the military denied my request for financial help, it was like putting a dagger in my back. I spent almost 30 years in the Air Force. When Saddam invaded Kuwait, I had to explain to my son, I could be sent to war and I’d have to find somebody to take care of him. His whole face just dropped.

What children of the military go through stays with them their whole lives. That’s why I get angry when people say I’m pampering my son. Since he got laid off after the economy went down the toilet, I have helped him out. But he has essentially become my caregiver. It’s cheaper to pay my son’s bills than to hire a full-time caregiver.

We used to be comfortable. But supporting two households is a real struggle. I don’t buy big fabulous things—I’m not Wilma Flintstone—but my monthly VA benefits and Social Security are no longer enough. I’ve used up my savings to keep us from becoming homeless. One month, I came within 3½ hours of losing my son’s house. I begged

the bank, saying, ‘Look we’re doing the best we can; I don’t want it to go into foreclosure,’ and the bank came through. It was really embarrassing to ask for help, because I was the one always helping others.

My medical is pretty well taken care of by the VA. But there are months when I have to skip paying certain bills, and I can no longer afford food like I used to. Where I used to have two or three chicken thighs in a meal, now I make soup out of them and spread it over the week. I can’t get much from the local food pantry because it doesn’t carry lactose- and gluten-free food, which my doctor told me I must eat.

Feeding my young grandson properly is the priority, so I’ll eat peanut butter and celery for lunch rather than fix myself a real meal. You can get a bunch of celery for \$0.88 and a jar of peanut butter for \$1.50 at the military commissary. Three jars of peanut butter last me about a month. I guess my body will adapt to eating less, and I can get nutrition from the vitamins the doctors have me taking for my medical problems.

My son is trying very hard to get into the solar business, and if he does, we’ll be OK again. I’d like to eat something besides peanut butter and celery. But my goal is to get out of debt so that when my time comes, my children won’t have to worry. I’d like to leave my kids something for them to remember me by.”



Emery from Brandon, Mississippi

“We were one of those couples that purchased the house we could afford, so we could have that slice of the American Dream: our own home. We didn’t just jump into it blind—we had two stable incomes.

I was working for a gentleman in home renovations and when his business was hit by the recession, he started paying me late. Then he just stopped paying me altogether. I had to quit the job to look for a new one that paid me for my work. I’ve been

applying for jobs I’m qualified for, that have openings, but I’ve gotten no response. Being unemployed has cut our household income in half, and my wife and I are having to make decisions every day on how to allocate what little monies we have: are we going to eat or are we going to pay the light bill? We never lived extravagantly, but there are no luxuries now, no more vacations. We are fighting to hold on to what little we still have.

In the 6 years since we bought our house, this month is the first time that the mortgage wasn’t paid on time. I had to borrow from one place to give to another. I pawned the title to my truck to supplement income. We don’t qualify for mortgage assistance or food stamps. That’s frustrating because you hear about all these programs to help people like us, but then they tell you you’re not eligible. I’m not out to shirk my responsibility or take something that’s not mine, but I just don’t want to keep sliding further down. Choices have to be made. We’ve changed how we feed ourselves. I like fish a lot, but now we can’t afford it. What we buy is limited to more processed foods. Last night for dinner, I ate some crackers and cheese and some kind of, shall we say, processed meat. There are many times that instead of making myself a salad, I’ll have ramen noodles. Granted, ramen is full of sodium and other things that aren’t good for you, but it’s just basic sustenance and you can buy a case of them for a dollar and change.

It’s a tough, tough time, and sometimes it feels insurmountable. I just re-enlisted in the National Guard to do right by my family. I mean the military is one job that as far as I know is always going to be there. It gives us health insurance and a part-time steady income. My wife worries because I am scheduled to go to Afghanistan in 2015, but that could change.

I have been working ever since I was fifteen. To wake up and realize you are among the unemployed is a shock. But we will get through it. My wife and I are a team.”

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you, Mrs. Hubbard. And right under 5 minutes. Good job.

I now recognize Ms. Hollywood. If you would unmute and please begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF LT. COL. DENISE HOLLYWOOD, (RET.), U.S. AIR FORCE; CHIEF COMMUNITY AND PROGRAMS OFFICER, BLUE STAR FAMILIES, PORT JERVIS, NY

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. My name is Denise Hollywood, and I am the Chief Community and Programs Officer for Blue Star Families, the largest national nonprofit organization supporting military and veteran families. We are nationally recognized for our annual military family lifestyle survey, the largest and most comprehensive survey of its kind, covering a wide variety of topics that impact military and veteran families.

Today, I am here to share with you what our surveys have revealed about food insecurity.

In 2020, 14 percent of enlisted Active Duty family respondents and 12 percent of veteran family respondents reported low- or very-low-food security. While a greater proportion of junior enlisted family respondents indicated that they were food-insecure, this issue was not limited to the junior enlisted ranks.

Our data also suggests that military families of color are struggling with food insecurity at higher levels than their White peers.

Blue Star Families' early findings align with existing research regarding wealth inequality in the United States. It is worth emphasizing that, in the military community, food insecurity is an issue that primarily affects families rather than single, unattached servicemembers.

We know from our research that several intersecting structural challenges contribute to military families' financial stress, including military spouse unemployment, the lack of affordable childcare, and high out-of-pocket housing expenses. Each of these factors and others can undermine a military family's financial readiness and contribute to food insecurity.

Military spouses face significant barriers to employment. The unemployment rate for military spouses was nearly seven times greater than the national unemployment rate pre-pandemic and has not decreased significantly since 2012. Crucially, the lack of affordable childcare continues to be a major contributor to military spouse unemployment, with 34 percent of Active Duty spouses who are unemployed but needed or wanted to work citing the high costs of childcare as a barrier to their employment.

Military family financial stress is further complicated by out-of-pocket housing expenses. Today, the basic allowance for housing is pegged to 95 percent of local area rent. We see in our data that families that prioritize their children's school, which are most military families, often end up paying significantly more out of pocket than DOD's cost-share estimates.

Additionally, our data shows that barriers, both bureaucratic and psychological, exist that prevent military families from accessing Federal nutrition assistance programs.

Financial stress and the stigma surrounding needing support does not end when a family leaves the military. To the contrary, a military family's financial difficulties can be compounded by transition-related challenges, thereby leading to veteran food insecurity. Creating the conditions for Active Duty family financial resilience and destigmatizing the need for assistance will therefore help prevent veteran hunger downstream.

The need is great. Between May 2020 and October 2021, Blue Star Families hosted 50 food security related events, including drive-thru food distributions, grocery store gift card distributions, sustainable gardening events, and holiday meals for families in need. We helped to increase the immediate food security for over 7,000 military and veteran families through these programs.

However, we must work to address the underlying factors that contribute to food insecurity among military families. These issues are persistent and will take time to resolve. We encourage you to amend section 403(k), Title 37 of the *United States Code* to exclude

the Basic Allowance for Housing, BAH, from being counted as income when calculating eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, and other Federal nutrition assistance benefits.

Including BAH in the evaluation of SNAP eligibility creates an artificial and unnecessary barrier for military families, as the allowance is a nontaxable portion of a servicemember's pay that allows for equitable housing compensation. Addressing this barrier, which many military families face in accessing food assistance, would help those struggling to make ends meet during this unprecedented pandemic and would boost the financial resilience of those military families.

I would like to thank again the distinguished Members of the Subcommittee for their efforts to eliminate military and veteran hunger. Those who make significant sacrifices for our country should never struggle to put food on the table for their families.

[The prepared statement of Lt. Col. Hollywood follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LT. COL. DENISE HOLLYWOOD, (RET.), U.S. AIR FORCE;
CHIEF COMMUNITY AND PROGRAMS OFFICER, BLUE STAR FAMILIES, PORT JERVIS, NY

Chair[wo]lman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Agriculture, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Denise Hollywood, and I am the Chief Community and Programs Officer of Blue Star Families (BSF)—a national nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting military and veteran families from all ranks and services. With over 150,000 members, BSF is the nation's largest grass-roots military family support organization, and touches more than 1.5 million military family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, BSF seeks to ensure that our military and veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive.

BSF's groundbreaking research calls attention to the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and veteran families. Our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS)—developed in partnership with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)—is the largest annual comprehensive survey of military and veteran families, and is widely regarded as the gold standard among military family surveys. Data from the aMFLS has been used at every level of government to help inform those tasked with making policy decisions that impact our military-connected communities.

Military & Veteran Family Food Insecurity Findings

Blue Star Families' research has revealed alarming rates of food insecurity¹ among military and veteran families. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 7% of active duty family respondents and 12% of veteran family respondents to the 2018 MFLS answered "yes" to the question "Has anyone in your household faced food insecurity (the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food) within the past year?" Similarly, 9% of active duty family respondents and 18% of veteran family respondents answered "yes" to the question "Has any member of your household sought emergency food assistance through a food bank, food pantry, or charitable organization?"² Due to an oversampling of senior enlisted and officer families in the 2018 MFLS, it is possible that the actual per-

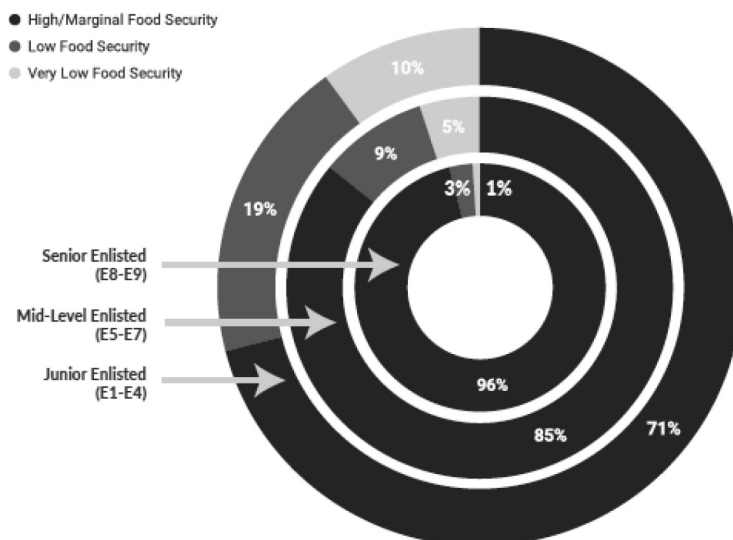
¹ Food insecurity and hunger are distinct concepts. According to the USDA, food insecurity is defined as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. Hunger is defined as an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity. [U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Definitions of Food Security," Economic Research Service, September 9, 2020, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>.]

² Blue Star Families, "2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey," <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>.

centage of military and veteran families experiencing food insecurity pre-pandemic was higher than this data suggests.³

Level of Food Security by Enlisted Rank

Active-Duty Enlisted Family Respondents Food Security Levels by Ranking Grouping



Blue Star Families uses a non-scientific, convenience sampling method in our surveys.

As such, we are unable to track statistically-significant changes within the same population overtime. That said, we posit (on the basis of our own data and that of civilian research) that the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated military and veteran family food insecurity in the United States. In our 2020 MFLS, one in ten (9%) active-duty family respondents reported that they had experienced food insecurity (low-⁴ or very-low-food security⁵) in the 12 months preceding the survey's September-October fielding. That figure rose to 14% for enlisted active-duty family respondents. While a greater proportion (29%) of junior enlisted (E-1-E-4) family respondents reported food insecurity, this issue was not limited to junior enlisted ranks: 16% of mid-grade enlisted (E-5-E-6) and 8% of senior enlisted (E-8-E-9) respondents reported low- or very-low-food security. Meanwhile, 12% of veteran family respondents in the 2020 MFLS reported that they had experienced food insecurity.

Underlying Causes of Active-Duty Family Financial Stress and Food Insecurity

In the 2020 MFLS, 39% of active-duty families reported "financial issues" as a top stressor during their time affiliated with the military. Respondents reported intersecting challenges as top contributors to their financial stress, including: high rates of un/underemployment among military spouses, limited availability and high costs of child care, and out-of-pocket housing and relocation expenses. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated each of these underlying factors.

³For example, the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) has reported that one in eight military family respondents to their survey on the subject (pre-pandemic) was food-insecure. [Military Family Advisory Network, "Military Family Food Insecurity," Accessed on March 4, 2021, https://militaryfamilyadvisorynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/MFAN-117-Food-Insecurity-One-Pager-pf-1.3-002_LA.pdf.

⁴"Low-food security (old label=Food insecurity without hunger): reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake." [U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Definitions of Food Security," Economic Research Service, September 9, 2020, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>.]

⁵"Very-low-food security (old label=Food insecurity with hunger): reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake." [*Ibid.*]

High Rates of Un/underemployment Among Military Spouses

Spouse employment has been identified as one of the top concerns for active-duty families since the inception of the aMFLS in 2009. Despite multiple cross-sector hiring efforts, the military spouse unemployment rate has not decreased significantly since 2012,⁶ and was nearly seven times the rate of the national unemployment rate pre-pandemic (22%⁷ vs. 3.5%⁸).

In the 2020 MFLS, more than 1/2 (52%) of active-duty spouse respondents and 1/3 (31%) of active-duty service member respondents listed military spouse employment as a top issue of concern. While nearly half of active-duty military spouse respondents were employed, either full time (30%) or part time (17%), 2/3 of employed active-duty spouse respondents (68%) reported they were underemployed in some way (indicating their current employment did not match their desires, education, or experience). Furthermore, 35% of active-duty spouse respondents reported they were not employed but needed or wanted to work.

Our research revealed an association between spouse unemployment and food insecurity. In the 2020 MFLS, 10% of enlisted active-duty spouse respondents who were employed were food-insecure (with low- or very-low-food security), compared to 20% of those who were not working but needed or wanted to work. The Department of Defense likewise reports slightly higher rates of food pantry usage (pre-pandemic) by military spouses who were unemployed in 2019 (7%) or not in the labor force (6%), when compared to employed military spouses (4%).⁹

While the causes of military spouse un/underemployment are myriad and complex, military spouse respondents report a lack of affordable child care, the unpredictability of service-member day-to-day job demands, hiring/promotion discrimination, and frequent Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves as key barriers to employment.¹⁰ Other important, but less common factors include state licensure barriers and gaps in résumés due to frequent PCS moves.

Limited Availability and High Costs of Child Care

According to the Department of Defense, 37.8% of military children are 5 years old or younger.¹¹ The DOD recognizes that childcare is a “workforce issue that directly impacts the efficiency, readiness, retention, and lethality of the Total Force,” which is one of the reasons it is the largest employer-sponsored child care provider in the United States.¹² Yet, challenges obtaining affordable child care in a timely manner continue to have cascading impacts on military family financial well-being.

Many military families have trouble finding child care that meets their needs. In the 2020 MFLS, most active-duty family respondents had children under the age of 18 (80%) at home, and among those, 65% needed child care at least some of the time. Of those with a need, 23% reported always being able to find child care that works for their situation; however, that number fell to 19% for respondents with a child who has special needs.

⁶Office of People Analytics, “2012 Survey of Active Duty Spouses,” <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1201-Briefing-Support-Deployment-Reintegration-PCS-WellBeing-Education-Employment.pdf>.

⁷Office of People Analytics, “2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses,” December 2, 2020, https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1901_MOS-Briefing-508-Revised.pdf.

⁸Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Civilian Unemployment Rate,” December 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/charts/employment-situation/civilian-unemployment-rate.htm>.

⁹Office of People Analytics, DOD (2020). *2019 Survey of Active-Duty Spouses*. Unpublished email correspondence.

¹⁰“Active-duty spouse respondents who are not in the labor force most often reported they are not working because of the difficulty of balancing household and work obligations, such as homeschooling or supervising children’s education (35%), or that their service member’s day-to-day work schedule is too unpredictable (33%) or too long to balance work and home demands (30%). An additional but related barrier is the cost of child care (34%), which may quickly overwhelm a spouse’s take-home pay, particularly if they are underemployed, resulting in a situation in which active-duty spouses can’t afford to work. The lack of affordable, available child care is not new nor unique to active-duty families, but it is exacerbated by families’ frequent relocation, which may disrupt both the spouse’s employment and existing child care arrangements . . . Spouses who seek work often perceive reluctance from employers. More than half of active-duty spouse respondents (51%) agreed their military affiliation prevented them from receiving a promotion at some point in their career.” [Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Finding 13,” https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FULL.pdf.]

¹¹Department of Defense, “2018 Demographics Report: Profile of the Military Community,” <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2018-demographics-report.pdf>.

¹²Congressional Research Service, “Military Child Development Program: Background and Issues,” March 19, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R45288.pdf>.

In addition to limited availability, child care affordability continues to be a major concern for military families. Among active-duty family respondents to the 2020 MFLS who reported being financially stressed and having a need for child care, “out-of-pocket child care costs” were the most commonly reported contributor to their financial stress (31%). Unfortunately, having a higher level of income did not seem to completely resolve this issue. Although active-duty military family respondents in lower income brackets had greater difficulty finding affordable child care, respondents across all income levels reported child care as being a need that was often out of reach.

Child care expenses likewise remain a top barrier to military spouse employment with 34% of active-duty spouse respondents to the 2020 MFLS who were not working but needed/wanted to work stating “child care is too expensive.” Similarly, in the 2019 MFLS, 54% of service member respondents with children reported that the lack of affordable child care negatively impacted their pursuit of employment and/or education post-service. (Female service members, in particular, were particularly affected by the lack of affordable child care, with 62% of female service member respondents saying that childcare “moderately” to “completely” prevented their pursuit of education compared to 51% of their male counterparts.)

Out-of-Pocket Housing and Relocation Expenses

Most active-duty family respondents in the 2020 MFLS (64%) live off installation and use their basic allowance for housing (BAH) to rent (27%) or purchase (37%) housing. Starting in 2015, BAH¹³ was incrementally reduced to 95% of local area rent,¹⁴ making it a matter of policy for military families to pay out-of-pocket for quality housing, though they rarely have full control over where they are stationed or when they move. According to the Department of Defense, the 5% of housing cost that military families are expected to cover out-of-pocket should range from \$70 to \$158 per month in 2021.¹⁵ Yet, of those active-duty family respondents who reported paying out-of-pocket housing expenses (83%), more than $\frac{3}{4}$ (77%) reported the costs exceeded the anticipated range (>=\$200).

All of these factors—out-of-pocket expenses, the lack of affordable childcare, military spouse un/underemployment, and others—can contribute to food insecurity among active duty military families. Unfortunately, this food insecurity does not end when service members leave the military. To the contrary, the financial difficulties of many military families can be further compounded by transition-related challenges—thereby leading to veteran family hunger.

Financial Inequity

There is reason to believe that military families of color might be struggling with food insecurity at higher rates than their white peers. In the 2020 MFLS, 15% of active duty family members of color reported low- or very-low-food security, compared to only 7% of white, non-Hispanic active duty family members.¹⁶ Furthermore, in line with civilian research which finds that Black and Hispanic/Latinx families have fewer financial resources to navigate uncertain financial times than white families,¹⁷ data from the COVID-19 Military Support Initiative (CMSI) Pain Points Poll¹⁸ indicates that Black and Hispanic/Latinx military families may be in greater need of financial assistance than their white peers. On average, 40% of Black and 33% of Hispanic/Latinx active-duty family respondents reported relying on savings or credit cards during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 29% of white active-duty family respondents. As one Black military spouse told CMSI:

I [took on] a loan to fly home to bury my mother-in-law in New Orleans. I'm using credit cards to stock up on food, paper goods, *etc.* . . . [and all of our] bills are going up to keep the house running.

¹³Budget Office, “Reduce the Basic Allowance for Housing to 80 Percent of Average Housing Costs,” December 13, 2018, <https://www.cbo.gov/budget-options/2018/54767>.

¹⁴Ryan Guina, “BAH Rate Cuts: 95% BAH—The New Reality & The Future of BAH,” *The Military Wallet*, April 21, 2019, <https://themilitarywallet.com/bah-rate-cuts/>.

¹⁵Department of Defense. (2020, December 15). *DOD Releases 2021 Basic Allowance for Housing Rates*. <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2447343/dod-releases-2021-basic-allowance-for-housing-rates>.

¹⁶Please contact Blue Star Families for more information: survey@bluestarfam.org.

¹⁷Elise Gould and Valerie Wilson, “Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus-racism and economic inequality,” Economic Policy Institute, June 1, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>.

¹⁸The CMSI Pain Points Poll garnered 7,421 respondents from March 18 to May 26, 2020. [COVID-19 Military Support Initiative, “Pain Points Poll Deep Dive: Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Black and Hispanic/Latinx Families,” July 2020, <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/BDG-PPP-DeepDive-Black-Hispanic-Respondents.pdf>.]

These findings align with existing research around wealth inequality in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center (April 2020), 73% of Black and 70% of Hispanic Americans reported they did not have enough savings to cover expenses for 3 months of financial hardship.¹⁹ When we consider that the net worth of a typical white family is nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family,²⁰ it is unsurprising that Black and Hispanic/Latinx families are more reliant on savings and credit cards to pay expenses than their white counterparts.

To make matters worse, the CMSI Pain Points Poll suggests that Black and Hispanic/Latinx military family respondents may not be receiving effective communication about available community resources. “Communication about resources/services available” was the second most commonly cited “unmet local community need” among Black (25%) and Hispanic/Latinx (20%) respondents—and both groups reported this need at higher rates than their white peers (16%). Similarly, in CMSI’s Resilience Under Stress Study (RUSS), only 46% of Black military family respondents felt as though they could easily locate information about local resources, compared to 67% of white, non-Hispanic military family respondents who said the same.²¹ These findings might suggest that some military families of color are less aware of and/or connected to resources that might help alleviate their financial difficulties.

Barriers to Help-Seeking

Bureaucratic

While 14% of active-duty enlisted family respondents to the 2020 MFLS reported some level of food insecurity in the past year, only 2% of active-duty enlisted family respondents reported utilizing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits within the 12 months preceding the survey’s fielding. One reason might be that bureaucratic barriers are currently preventing food-insecure military families from accessing SNAP.

As detailed in a 2016 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), service members’ BAH is currently treated as income for the purpose of determining eligibility for SNAP benefits.²² Meanwhile, housing vouchers for low-income civilians are not treated as income for the purposes of determining SNAP eligibility.²³ Current eligibility policy for SNAP thus establishes an unnecessary and harmful barriers to nutrition assistance for struggling military families.

Psychological

In Blue Star Families’ November 2020 Pulse Check poll of active-duty and veteran families’ financial needs, respondents were asked in an open-ended question “what barriers, if any, would prevent [them] from seeking financial assistance in the event that [they] required it.” Among those who provided a response, the greatest proportion—28% of active-duty family respondents and 27% of veteran family respondents—wrote that emotional barriers, such as shame and embarrassment, would prevent them from seeking support. In Blue Star Families’ March 2021 poll, this same question was included with a multiple choice response. Roughly the same proportion of respondents selected “pride, shame, or embarrassment” as a barrier (25% of active-duty, 23% of veteran, and 22% of National Guard family respondents).²⁴

Additional barriers to help-seeking reported in the November 2020 and March 2021 polls include: the desire to avoid chain of command involvement, an incohesive assistance network, confusing application processes, and qualification requirements that can make it difficult to justify the effort required to apply.²⁵

¹⁹Pew Research Center, “Hispanic and black Americans have been hardest hit in COVID-19 wage, job losses; most do not have rainy day funds,” May 5, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/ft.2020-05-05.covidrace.01/>.

²⁰Kriston McIntosh, Emily Moss, Ryan Nunn, and Jay Shambaugh, “Examining the Black-white wealth gap,” Brookings Institution, February 27, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>.

²¹COVID-19 Military Support Initiative, “Resilience Under Stress Study” (Blue Star Families, 2020), https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RUSS-Report-11.4.20_FINAL.pdf.

²²Government Accountability Officer, “DOD Needs More Complete Data on Active-Duty Servicemembers’ Use of Food Assistance Programs,” Report to Congressional Committees, July 2016, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-16-561.pdf>.

²³Cornell Law School, “7 CFR § 273.9—Income and deductions,” <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/7/273.9#c.1>.

²⁴Blue Star Families, “Pulse Check: Military and Veteran Families’ Financial Needs,” March 2021, https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/BSF_PulseCheck_Report_Mar2021.pdf.

²⁵*Ibid.*

What Congress Can Do To Help

Upstream Solutions

Food insecurity is a real, but preventable, experience for many military and veteran families. As a society, we must collectively work to destigmatize help-seeking behavior—among those seeking help and those who facilitate it. The Federal Government must also work to expand its data collection around military and veteran family food insecurity, so as to better inform policy responses to these issues.

In the long-term, we must also work to relieve financial inequity and address the underlying causes of military family financial insecurity (outlined above). One way to do this is by implementing policies that align with a Total Family Force model.²⁶ For example, Congress could:

- Work with the Department of Defense to ensure military families have more control over their careers—including when and where they relocate. This would allow them to make decisions that support their families’ financial stability, and may necessitate a reconsideration of current “up-or-out” talent management policies.²⁷
- Support a fixed period of Federal student loan deferment for military spouses who leave a job in order to relocate due to military orders.²⁸
- Support incentives for employers to make retirement savings plans more accessible and portable for military spouses.²⁹
- Commission a report on discrimination against military spouses in employment, housing, and public [accommodations] due to their military affiliation. The report should include an assessment of the viability of policy solutions to prevent such discrimination (*e.g.*, expanding USERRA to cover military spouses, making military spouses a protect class, *etc.*).³⁰
- Enhance and expand access to fee assistance programs. For example, direct the Services to expand fee assistance eligibility under the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) program to military families who wish to enroll their child in a childcare facility that is state licensed, even if it is not accredited.³¹
- Commission a report on the demand for various child care options among military families, and to assess the pros/cons of requiring families to first seek care at their local CDC before being authorized to use MCCYN fee assistance.³²
- Standardize, expedite, and simplify the Career Intermission Program (CIP) application process for service members who are unable to implement their family

²⁶To ensure optimal mission readiness, resilience, and retention, the military ought to adopt a “Total Family Force” model. This is an extension of the “Total Force” concept that the military pioneered in the 1970s, which was designed to break down barriers between service branches to create one “total” force with similar goals and objectives. Blue Star Families wants to build upon this concept to acknowledge the fact that military family well-being is inextricably linked to mission readiness, and that military personnel policies ought to reflect that reality.

²⁷See, for example: Bipartisan Policy Center, “Building a F.A.S.T. Force: A Flexible Personnel System for a Modern Military, Recommendations from the Task Force on Defense Personnel,” March 2017, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/building-a-fast-force/>.

²⁸In the 116th Congress, Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY) introduced the Military Spouse Student Loan Deferment Act of 2020 (H.R. 7433). This bill would have allowed certain military spouses to defer payment on their Federal student loans for 90 days. Specifically, borrowers would be eligible to receive this deferment if (1) their spouse is an active duty service member of the Armed Forces, (2) they lost their employment due to a permanent change of station move, and (3) they could provide certain documentation to the Department of Education. Loan interest would not accrue during the deferment period. Blue Star Families supported this proposal. [Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Finding 13,”

²⁹In the 116th Congress, Rep. Jason Crowe (D-CO) introduced the Military Spouse Retirement Security Act of 2020 (H.R. 7927). This bill would have allowed a small business employer to take a tax credit for each of their employees who is a military spouse and is eligible to participate in the employer’s defined contribution retirement plan. Blue Star Families supported this proposal. [*Ibid.*]

³⁰Blue Star Families included a deep dive on this recommendation in our 2020 MFLS comprehensive report. [Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Recommendations,” https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_REC_OMMENDATIONS.pdf.]

³¹Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Finding 11,” https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FINDING_11.pdf.

³²Blue Star Families included a deep dive on this recommendation in our 2020 MFLS comprehensive report. [Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Recommendations,” https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_REC_OMMENDATIONS.pdf.]

care plans due to an unexpected extended emergency (such as virtual schooling during a pandemic).³³

- Explore different ways to calculate BAH to reduce out-of-pocket costs, such as pegging it to the median rent/housing cost in the best local school district and/or restoring payments to 100% of local area rent.³⁴

Downstream Solutions

It is no doubt critical that we work to address financial inequity and alleviate the underlying causes of military family food insecurity (by reducing out-of-pocket expenses, increasing the availability of affordable child care, and improving spouse employment outcomes). However, these issues are persistent and will take time to resolve. In the interim, Congress can tackle military food insecurity and hunger downstream by removing a legislative barrier that prevents many military families from qualifying for Federal nutrition assistance, despite being food-insecure.

In 2018, Blue Star Families endorsed an amendment to the farm bill which would have excluded BAH as counted income when calculating SNAP eligibility. That effort failed.³⁵ Undeterred, BSF then endorsed the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance (MBNA),³⁶ which would have alleviated military family food insecurity by supplementing the base pay of military family members at or below 130% of the Federal poverty line.³⁷ BAH would not have been treated as income when calculating eligibility for the Basic Needs Allowance. Moreover, the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) would have automatically notified service members of their eligibility—thereby removing the need to disclose one’s financial circumstances to command. The MFBNA was thus structured in a streamlined and efficient manner to eliminate common barriers to nutrition assistance, including shame, stigma, and fear of retribution. Unfortunately, the MFBNA was removed from the final versions of the FY20 and FY21 National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA).

We encourage you to amend Section 403(k), Title 37 of the *United States Code* to exclude the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) from being counted as income when calculating eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other Federal nutrition assistance benefits. Including BAH in the evaluation of SNAP eligibility creates an artificial and unnecessary barrier for military families, as the allowance is a non-taxable portion of a service member’s pay that allows for equitable housing compensation. Addressing this barrier, which many military families face in accessing food assistance, would help those struggling to make ends meet during this unprecedented pandemic, and would boost the financial resiliency of those military families.

I would again like to thank the distinguished Members of the Committee for their attention to this critical issue. Those who make significant sacrifices for our country should never struggle to put food on the table.

Sincerely,

DENISE HOLLYWOOD,
Chief Community and Programs Officer,
Blue Star Families.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you for your testimony.

I now recognize Dr. Kamdar. Please begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF NIPA KAMDAR, PH.D., R.N., FNP-BC, CYPRESS, TX

Dr. KAMDAR. Good afternoon, Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for allowing me to share my work with you.

³³Blue Star Families included a deep dive on this recommendation in our 2020 MFLS comprehensive report. [*Ibid.*]

³⁴Blue Star Families included a deep dive on this recommendation in our 2020 MFLS comprehensive report. [*Ibid.*]

³⁵Blue Star Families continues to support the exclusion of BAH as counted income from SNAP eligibility calculations in the next farm bill. [Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Recommendations,” https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_RECOMMENDATIONS.pdf.]

³⁶The 2018 Farm Bill amendment and military family basic needs allowance were also endorsed by MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, the National Military Families Association (NMFA) and many other military and veteran support organizations.

³⁷Note that to qualify for SNAP, you must be at or below 130% of the Federal poverty line.

As a nurse practitioner and researcher, I recognize food insecurity or the lack of access to healthy food as a threat to the well-being of veterans who have served our nation. Nearly all the veterans who participate in my research ask what I will do with the information they openly and bravely share. This opportunity to testify before the Members of this Subcommittee allows me to directly communicate what I learned from them with those who have the power to make change.

Before I begin, I would like to clarify that, although I am employed by the Veterans Health Administration and have a faculty appointment at Baylor College of Medicine, today, I am presenting to you as a private citizen. The views and opinions expressed in this testimony are mine and do not necessarily express the official policy or position of Baylor College of Medicine or the Veterans Health Administration.

One approach to understanding the problem of food insecurity is to place a quantifiable number to capture its scope. Using data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, I learned that veterans who are food-insecure are almost three times more likely to suffer from very-low-food security compared to non-veterans who share similar socioeconomic characteristics, like age, gender, and income.

My team and I also found that veterans dealing with very-low-food security have an almost fourfold increase in odds of suicidal ideation. Although these statistics provide evidence that food insecurity is a serious threat, they do not capture the struggles of veterans who are food-insecure. For that, I listened to veterans who have experienced food insecurity. I will share some of what I learned. Any names I use are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

I will start with Ed. Ed is a 39 year old Marine veteran who reminded me that no one is ever just food-insecure. Nearly all the veterans I have met in my studies struggle with other basic needs, like housing, transportation, and childcare. They are making hard decisions on how to spend their next \$20.

As Sheila, a 34 year old single mother of three and Army veteran explained: "How much [I am] spending on gas affects how much [I have] left over for food . . . gas comes over food." Following this statement, I asked Sheila if she ever skipped a meal. She looked at me and said: "I skipped out on meals plenty of times, plenty of days."

Too many veterans ration their personal food intake to ensure that their children and others in their family do not go hungry. Some, like Haley, a 35 year old Army veteran and single mother of three, have tried to increase their food supply. Haley applied for SNAP four times but never qualified. Ultimately, she stopped applying. She said: "I have been burned so many times, I don't try it anymore."

Her sense of desolation was shared by other veterans when their attempts to find help fell short.

For many veterans like Sarah, a 33 year old Army veteran, finding help was a matter of luck. Years ago, when she was homeless and pregnant, Sarah's life was gratefully rescued by a fellow veteran on the bus one day when he noticed her Army T-shirt. After

asking if Sarah needed help, he directed her to a veterans center, where she was fed and connected to much-needed resources.

This event was a major turning point in her life. What would have happened if Sarah and her fellow veteran were not on the same bus that day?

The experiences that these veterans share point to the complex nature of food insecurity and the challenges of finding effective solutions. One approach to finding effective solutions is to use the public health model of prevention. This model consists of three levels of prevention: primary, which is focused on preventing the problem in the first place; secondary, which is identifying the problem as early as possible; and tertiary, which is reducing the damage and preventing the problem from getting worse.

Most efforts to reduce food insecurity focus on tertiary prevention with food distribution from the USDA food assistance programs. There is also increased attention on screening for food insecurity, which is a form of secondary prevention. However, the most effective, but also the most complex solutions, address the root causes of food insecurity.

So far, research indicates that veteran—[inaudible] with physical and mental health, housing instability, and financial instability. This means that efforts to address food insecurity need to tackle these.

Additionally, veterans have described the initial 6 to 12 months post-separation from Active Duty as being a time of high risk for food insecurity. This is also a time when they run out of money, may still be looking for a job, and may not have yet received care for health-related issues.

Thus, another proactive approach to reduce the risk of food insecurity is to leverage the Transition Assistance Program to facilitate registration into the Veterans Health Administration so that veterans have access to healthcare and auxiliary support, like social work. This is also a prime opportunity to encourage transitioning servicemembers, especially those who are enlisted grade 7 or below, to apply for SNAP.

Moving forward, I encourage all who strive to reduce food insecurity among veterans to balance the need to address immediate food shortages with the need to address contributing factors.

Once again, I thank the Subcommittee. And I wish all veterans in the Subcommittee and abroad a very happy Veterans Day.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Kamdar follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF NIPA KAMDAR, PH.D., R.N., FNP-BC, CYPRESS, TX

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. As a nurse practitioner and researcher, I recognize food insecurity as a threat to the health and well-being of Veterans who have served our nation. Now it is my honor to serve them and work towards finding solutions to address food insecurity that affects too many of them.

Before I begin, I would like to clarify that although I am employed by the Veterans Health Administration and hold a faculty appointment at Baylor College of Medicine, today I am presenting to you as a private citizen. The views and opinions expressed in this testimony are mine and do not necessarily express the official policy or position of Baylor College of Medicine or the Veterans Health Administration. I do not speak for either entity today.

Thank you for allowing me to share my work with you. Nearly all the Veterans who participate in my research ask what I will do with the information they openly

and bravely share. This opportunity to testify before the Members of this Subcommittee allows me to directly communicate what I learned from them with those who have power to make change.

Understanding the Problem

Food insecurity is the lack of access to healthy food often due to financial limitations and is a complex issue.

To grapple with an understanding of the problem, I approach it in two ways. One is to place a quantifiable number to capture its scope. Using data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), I learned that Veterans who are food-insecure are almost three times more likely to suffer from very-low-food security compared to non-veterans with similar socioeconomic characteristics (*i.e.*, age, gender, race/ethnic background, level of education, marital status, and income).¹ Very-low-food security is associated with decreased food intake and skipping meals which could result in feelings of hunger. Adding to this concern, in another study using data from NHANES, my team and I found that Veterans dealing with very-low-food insecurity have an almost a four-fold increase in odds for suicidal ideation.²

Although these statistics provide evidence that food insecurity is a serious threat, they do not capture the daily struggles of Veterans who are food-insecure. For that, I listened to Veterans who have experienced food insecurity.

Since 2018, I have been learning directly from Veterans who have lived with food insecurity to better understand their day-to-day challenges, and—importantly—work with them to identify how to assist them. Some of themes I am about to share come from research that is still in progress. Any names I use are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the Veterans.

1. Getting food to the table is much more than having the ability to buy food.³

Other factors to consider in effort to ensure Veterans have the ability to get food to the table include:

- Access to resources like time, transportation, kitchen tools and equipment, social support (*e.g.*, friends and family).
- Personal capacity including physical and mental health.
- Military training/experience and life experiences prior to joining the military. These experiences often shape Veterans' willingness to ask for and/or accept help. For example, many Veterans describe a military ethos of "making do with what they got" and may not ask for help even if they need it. As a Marine Veteran explained: "We can't show weakness. We have to show we have everything under control even if we have struggles."

Attempts to address food insecurity that do not account for these factors will be inadequate.

2. Mental health and well-being play heavily into the Veteran's capacity to care for themselves and their basic needs like food.

Carl is a 55 year old Air Force Veteran. He separated from active duty in 2015. On his return home from deployment his life spiraled down. His wife left him and took their son. In his effort to pay child support, he ended up living in his car and was food-insecure. His "head was messed up" and he did not have the capacity to help himself. Finally, in 2019, he walked into a VA clinic and got connected with a case manager who helped him.

His take-away message was that "Veterans have lots going on and if their head is not in the right space and things are hard, they'll give up . . ."

3. "No one is ever just food-insecure." (Ed, 39 year old Marine Veteran)

¹Kamdar N., Lester H.F., Daundasekara S.S., *et al.* *Food insecurity: Comparing odds between working-age veterans and nonveterans with children.* NURS. OUTLOOK. 2021; 69(2): 212–220. doi:10.1016/J.OUTLOOK.2020.08.011 ([https://www.nursingoutlook.org/article/S0029-6554\(20\)30625-4/fulltext](https://www.nursingoutlook.org/article/S0029-6554(20)30625-4/fulltext)).

²Kamdar N., Horning M., Geraci J., Uzdavines A., Helmer D., Hundt N. *Risk for depression and suicidal ideation among food-insecure U.S. veterans: data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Study.* SOC. PSYCHIATRY PSYCHIATR. EPIDEMIOL. 2021; 1:3. doi:10.1007/s00127-021-02071-3 (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33770225/>).

³Kamdar N., True G., Lorenz L., Loeb A., Hernandez D.C. *Getting Food to the Table: Challenges, Strategies, and Compromises Experienced by Low-Income Veterans Raising Children.* J. HUNGER ENVIRON. NUTR. Published online December 7, 2020: 1–21. doi:10.1080/19320248.2020.1855284 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19320248.2020.1855284>).

Nearly all the Veterans I have met in my studies struggle with other basic needs like housing, transportation, and childcare. They are making hard decision on how to spend their next \$20: groceries or gas?

As Sheila, a 34 year old, single mother of three and Army Veteran explained: “How much [I am] spending on gas affects how much [I have] left over for food, because even though food is a necessity, gas is one too. So, when it comes to deciding between food and gas, gas comes first over food. I can’t lessen the gas.”

4. Sense of desolation when the request for assistance is turned down.

Haley is 35 year old Army Veteran and single mother of three children. She has applied for SNAP four times but never qualified. Even when she was in a shelter, her application was denied because she was a few dollars over the eligibility line. Ultimately, she stopped applying. She said, “I have been burned so many times that I don’t try it anymore.”

5. Many Veterans who are food-insecure implement survival skills like rationing of personal intake.

To ensure that their children did not experience hunger, Haley and Sheila are just two of many parents who, when food supply is low, will cut back on their personal consumption to make sure their children have enough food to eat. In Sheila’s words: “I’ve skipped out on meals plenty of times, plenty of days. I’ve actually fed all of my family, and there’s no meat left, because, like . . . so I would give my portion [to the children], so everyone can get full. And just would tell them, ‘Oh, I ate.’” Too many Veterans adopt this coping strategy.

It is unclear how the stress of living in this sort of survival mode/stress affects the health and well-being of Veterans overtime but getting them access to assistance as soon as possible needs to be part of the solution.

6. Finding assistance is often a matter of chance or luck.

Sarah is a 33 year old Army Veteran with three children. Years ago, when she was homeless and pregnant, Shannon’s “life was gratefully rescued by a fellow veteran on the bus one day”.⁴ The fellow Veteran noticed her Army T-shirt. He asked if she needed help and she said yes. He directed her to a Veteran Center where she was fed and connected to other much needed resources. This event was a major turning point in her life.

What would have happened if Sarah and her fellow Veteran were not on the same bus that day? She, and other Veterans, cannot afford to leave finding assistance to luck.

The experiences that these Veterans share point to the complex nature of food insecurity. This complex nature also adds to the challenges of finding effective solutions.

Finding Effective Solutions

Ultimately, the goal in understanding the problem is to apply the findings towards developing and evaluating effective solutions.

An initial step to this difficult task is to organize the various solutions using the Public Health Model of Prevention. This model consists of three-levels of prevention: primary (focused on preventing the problem in the first place), secondary (identifying the problem as early as possible), and tertiary (reducing damage and preventing the problem from getting worse).

Tertiary Prevention of Food Insecurity

I start by describing tertiary prevention because most efforts to address food insecurity focus on tertiary prevention through charitable food distributions and/or USDA food assistance programs like SNAP, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch Program. These programs are essential for Veterans who are suffering from food insecurity as they directly address the immediate lack of food. Increasing awareness of and accessibility to the USDA programs, in particular, would benefit many of the Veterans who are food-insecure.

⁴Downey S., Helmer D., Kamdar N. *Shannon’s ETS (Expiration of Term of Service) Experience: How Engaging with Veterans Informs Researchers and Shapes Practice*. JOURNAL OF VETERANS STUDIES. 2021; 7(1): 241-4. doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.237 (https://journal-veterans-studies.org/article/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.237/).

Secondary Prevention of Food Insecurity

Screening using validated tools like the Hunger Vital Sign™, if implemented correctly, will help identify Veterans who are struggling with food shortages. There is increasing awareness among healthcare clinics about the need to screen for food insecurity. Yet, many Veterans who have unmet food needs may not seek healthcare. Their first point of contact may be community organizations. Therefore, we need to facilitate screening and referral systems where Veterans are.

Primary Prevention of Food Insecurity

Finally, the most effective, but also the most complex solutions, address the root causes of food insecurity in effort to not let it happen in the first place. To achieve this level of prevention, we need to move upstream and examine what places Veterans at risk for food insecurity. What are those contributing factors?

So far, my current study and that from prior research indicates that food insecurity is highly intertwined with physical and mental health, housing instability, and financial instability. This means that efforts to address food insecurity need to also tackle issues like access to healthcare, stable housing, and financial stability.

Additionally, Veterans have described the initial 6 to 12 months post-separation from active duty as being a time of high risk for food insecurity. This is about the time that they run out of money, may still be looking for a job, and may have not yet received care for health-related issues.

Thus, another proactive approach to reduce their risk for food insecurity is to leverage the Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (TAP) curriculum to facilitate registration into the Veterans Health Administration. This will help transitioning Service Members have access to healthcare and auxiliary support like social work. This is also a prime opportunity to encourage transitioning Service Members to apply for SNAP. The target group for such an effort would be transitioning Service Members who are enlisted grade 7 (E-7) or below.

Conclusion

I appreciate the Subcommittee's recognition that to have effective solutions, we need to understand the problem—however complex it may be. I also thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to share how current and future solutions fit in the public health model of prevention.

Moving forward, I encourage all who strive to reduce food insecurity among Veterans to balance the need to address immediate food shortages with the need to address contributing factors.

Efforts to prevent food insecurity need to start prior to separation from active duty (primary prevention). For those Veterans who have already separated, early identification of Veterans with unmet food needs (secondary prevention) and assistance to access programs that will meet their immediate food needs and contributing factors will be critical to reduce the negative outcomes like sense of desolation and suicidal ideation (tertiary prevention).

Our nations' Veterans served and protected us. Now we need to serve them.

The CHAIRWOMAN. I don't think I was unmuted.

Thank you for your testimony.

I now recognize our final witness, Mr. Keefe. Please unmute and begin when you are ready.

**STATEMENT OF TIMOTHY KEEFE, VETERAN, U.S. NAVY,
ROCKLAND, ME**

Mr. KEEFE. Good morning or afternoon. Now I am confused with all the Zoom stuff. But, Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Tim Keefe, and I would like to start by saying that I worked since I was 11 years old. I never had to worry about being hungry. I would just work and I would eat. It wasn't until I couldn't work that I experienced real hunger. Boy, that was a blow.

I suffered an injury at work, as the Chairwoman said. And after 2 years of surgeries and physical therapy, occupational therapy, it was another 2 years before I could get even the status to get back to work, as the Department of Labor had me medically unable to

work. So, with no income or address by that time, I became homeless.

I applied for SNAP benefits and received \$194 worth of food. This was crucial. However, because of work restrictions, I was cut off after 3 months.

I brought all my paperwork to SNAP and a declaration by the Department of Labor that I was medically unable to work. I was told that this did not qualify me for disabled status in which the work restriction would be waived. I showed my doctor's paperwork, which basically cleared me from work, although the Department of Labor wasn't reading it that way. This was to no avail.

I then asked for the paperwork I needed to volunteer to satisfy the work restrictions that way. The screener told me he didn't feel comfortable putting me into a volunteer situation with my injury. So, I asked, "What do I eat?" He said there was an appeal process that I could go through and appeal the decision. So, I asked, "What do I eat until then?" I waited in silence for a solid minute as he stared blankly back at me and finally said there was nothing he could do for me.

In the year that followed, I filed appeals to both SNAP and the main Department of Labor for a change in status, but I lost all of them. In the meantime, I had to add seven holes to the belt I was wearing to keep my pants up. My conditions devolved into that of a caveman. That is all I could think of. I am living like a caveman, nothing better than that.

Foraging took up a lot of my time. But once a month, I could hitchhike 25 miles to visit—in either direction, actually, which was fortunate—I could visit the food pantries there. I was able to fill a backpack with enough food to give me a meal a day for 2 weeks, if I stretched it. Still, there were more days than I care to remember where there was nothing to eat.

The food bank offered supplemental food once a month and had me eating one meal a day, but the food bank has limited resources. And I am truly grateful for that food, but I know that I still lacked nutrition and calories. SNAP, in my particular case, would have gone a long way to bolster my health during this time, as I continued to wade through a seemingly endless appeals process.

Unfortunately, I can tell you firsthand that when you have gone a couple days without food, your whole being cries out for it with a desperation I can't explain. You can't sleep, as tired as you are. You can't do anything but think about and try to get food.

I contemplated stealing food. I could hitchhike down to the supermarket and fill a backpack. And, if I got caught, I would go to jail and I would eat. If I got away, I could have the food and I would eat. But I was able to resist this urge. It is a desperation I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

A little more than a year later, I turned 50 and aged out of the work restrictions. I immediately reapplied—I think I was in there on my birthday, if I am not mistaken—and received that \$194 benefit. It amounts to about \$6.45 a day. But it didn't take long for my health and energy to increase. I started gaining the weight back. The return of SNAP benefits meant that I could concentrate on improving other areas of my life, and a year later, I was working again.

I would like to also raise awareness for the veterans who are not disabled but are returning to society with the unique experience of having to adjust from a combat zone to everyday life. Surely, we could feed them.

When I swore into the Navy in Boston, I was ready and willing to give my life for this country, and it seemed like, during this time, I couldn't even get a sandwich from them.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Keefe follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF TIMOTHY KEEFE, VETERAN, U.S. NAVY, ROCKLAND, ME

Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is Tim Keefe, and I'd like to start by saying that I have worked since I was 11 years old. I never had to worry about being hungry because I could work and eat. It wasn't until I couldn't work that I experienced true hunger.

I suffered an injury at work and for the next 2 years I went through two surgeries, physical and occupational therapy. But it would be another 2 years before I was medically able to return to work, as far as the Maine Department of labor was concerned. Eventually what money I had ran out and I found myself homeless and living in a tent in the woods in the winter in Maine.

With no income or address, I applied for SNAP benefits and received \$194 worth of food per month. Which was crucial. However, because of work restrictions on SNAP benefits I was cut off after 3 months. I brought all my paperwork to the SNAP office including the declaration by the Department of Labor that I was medically unable to work. I was told that this did not qualify me for disabled status in which the work restrictions would be waived, I showed my doctor's paperwork which cleared me for work but the DOL wasn't reading it like that. It was to no avail. I then asked for the paperwork that I needed to volunteer and satisfy the work restrictions that way . . . the screener told me that he didn't feel comfortable putting me into a volunteer situation with my injury. I asked, "what do I eat?" He told me that there was an appeal process and I asked, "what do I eat until then?" I waited in silence for a full minute for an answer, but the screener must have thought it was rhetorical because he just stared blankly back at me until finally stating that there was nothing he could do.

In the year to follow, I filed appeals both to SNAP and the Dept. of Labor for a change in status, but I lost all of them, while in the meantime I had to add seven holes to my belt just to keep my pants up. My conditions devolved to that of a cave-man, foraging for food took up a lot of my time. Once a month I could hitchhike 25 miles and visit the food pantry. This was lifesaving, I was able to fill a backpack with enough food to give me a meal a day for 2 weeks if I stretched it. Still, there were more days than I care to remember where there was nothing to eat.

Unfortunately, I can tell you first hand that, when you have gone a couple of days without food your whole being cries out for it. You can't sleep, as tired as you are, you can't do anything else but try and get food. I contemplated stealing food many times with the justification being that if I got away with it, I would eat, if I got caught, I would go to jail for at least some amount of time, and I would eat. It's a level of desperation that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

A little more than a year later I turned 50 years old and aged out of the work restrictions, I immediately reapplied and received that \$194 benefit. It amounts to about \$6.45 per day but I'd didn't take long for my health and energy to increase and I started gaining the weight back.

The return of the snap benefits meant that I could concentrate on Improving other areas of my life and another year later I was working again.

When I swore into the navy at the Military Entrance Processing Station in Boston, I was ready and willing to give my life for my country. During this time in my life, I felt like my country wouldn't even give me a sandwich in return.

TIM KEEFE,
Navy Veteran.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Keefe.

At this time, Members will be recognized for questions in order of seniority, alternating between Majority and Minority Members.

You will be recognized for 5 minutes each in order to allow us to get to as many questions as possible.

Please keep your microphones muted until you are recognized in order to minimize background noise.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes of questioning.

First of all, Mr. Keefe, thank you for your service and for your powerful testimony. You are exactly what Members of this Committee—your testimony is exactly what Members of this Committee need to hear as we search for solutions.

I understand that after you turned 50, you were able to access SNAP benefits, since the time limit on benefits for adults without dependents phased out at that age. Based on your experience, do you believe that the SNAP work requirement incentivizes work, or do you think they have unintended consequences specifically for veterans?

Mr. KEEFE. Well, definitely unintended consequences. I feel like there was like a fissure that I fell through, this Catch-22 that just opened up in front of me and swallowed me up. So, definitely that.

Work restrictions, I mean, isn't laying your life down on the line enough work?

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you, Mr. Keefe.

Dr. Kamdar, you mentioned in your testimony the sense of desolation that veterans feel when they are denied assistance. How can we better address hunger and food insecurity among veterans who are living on the poverty line? And, based on your research, would allowing people to save more money while still qualifying for SNAP—for example, raising the asset limit—be helpful in this situation?

Dr. KAMDAR. I do believe that one of the reasons why many of the veterans who told me that they applied for SNAP couldn't qualify was because their disability counted as income. So, if the disability could be removed as an income qualifier, then perhaps that would open opportunity for more of them to get SNAP benefits.

I am sorry. Can you repeat the first question that you had?

The CHAIRWOMAN. Yes. I said, how do we better address hunger and food insecurity amongst veterans who are living on the poverty line?

Dr. KAMDAR. So, I think having those safety nets available to them, having access to those safety nets is critical. That addresses the immediate needs that they have. But then, also, we need to consider childcare, transportation, housing, because they are all so interrelated. So, if we only focus on food and we neglect those other important and critical needs, we are only addressing part of the problems that they are facing.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Do you think that we need to make specific changes that are unique to our veterans and servicemembers, because, as you mention, it is a different population?

Dr. KAMDAR. They have their own unique culture, and I do believe that the way we approach them to help them needs to be unique to their culture. Most veterans I have met don't want to feel like they are getting a handout. But if they can understand that this is assistance that they have earned, that they deserve, and it is presented to them respectfully and honorably, those are the ap-

proaches that we need to make sure that they are receiving the care with.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you.

Ms. Hollywood, studies have shown that food insecurity is associated with increased risk of negative mental and physical health outcomes, including depression, hypertension, diabetes, and oral health problems. These outcomes seem particularly problematic for servicemembers, whose jobs often depend on staying physically and mentally fit.

Do you believe that food insecurity harms our military readiness and recruitment and retention efforts?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Our resources do not have a specific statistic on that, but I would say that, as a veteran, who served for 20 years in the Air Force, that anything that impacts our military readiness is an important problem we need to attack.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you. I think it is critical to note that this is a population that has higher instances of disability. So, we really need to, in my opinion, think about the way disabilities are counted towards benefits in most of these cases.

Thank you all for your thoughtful answers to my questions.

I yield back. And I now recognize the distinguished Ranking Member, Mr. Bacon, for his questions. You can unmute.

Mr. BACON. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

Thanks for all the testimony today.

And, Mr. Keefe, thank you for sharing. Did you say that you were not—they wouldn't allow you to have disability, did I understand that correct, or you weren't offered a disability recognition?

Mr. KEEFE. Yes. So, of course, I went to the Feds and had them examine me for Federal disability, and they said, "No, I was fine." My doctor said my condition would improve. I had torn cartilage in my hand, which I see people working with one hand. I just didn't understand what was happening to me at the time.

Mr. BACON. Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.

And, Mrs. Hubbard, I have had one of the command chiefs of one of the services visit with me recently, and he told me that the pay for our junior enlisted really hasn't been reviewed in decades. And so, what we have seen is, like, every year, you get a cost-of-living increase, but when you do a three percent raise, for example, at a lower pay *versus* the higher grades, the disparity keeps getting bigger.

Would you not think that maybe a more effective way of trying to address food insecurity, I would think, for our junior enlisted is maybe reviewing the pay?

Mrs. HUBBARD. Yes. I agree that military pay levels need to be looked at, and I think that is an issue and a solution that is working, really far upstream on this issue, which is, of course, I think where we all need to focus, right, as far upstream on these issues as we can.

It is a big lift, I think. And I think, in the meantime, some of the other proposals and solutions that are being put forth and that we will discuss today, can help these families to be able to put food on the table.

But, yes, I agree. I think we have so many more enlisted members who are supporting families and need additional supports.

And so, we really do need to look at how the composition of our military has changed over time and make sure that our pay and the benefits are supporting them adequately.

Mr. BACON. Okay. Well, thank you. I appreciate that feedback.

And I am hearing some feedback from our senior enlisted leaders in the military thinking it is time that the HASC or the Armed Services Committee and the Personnel Subcommittee may take a look at this. And I just heard that last week, in fact, from a lot of them.

So—and maybe I will turn over to Mrs. Hollywood—or Ms. Hollywood. Excuse me. I know we have worked hard on extending family tours or tours of our enlisted so that spouses could get employment more easily, so they don't lose their jobs. We are also looking at licensing laws so that, if you are licensed in Virginia, it will work in, say, Illinois or whatever and so forth.

Are you seeing a positive impact here of some of these adjustments we are making on families for spouse income?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. So the needle is moving, but it is not moving nearly fast enough. And the primary reason why it is not is the childcare issue, because, the licensing is great, but if we don't fix the childcare issue, we are never going to move the needle on military spouse unemployment.

Mr. BACON. Okay. Now, most bases offer childcare. So, are you saying it is not enough capacity at each base or some of the bases are not doing it? Because every base I have been on has childcare provisions.

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. In my Active Duty life, I was a squadron commander for those units that did run childcare facilities, and [there was] never enough capacity. Never enough capacity, coupled with the cost. And, granted, childcare facilities on military installations are subsidized, but there is just increasing costs on and off installations.

So, that is really a primary concern of military spouses that has prevented successful military spouse—the unemployment for military spouses for the needle to move like we would like to see it.

Mr. BACON. Okay. Well, I don't know if it is—I would be curious to get [more] from the Military Subcommittee [on] if this capacity has gone down or up. I did 30 years in the Air Force, and where we were at, like at one base, we had two childcares there, so it is maybe hit and miss depending on which base. But I think most of the bases I have been on have tried to provide that capacity, because I know it is a concern for a lot of families.

You mentioned you didn't think we should count housing or the substance—the food allowances towards pay. But for some, that is over a thousand or could be up to \$1,500. It varies based on where you are living. But you don't think they should count that towards determining SNAP income. Is that what I am hearing?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Yes. I think we need parity with our civilian—military family members need parity with their civilian counterparts. This is not taxable income. BAH isn't taxable, the housing allowance. So, it almost feels like having BAH be part of what makes you eligible or not—eligible for SNAP—is a disservice, and it is not on par with what our civilian counterparts would have to count in their income.

Mr. BACON. Do civilian counterparts get VAS and housing allowance?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. No, but their salaries would be reflective of those different allowances.

Mr. BACON. Yes. I guess that is a debatable point, but I appreciate your perspective on it, then.

One other thing I wanted to—I guess I am out of time, so I better yield back to the Madam Chairwoman. So thank you.

The CHAIRWOMAN. I was going to let you go, Representative Bacon. I will add, from the Committee, thank you again for your service. Thirty years is quite impressive.

And to Ms. Hollywood, to your point, highlighting the childcare issue, that is part of the President's Build Back Better agenda to offer universal pre-K and a seven percent cap for childcare costs, because we have heard this over and over from different communities.

I now recognize the gentleman from Massachusetts, Representative McGovern. You have 5 minutes for your questions.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Well, thank you very much, Madam Chairwoman.

And look, this is not a new issue. We have been talking about this. You have been talking about this. I know Mazon has been talking about this, and others have been, Blue Star Families have been talking about this for years. The bottom line is that the powers that be haven't done anything about it.

The Pentagon has known this for years, and yet, they have not come up to the Hill and asked that we not count the housing allowance toward total income so that those people who are struggling could actually get SNAP. They haven't done that.

And they haven't been up here, shaking the trees for better compensation for enlisted servicemen and -women. That has to change. I mean, we know there is a problem—there is a problem here. For anyone to imply that there is not a problem is ignoring reality. And, by the way, it is not just amongst Active Duty servicemembers; it is amongst our veterans.

Mr. Keefe, I want to thank you for your service to our country as well. And I want to thank you for sharing your story today. I first learned about you through a *Washington Post* article in which it talked about what you went through.

And I think, all too often, the voices of people with lived experiences are left out of policymaking. And I hope that my colleagues on this Committee who have advocated for harsher time limits and work requirements are listening to your testimony, because, in real life, things don't fall into nice, neat categories. There is a lot of gray area, and that is where your situation is.

And, by the way, the average time that somebody is on SNAP anyway is less than a year. But in your case, you have clearly laid out how cruel these requirements are—they do not make sense—and how complicated the lives of people living and struggling in poverty are.

So, I want to ask you: What kind of things would have helped you make ends meet after you lost your job? I mean, what can Congress do to better help people who fall into your situation? In addi-

tion to not having these harsh and cruel time limits or work requirements, how could the system have been more helpful to you?

Mr. KEEFE. Well, to start with, a complete audit of the workmen's comp system would probably show a couple of—reveal a couple things. But, it really dawned on me that the Department of Labor's decision didn't affect SNAP, and the Federal decision didn't affect the Department of Labor's decision. It dawned on me these agencies are at odds with each other in dealing with me at the time, and it was creating quite a vortex that I was falling into. The paperwork on the appeals I have for all of this is ridiculous.

What would have helped me? As the doctor said, stopping the bleeding. Immediate stopping the bleeding.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Right.

Mr. KEEFE. If I could have gone to the military medical center and gotten something to eat and maybe a box of food or something that would have been great.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Right.

Mr. KEEFE. And mirroring the food banks, because this is an effective program.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Right. Right.

Mr. KEEFE. These people give you food. You walk out of the building with food. There is no red tape in between. There is no anything. They give you food.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Right. Right. But, clearly, if there had been no arbitrary time limit on your SNAP benefit that would have helped, right? That would have provided for you, right?

Mr. KEEFE. Oh, yes.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Which, again, real life is complicated. It doesn't fit into nice sound bites, and I really appreciate your testimony.

I know I am running out of time, but I do want to thank my friends at MAZON for their attention to this issue. They have for a long, long time been sounding the alarm about the seriousness of the hunger problem amongst our Active Duty servicemen and -women, but also amongst our veterans.

I mean, people who put their lives on the line for our country, people who served our country are in this situation where they don't know where their next meal is going to come from. All of us should be ashamed.

And, again, this is not a new revelation we are hearing here today. We have been hearing about this for a long, long, long time. The question is whether or not we are going to do anything about it or whether we are going to raise questions as to whether this is all real. It is real.

And, we have heard from Mr. Keefe. There are lots of other people. Talk to our friends at Blue Star Families as well. They have documented case after case after case. So, look, we know there are solutions here. We have to act. We have to do something.

And I know I am out of time, but I want to thank you all for your testimony. This is really helpful. And as we approach Veterans Day, let's all resolve that we are going to, by next year, have done something so that we don't have to hear these stories and we have actually helped make people's lives better.

I yield back.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you, Mr. McGovern.

I now recognize the gentleman from Tennessee, where it is 70° today, Representative DesJarlais.

Mr. DESJARLAIS. Thank you. I appreciate it, Madam Chairwoman. And thank you to our witnesses for appearing today. Clearly, this is an important topic.

And it almost seems as if we should have the VA Committee and HASC Committee included today to discuss this, because they are all intertwined. And we don't want to see anyone in the country go hungry, but we certainly owe a debt of gratitude to our servicemembers and our military veterans, who, as our witness said, put their lives on the line for us, and we want this not to be one of their problems.

But I would like to note that the House Armed Services passed the Fiscal Year 2021 and 2022 Defense Authorization Act that all included provisions related to military hunger and the issues that we are here discussing today.

The DOD had asked for an extension now, I guess, on two occasions to address the reports of hunger within the military, and now the report is due on March 31st of 2022.

So, I think we should all encourage the Department to publish this information so we can get an accurate grasp on the situation and see what committees of jurisdiction should get involved here. Like I said, I think probably VA has—and possibly Ag.

Now, it is interesting, in the 2018 Farm Bill conference report, we did attempt to address this. Chairman Conaway had suggested that \$500 of the BAH not be included. And for some reason, MAZON's reaction, among others, led to that provision being dropped from the fiscal 2018 Farm Bill.

So, I do take a little issue, Mrs. Hubbard, with you saying that nobody cares and nobody has tried to do anything. That maybe wasn't enough, but it was something, and I am not sure why that olive branch was rejected.

So, I guess I would just close with, again, thanking all of our veterans and military personnel. We certainly want to solve this problem, and I am committed to working with those other committees to find a way to alleviate this problem.

And wish everyone a happy Veterans Day, and I will yield back.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you, Congressman.

I now recognize the gentlelady from North Carolina, Representative Adams. You have 5 minutes for questions.

Ms. ADAMS. Thank you, Chairwoman Hayes and Ranking Member Bacon, for hosting the hearing today. And thank you to our witnesses for your testimony. And to our two veterans who are speaking today, who are witnesses, thank you so much, Ms. Hollywood and Mr. Keefe, for your service.

It is disheartening to know that so many of our veterans and our military families don't know when their next meal will be. No one in this great country, especially the men and women who wear the uniform and bravely served, should ever go hungry.

But we must address long-standing barriers to veteran and military families' participation in SNAP with innovative and proactive solutions, which is why, earlier this year, I introduced the Closing the Meal Gap Act of 2021 (H.R. 4077), a bill that would eliminate eligibility time limits and unrealistic barriers for SNAP. Provisions

like these are crucial and would prevent SNAP recipients from losing their benefits when they are not able to meet work requirements.

For example, how we heard today of Mr. Keefe's testimony, creating a barrier to food access does not help anyone secure employment or make our communities healthier.

So, Mr. Keefe, thank you again for your service and your willingness to share your story. Can you provide an estimate of how long after you became food-insecure did you first apply to SNAP for benefits?

Mr. KEEFE. Well, it wasn't until after the workmen's comp had run out, so 2 years after my injury.

Ms. ADAMS. Yes. Okay.

Mr. KEEFE. And so, that day, they gave me 3 months' worth, which was the stipulations, and then cut me off—

Ms. ADAMS. Okay. Were you screened for food insecurity at a healthcare facility while you were getting treated for your injuries or provided with resources to prevent you from becoming food-insecure and homeless?

Mr. KEEFE. Well, they asked. They asked if you had food, but that was about it. Really, all—there was only the food pantry was my lifeline.

Ms. ADAMS. I see. Okay. Okay.

Mr. KEEFE. Really, they were the only ones to offer.

Ms. ADAMS. Right. I think you have already indicated at least what you think Congress can do to make sure that the veteran experiences that are not the same kinds of hardships that you experienced. So, thank you for sharing that.

Ms. HOLLYWOOD, as we all know—again, thank you for your service as well—the basic allowance for housing is currently considered as income when determining a servicemember's eligibility for SNAP. So, do you know why SNAP doesn't exclude the basic allowance for housing as income but WIC does?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that that is definitely a barrier to—that having the BAH be part of income is definitely a barrier for military families, as is the fact that BAH is only pegged at 95 percent of the local area's rent. So even that difference, that five percent, is another barrier, to be honest, with military families' pay.

Ms. ADAMS. Okay. Right. Mrs. Hubbard, can you respond to this question?

Mrs. HUBBARD. Yes. I mean, I think from where we sit, it is simply an oversight. And that the BAH is not listed among many exclusions that are included in the SNAP program. So, that includes, as already been mentioned, it is not counted or considered income for Federal income tax purposes. And for most Federal assistance programs, it is not treated as income.

Ms. ADAMS. Okay.

Mrs. HUBBARD. And so, it really seems to be an oversight, and it may have been unintended, but it has persisted.

Ms. ADAMS. Right. Okay.

Mrs. HUBBARD. And so now it is a choice, and we need to—

Ms. ADAMS. Thank you.

So, Dr. Kamdar, you mentioned that efforts to prevent food insecurity need to start prior to separation from active duty. So, could you please elaborate briefly on what efforts we should be focusing on and how Congress can help in this regard?

Dr. KAMDAR. Well, and as I said in my statement, my suggestion is that as the veterans are going—or as the transitioning servicemembers are going through the TAPs courses, if there is a way that they can be signed up for healthcare through the Veterans Health Administration, that would at least connect them with healthcare so that there is not a gap there.

Ms. ADAMS. Right.

Dr. KAMDAR. And then, once they are in the VHA system, they would have access to other support systems, like social worker and case managers, who can direct them when the needs arise, or hopefully prevent the need from arising.

Ms. ADAMS. Right. Well, thank you very much.

And I am out of time. Madam Chairwoman, I am going to yield back.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you, Representative Adams.

I now recognize the gentleman from Indiana, Representative Baird. If you can unmute, you have 5 minutes for questioning.

Mr. BAIRD. Well, thank you, Madam Chairwoman and Ranking Member Bacon.

I really appreciate this hearing today, but I would really want to start off too just by saying and expressing my appreciation to all of our nation's veterans and for all those that have worn the uniform of the United States Armed Forces.

And I want to thank Mr. Keefe for his testimony.

Now, my question really deals with the concern I have about hunger in any demographic, but on this basic concern about and has been expressed here already today, about veterans and Active Duty personnel.

So, I am concerned that, I don't feel that we have the kind of data that we need to make the analysis, and we don't have—I don't know that we have an overall feeling of engagement. So, my question, then, is to any member that would like to address this.

The organizations that you represent—have you conducted research and come up with various conclusions on this topic? And then I want to know how—have you tried to share or have shared that with DOD or the VA or the House Armed Services Committee?

So, any one of you that would like to start is welcome. You—if you want me to do it—

Mrs. HUBBARD. No. I am actually happy to chime in. Thank you, first, for your service, Representative Baird, and for the question. It is an important one, this issue of the lack of data around these issues.

Obviously, we don't have enough data, and the Federal Government has not collected enough data. And there are definitely some gaps that need to be filled, and thankfully we have colleagues in the field who have conducted studies and tried to give us information that we can use to make better public policy.

But the Federal Government really is the place that has the capacity, the reach to really document this issue, and needs to be held accountable to do it. And it is that lack of recognition that is

really a problem. And it is simply unacceptable that we don't have the data.

And I guess I would say, not only does the government need to be held accountable, but it is also not an excuse for inaction. And, hungry families, they can't wait for data. They can't eat another hunger study. And so, while we need to continue to really push for the numbers—we also have to act. We can't wait any longer.

Mr. BAIRD. Dr. Kamdar?

Dr. KAMDAR. I am presenting today as a private citizen, so I really can't speak about any data that is in the VA or elsewhere.

I will say that we have been able to use data from surveillance, surveys like the Current Population Survey and the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys, but it would be nice to have additional data.

Mr. BAIRD. Ms. Hollywood?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Sir, we have been conducting the annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey for 10 years now, so we do have data that I think could help us get the ball moving forward in the right direction, along with the data from the U.S. Army Public Health Center that was conducted recently among 11,000 soldiers of two different installations.

So, I think there is some data, there is a data baseline. Continued data analysis would always be welcome, but I do think there is enough data now to actually help move the needle in the right direction.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you.

Dr. Kamdar, I have about, it looks like about 58 seconds left, and so my question to you is, I really appreciated you recognizing that veterans really are a unique culture in and of themselves. There is a bond there, that is, as you approach them, you have to make sure you approach them appropriately.

But I just thought I might ask you exactly how you think we ought to address homelessness, hunger, and unemployment for veterans. And you have 26 seconds, not to put pressure on you.

Dr. KAMDAR. I don't have an eloquent answer in the 15 seconds I have left to address that, but I will say that veterans depend on other veterans. So, some solution, I think the veterans are the best people to go to to ask, "How can we help you?" And that is the approach that I take in my research.

I don't have the solutions. I turn to the veterans to ask them, "How can I help you; how can we help you?"

Mr. BAIRD. Nice job. You did it within time.

So with that, I yield back, Madam Chairwoman.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you, Representative Baird.

I now recognize the gentleman from Illinois. Representative Rush, you have 5 minutes for your questions. Please unmute and begin.

Mr. RUSH. I thank you, Madam Chairwoman, and the Ranking Member for convening this particularly important hearing this morning. I join this conversation as a veteran of our armed services and also as a pastor of a local church that takes seriously the charge to feed the hungry and provide services for all of our wanting citizens and needy citizens.

As a pastor of a church, as a Congressman, and also as a Vietnam-era veteran, these roles have informed my perspective on the points of addressing food insecurity for our veterans and also for our active servicemembers.

Madam Chairwoman, let me make sure that I am clear on this. Our veterans are one of our nation's most appreciated and most valuable assets. Their sacrifices should be, again, appreciated, and their requisite skills should also be eagerly anticipated in regards to our nation's future.

And that said, Dr. Kamdar, I agree that the three-tiered approach is critical to prevent, to stop, and to treat the damage caused by food insecurity. While I agree with Ms. Hollywood's call to not allow the Federal Government to abdicate its responsibilities to the charitable sector, I firmly believe that there is a role for religious organizations and not-for-profits in this vital work.

Churches, community organizations, know their communities best, most of all, and they work with their communities on a day-to-day basis. And they are able to marshal food and intervene to provide assistance to the very veterans that we are concerned about, if they are given the priority of proper support by the Federal Government.

So, my question, Dr. Kamdar, what is the current role of churches and not-for-profits in providing primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention of food insecurity, and how can the Federal Government better empower them to play a more effective role?

Dr. KAMDAR. Well, I can address how churches can play a role in the secondary and tertiary prevention. Most of the veterans that I have encountered, when they are in need, they go to the community for assistance. And churches are one of those safe spaces that can ask their congregation, including those who are veterans, if they need assistance, if they are lacking any—if they are short on food. So, screening would be one of them.

And then the tertiary prevention, as you stated, churches are there to help, and they can be that source for the immediate needs, the ones that helped Tim keep his—stay alive, for all practical purposes.

So, they can be a source of immediate relief, but they can also be a source that can help connect veterans to other resources that they need to address those upstream barriers that they may be facing.

So, if there is a support mechanism that can help them address those questions that they have, be a source of support, not just providing the food, but also helping to help them be an advocate.

Mr. RUSH. Madam Chairwoman, I only have a few seconds, so I yield back the balance of my time.

Madam Chairwoman, I yield back the balance of my time.

The CHAIRWOMAN. I am sorry. I now recognize the gentlelady from Louisiana, Congresswoman Letlow.

Ms. LETLOW. Thank you, Chairwoman Hayes. As we look to tomorrow to recognize Veterans Day and share our utmost appreciation to the men and women who courageously stepped up to the line of duty to fight for the freedom we all share here at home, I would like to extend a special thank you to the veterans testifying

before us today and all the other servicemembers and veterans for their service to our great country.

Given the sacrifices of our servicemen and -women, I believe it is only right that we, in Congress, ensure that our military and veteran families have the resources and care they need to prosper.

However, for the purpose of this hearing, I echo the sentiments that my Republican colleagues have shared before me. Some of the topics discussed today are the direct jurisdiction of the House Armed Services Committee and matters pertaining to the Department of Defense.

While the Agriculture Committee has oversight of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's supplemental nutrition programs, the committees of jurisdiction and the DOD need to be at the table to provide their insight and findings as it relates to the financial stability of Active Duty members and those transitioning out of the service.

Ms. Hollywood, in your written testimony, you highlighted the barriers that military spouses face when considering gainful employment and how it contributes to families' financial stress. Can you speak to the workforce development services Blue Star Families undertakes, specifically for unemployed spouses?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Yes, thank you. One of the things that we really strive to do at Blue Star Families is partner with other organizations to share resources. So, we are a hub of resources for our military spouses to help them find not only resources on the training side, to help them get some of the needed training they may need. Maybe they have been out of the job market for a few years because they were living in a state and then they moved to another state and couldn't find similar employment.

So, not only do we find those additional resources, we provide mentorship opportunities, and then we also connect with industry partners who are really looking to increase their pipeline of military spouses.

I think the more we can educate industry on the ongoing problems with military spouse unemployment, the more we can get industry to employ our military spouses and learn about their unique situations as a result of being a military spouse.

Ms. LETLOW. Thank you. That is encouraging to hear. I do have a follow-up question as to relates to our veterans. Does Blue Star Families provide any services for individuals transitioning out of the service to help them find post-Active Duty employment or help them navigate other programs offered, and how would you measure the success of these programs?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Yes, we do provide those programs. Our programs are open to both Active Duty and veteran families. So, any transitioning veteran who would like to come in and take part of any of our programs, that is an option for them.

We measure success of our programs through an annual impact survey, and we also do program evaluations after each particular program that we do. So, I would say we have had some good success moving the needle and trying to get military spouses employed.

We have hosted—I think our current pipeline of military spouses who are looking for training is over 10,000 people. So just getting

folks in the door to try to get resources, is also a measurement of success on the military spouse part.

Ms. LETLOW. Thank you so much, Ms. Hollywood. I yield back.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you, Representative Letlow.

And I will just add that while hunger is a very complex issue and there are multiple committees that have jurisdiction, the House Agriculture Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations Subcommittee, this Committee, has jurisdiction over policies and statutes related to nutrition, including SNAP, domestic commodity distribution, and consumer initiatives. So, it is absolutely something that we should be working to try to address.

I now recognize the gentleman from California. Representative Carbajal, you have 5 minutes for questions.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you, Chairwoman Hayes and Ranking Member Bacon. My Central Coast district is home to a robust military community, including Active Duty military personnel and many veterans who have devoted their lives to protecting our country.

As a veteran myself, I am committed to ensuring that our brave men and women who have sacrificed so much for our country, along with their families, have the resources they need.

Mrs. Hubbard, as has been discussed, you highlight barriers servicemembers face when their basic allowance for housing is treated as income, which can affect their eligibility for Federal nutrition programs like SNAP.

You also highlight other factors that increase a servicemember's chance of being food-insecure, like base salaries that do not reflect the reality of our modern military force and the lack of access to affordable childcare.

The Military Hunger Prevention Act (H.R. 2339), a bipartisan bill I co-led with Members of this Subcommittee, including Representative Panetta, Ranking Member Bacon, and Representative Baird, would create a basic needs allowance to support low-income servicemembers who are not eligible for SNAP.

Can you please speak on how this bill would improve the crisis at hand? I know you have touched on it already, but if you can expand on it, I would greatly appreciate it.

Mrs. HUBBARD. Yes, thank you, thank you for the question and for your supporting leadership on this.

The Military Family Basic Needs Allowance, if enacted, would basically call on the DOD to automatically notify servicemembers of their potential eligibility for this allowance, if they are at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty line, which is the base minimum of the gross income threshold for SNAP.

And you know, the DOD doesn't have all of the households' information, and so a servicemember would have to report additional income, including their spouse's income.

They could opt out if they chose not to participate, but if they did qualify and were able to participate, they would basically get kind of a plus-up in their base pay, which would put them at above the 130 percent poverty line.

And it is really an opportunity to respond to the barriers that we are seeing in SNAP and to be able to give these servicemembers a little extra money they can use to respond to basic needs.

So, we have bipartisan support for it, and I am really hoping we can get it done. The full provision is in the House NDAA. The Senate version, unfortunately, does include the BAH as income. So that particular version of it would not be as effective, and we are hoping that the House version will be the version that ends up in the final NDAA bill.

So, we really appreciate your work on it and your leadership on the Committee who have also supported us.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you. And following up to that, could you also speak on how this bill could help improve mental health outcomes for our military's serving families?

Mrs. HUBBARD. Yes. Yes, thank you for that. I think a number of us have mentioned in our earlier remarks about the correlation between food insecurity and negative mental health outcomes, including suicide, and so I think responding to food insecurity is a critical action that we can take to address the crisis of increasing rates of military suicide.

And so I think whether it is the screening that we are doing or in the care that is being provided, and one of the things that I mentioned was the Solid Start program, the Veterans Suicide Prevention Program, and being able to make sure that folks are getting information about food insecurity and about resources that they can use, including the SNAP program to address it, will help with this interconnection between food insecurity and mental health outcomes.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you so much.

Madam Chairwoman, I yield back.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you for your questions.

I now recognize the gentleman from New York, Mr. Jacobs. I am not sure if he is on.

Okay. The next Member that I had on the Republican side is Representative Cammack from Florida.

Okay. I recognize the gentleman from California, Representative Panetta. You have 5 minutes for questioning.

Mr. PANETTA. Okay. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. I appreciate this opportunity, and, of course, thank you to all of the witnesses as well as my colleagues who are not just interested but actually focused on doing something about this pressing issue. So, thanks to all of you and especially the witnesses who are willing to discuss some of these tough issues of military hunger and hunger amongst our veterans.

As you have heard, and I think we all kind of believe that these issues really represent a failure of our government to serve those who have served us. And today you and my colleagues that we have heard from have expressed a number of the complicating reasons but also some solutions that we can put forward here in Congress to help.

For example, we have heard how the USDA counts the BAC—excuse me—BAH towards income when considering SNAP eligibility. That has resulted, as you know, in low-income military families being disqualified from SNAP and having to rely on food pantries and food banks for emergency food assistance.

That is why, to address that specific issue, I introduced the bipartisan Military Hunger Prevention Act, which you have heard

discussed, talked about. And I was fortunate to have the support of my colleagues on this Subcommittee, Reps. Bacon, Baird, and Carbajal.

And this bill would make up for that loss by providing military households with a basic needs allowance to purchase groceries.

Now, although it is unfortunate that SNAP military families must resort to that program, I do believe it is our responsibility to ensure that those families, at the least, have access to this necessary support, that they need to lead healthy, food-secure lives.

Now, we are going to continue to work on this policy in the conference NDAA, and I encourage all of my colleagues, not just at this hearing but throughout Congress, to join in that effort.

Now, we have also heard what we must do to support our military spouses who struggle with unemployment. That is why I was proud to introduce, along with Representatives Delgado and Bacon the Military Spouse Hiring Act (H.R. 2947), which would make military spouses eligible for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, so that businesses are actually incentivized to hire those married to our servicemembers.

We have to do more to take care of those who have protected us, who have served us, and not deter the good men and women from enlisting or serving in our armed services.

Now let me just hit on the bill, if I could, a couple of questions on the Military Hunger Prevention Act. As we noted, that BAH counts as income when determining SNAP eligibility.

Now, my legislation would address the unacceptable situation and ensure that these families are able to put food on the table. And so, Mrs. Hubbard, I know you have talked about this already, but how would a food allowance change the circumstances for servicemembers who are currently relying on food banks, if this legislation was passed?

Mrs. HUBBARD. Well, as you mentioned, it would basically give folks some additional resources and increase their purchasing power for things like food, for their basic needs. And you know, I think we want to see that. I think if folks—if they don't have these resources, they are turning to the charitable sector for food, and that is unacceptable.

I think there is nothing wrong with food pantries for emergency needs, but it is unacceptable that servicemembers are turning to pantries routinely to help feed their families.

And so, this benefit would really enable folks to have some additional resources to be able to adequately address their basic needs for food.

Mr. PANETTA. I agree. And I think your word *unacceptable* is more than appropriate.

Let me just—I have a few minutes left. Ms. Hollywood, you note that one intersecting issue, along with the issues that we have discussed with the basic allowance for housing, is military spouse unemployment.

And as I have noted and I just talked about the Military Spouse Hiring Act, which would make military spouse eligible for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, how would that help address the unemployment crisis amongst military spouses, and if you could also

elaborate on the key drivers of military spouse unemployment in your answer?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. So, the main key driver is the lack of childcare. Another key driver is military spouses unfortunately need flexible and a lot of times remote work. Because, if you have a military spouse who is deployed for 6 months out of the year, it is a much different dynamic than a family whose spouse doesn't go on deployments. So, then you are left with a whole other set of problems.

But, I think anything that helps move the needle for military spouse unemployment and gets employers more interested in hiring military spouses, as this Act would do, would be a great move in the right direction. So, I think that that would really open the door to more employers pursuing hiring of military spouses.

Mr. PANETTA. Thanks, Ms. Hollywood, and thanks to all of our witnesses for highlighting such an important, unacceptable issue as what we have been talking about today.

I yield back, Madam Chairwoman. Thank you.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you, Representative Panetta.

I am not sure if the gentleman from New York rejoined. Representative Jacobs?

Or the gentlelady from Florida, Representative Cammack?

Okay. I now yield to the gentleman from Florida, Representative Lawson. You have 5 minutes for questions.

Mr. LAWSON. Thank you very much, Madam Chairwoman, and I would like to say happy Veterans Day to all of those Members on this Committee who are veterans and served for so many years.

My question would be primarily to Mrs. Hubbard right now, but anyone on the panel may answer. Mrs. Hubbard, you mentioned in your testimony the need for Congress to explore a transition of benefits for servicemembers and their family leaving the military service.

In your opinion, what sort of services should be included in the transition of benefits, and how long should they last?

Mrs. HUBBARD. Well, thank you, thank you for the question. And I think that period of transition between active service and transition back to civilian life, I think is a critical time, and it is a time when the risk for food insecurity can rise.

And so, I think the VA and the DOD need to do a better job at improving kind of the policies and the systems that help folks making that transition. One of the things that I mentioned in my testimony was for the TAP program, needing to be a better bridge to Federal food programs like SNAP.

I think, from my understanding, the program could be more effective at delivering information about those resources.

I think oftentimes folks who go through the program, it is kind of like a fire hose of information that is hard to retain, and so I think thinking about different ways to be able to link people to these resources during their transition is important.

And then the other piece is, looking at providing a 6 month transitional SNAP, a temporary, targeted, transitional SNAP program for exiting servicemembers at a certain rank level, so that they don't have to worry about food security during those 6 months while they are establishing themselves, while they are finding a

home, and finding a job, and getting back on their feet in the civilian world. So, something like that I think would be very helpful for servicemembers during that critical time.

Mr. LAWSON. Did anyone else on the panel want to comment on that?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. So, I think getting upstream on some of the problems will also help with transitioning veterans. So, back to my earlier comment about the 95 percent of the local housing, the military members get 95 percent of the local housing.

As a person who moved ten times in 20 years, every time you move you have out-of-pocket expenses, and that just kind of complicates things as you then transition out of the military, so getting upstream of those problems is another way to solve this.

Mr. LAWSON. And one other question I wanted to ask to the Committee, for the panel, is: does military ranking, regardless to what branch of the service you come out have a great deal to do with whether you are going to have food insecurity?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Our research shows that it is mostly junior enlisted and other enlisted, more senior enlisted families particularly face food insecurity.

Mr. LAWSON. I would like Mr. Keefe to comment on that.

Mr. KEEFE. Well, it wasn't exactly an issue for me, but I did see that happening when I got out and people I know, yes, you didn't make much money when you were in. You are not going to have much money when you leave.

If you are in the higher ranks, you are going to make more money and have a savings. You are going to be able to afford it. It is kind of reflective of American society in general. But I mean, we are only as good—somebody said great country. I think we are only as great as our most disenfranchised person, and that should never be a veteran.

Mr. LAWSON. That is amazing. And I also would like my colleagues and Mr. Bacon and some of them to think about, after serving 30 years or so what it was like when they exited the military.

And Madam Chairwoman, since I only have about a few more seconds, I am going to yield back. I don't think I could get the other question in, which is that I have in the State of Florida the third largest veteran population according to the Census Bureau and about 130,800 of those are women. And I worry about the transition of women back into the workforce and SNAP benefits and everything else with kids and so forth. But I don't have enough time, so with that, I yield back.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Well, thank you, Representative Lawson, and thank you for bringing that to the attention of this Committee.

I now recognize the gentleman from the Northern Mariana Islands, Delegate Sablan.

Oh, did I lose him?

Okay. I will yield to the gentleman from New York, Representative Maloney.

Moving right along, we have a guest joining us today, the gentleman from Georgia and Chairman of the House Agriculture Appropriations Committee, Representative Bishop. Welcome to our Committee. You are recognized for 5 minutes for questioning.

Mr. BISHOP. Thank you very much, Madam Chairwoman. Let me thank all of the Members of this Subcommittee for your attention to this very, very important issue.

Let me also commend Representatives Panetta for the introduction of the Military Hunger Prevention Act, which is very much needed, and I certainly agree 100 percent with the need for the basic needs allowance.

But I would like to ask Ms. Hollywood, Mrs. Hubbard, and then Mr. Keefe to comment about their knowledge of the bill that we have introduced, along with Members of the Subcommittee, dealing with military hunger, the Equal Access to the Right Nutrition for Military Families (EARN) Act of 2021, the EARN Act (H.R. 5346).

I think there have been a number of hearings where Ms. Hollywood and Mrs. Hubbard have participated. I would like for you to comment on it.

Based on what we have heard today, the need for a national eligibility threshold, for example, the need for the transitional assistance, the need for a better data collection to be able to actually document, which we have been looking forward to, the need to have the Department of Defense and the Department of Agriculture work out some kind of cooperative agreement so that they can, together, address this problem for our military families, the possibilities of an automatic enrollment for our military families who would be eligible for SNAP, the basic allowance for housing looked at as we compare that to Section 8, for example, of HUD, which is exempt in calculating SNAP benefits, but for a military family that lives on post and receives the basic allowance for housing, they are penalized.

So, with that background, let me ask Ms. Hollywood and Mrs. Hubbard to comment on how the EARN Act would complement the Military Hunger Act that Mr. Panetta has offered and which we hope will soon become law.

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Thank you, sir. The EARN Act has been helpful in raising awareness about military food insecurity. And short-term solutions like the EARN Act, inclusion of the basic needs allowance in the NDAA, and removing barriers to SNAP eligibility from the farm bill even more broadly are extremely helpful.

I do believe, though, in the long run, that the root causes that I addressed earlier in my testimony really need to be resolved in order to prevent this problem from existing in the first place.

Mrs. HUBBARD. And thank you, Congressman Bishop, for your commitment to ending hunger among military and veteran families.

I think the EARN Act has really started and contributed to this larger conversation about how to address these issues in a comprehensive way, and you know, I think we welcome any legislation that is going to generate more conversation about potential solutions, and we welcome the opportunity to work on this with you and also, to be a part of future hearings where we are able to explore this particular piece of legislation further.

I mean, I think from where I sit, I think the single most important thing that we can do right now is pass the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance provision in the NDAA. It is on the table now, and it would provide immediate assistance to families.

But we certainly look forward to exploring other viable options to address this issue. That one piece of legislation and that one provision is not going to get us there. It is going to be a great start, but we definitely would be open to talking about other ways that we need to address this issue because it has been too long of an issue to have been ignored the way it has.

Mr. BISHOP. Thank you. I think my time is about expired, but if you could share some top-line conclusions from your upcoming report, Blue Star Families, on the disproportionate impact that Black and Hispanic families in general face in particular. Can you share some top-line conclusions quickly?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Sir, I don't have the actual stats right now other than our research did actually say that military families of color—and we haven't released—we just conducted a military families of color study this summer. The results aren't all finalized yet, but our top-line results do show that food insecurity is higher in military families of color than their white peers. We will be releasing those results in February of 2022.*

Mr. BISHOP. Thank you very much, and thank you, Madam Chairwoman, for allowing me to participate in the hearing.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you. Thank you, Congressman Bishop. I now recognize the gentleman from New York, Representative Maloney. You have 5 minutes for questions.

Mr. MALONEY. I want to thank the Chairwoman so much for convening this hearing, and I am particularly delighted to learn more about this subject and to see my constituent, Denise Hollywood here from Port Jervis, New York.

People who don't know the area may not realize that Port Jervis is in western Orange County, New York, on the border with Pennsylvania and New Jersey, but it is also not that far from the United States Military Academy at West Point.

And so right now, I think the largest construction projects in the Army are at West Point. We spend, and properly so, a huge amount of taxpayer dollars making sure we have the best trained, the best equipped, most extraordinary group of young officers anywhere in the world coming out of the United States Military Academy.

And yet just a few miles down the road, an organization like Blue Star Families, right, is working on an issue that represents a whole nother spectrum of the reality that so many people who serve in our military face.

And so, I really just want to give you an opportunity to explain to folks who may find this hard to believe what the unique barriers are, Ms. Hollywood, to military families when they are trying to access the SNAP benefits that they have earned.

And it is particularly glaring to know how many are accessing benefits because they are food-insecure and their families, but of course, there are a great number that are eligible that aren't receiving those benefits. And I would love to give you an opportunity to talk about that if you could.

***Editor's note:** the report referred to is retained in Committee file and is available at: https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf.

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Thank you, sir. And yes, I was up at West Point yesterday. Lot of construction going on in that area. One of the things I think that we have seen in our research is that—and whether it is food insecurity or whether it is financial insecurity that military families—you have to go through your chain of command to get help. Oftentimes you have to go through your chain of command to get help, and there is this stigma that is associated with that. So, I think really trying to overcome that even with terms, like, maybe *food insecurity* isn't the right way to approach it with our military families and our veterans, like maybe we need another nourish to flourish, or some other way that we can help destigmatize this issue with our military families.

And then again, getting them the access that they need to those resources. The three real areas that we talked about getting down, upstream of the problem, military spouse unemployment, the unreimbursed relocation expenses that all military families get every time that they move, and then just the out-of-pocket housing expenses because the housing allowance doesn't meet a hundred percent of the actual rents in that area.

I think those are the three main causes that we see that actually continue to make this problem not go away for military families.

Mr. MALONEY. And I know you have done important work on this with the Military Family Lifestyle Survey, and if you could just expound on that a little bit, please, because we have certainly seen this in other areas where we are trying to help our vets and their families, and sometimes, yes, there is a reluctance to ask for help. And that barrier, which is sometimes self-imposed, is particularly challenging. Talk a little bit about how we can do better on that and what some of the survey work you have done can tell us.

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. We have been doing this Military Family Lifestyle Survey for 10 years now, and what we do then, we are not a lobbying group, but we are an advocacy organization. We have tried to bring this, the results of these surveys to senior government leaders to help them help us move the needle.

Our theory of change is we listen, partner, share, and act. So, what we try to do is listen to what military families are really saying, and we get a lot of great input from military spouses who really bear the burden of military moves. They bear the burden of childcare. They bear the burden of maybe household incomes that aren't as high as they would like because of spouse unemployment issues.

So, when we gather this research, then we work with partners to try to find creative solutions, and we share that information with government leaders to help us advocate for solutions such as the ones we have discussed today on this panel.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Representative Maloney, you are muted.

Mr. MALONEY. Excuse me. Well, thank you so much, and we really appreciate your help in shining a light on this important issue, particularly as we celebrate our veterans and military families on Veterans Day. So, thank you all for your important work, and thank you, Madam Chairwoman, for holding this hearing, and I yield back.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Thank you. Mr. Keefe, it seems like you are the only one that knows how to work the mute button here.

I think that brings us to the end of our Member questioning. If there are any other Members on the platform who would like to ask a question, I will now recognize you.

Okay. With that, I invite the Ranking Member, Congressman Bacon, to share any closing comments he may have.

Mr. BACON. Thank you very much. And again I thank our panelists for being on today and sharing your perspective.

Madam Chair, I have a statement from the American Logistics Association. They provide some details on how the supply chain also affects food insecurity for our military, so I would like to submit that for the record.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Without objection.

[The statement referred to is located on p. 56.]

Mr. BACON. Thank you.

Also, I just want us to be careful if we start talking about changing BAS and BAH, in the end, we do not want that to be considered taxable income, or real taxable income, because it will end up being a 10 or 20 percent cut with taxes taken out for these individuals. So, we just want to be careful how we address this, in my view.

And there was—I had maybe a follow-up question, but maybe it is too late to get the panelists to comment on this. There was a mention on there that minorities are affected more. I would love to get a little more detail how that works if it is the same pay, the same thing. So maybe I will come back and try to get those details because I would like to understand that better.

And I will just also commit to the Chairwoman and to the team that I am going to write a letter to DOD. I want to get their position on this. I could do it, I am also on the HASC. I mean, I could do it either way here, but we need to know, is this a real issue with our junior enlisted ranks. And if it is, the military needs to say it is and give us the scope of the problem, and we need to work into it and lean into it and figure out how we are going to fix this.

So with that, Madam Chairwoman, I just appreciate the time to makes some closing remarks. Thank you.

The CHAIRWOMAN. Well, thank you, Representative Bacon, and thank you for your unique perspective on this issue, and again thank you for your service.

I would also like to sincerely thank all of the witnesses today. We genuinely appreciate you for being here to share your experiences. Your testimony and answers to our questions paint a picture of the challenges faced by veterans and Active Duty military members that we will need as we work to remedy this problem on this Committee.

I hope we can all agree that even one hungry veteran or servicemember is too many. I ask the other Members of this Committee to reflect on what we have heard today and to come together to find solutions that will ensure our veterans and servicemembers have the basic dignity of knowing that they will have food on the table for themselves and their families.

Under the Rules of the Committee, the record of today's hearing will remain open for 10 calendar days to receive additional material and supplemental, written responses from the witnesses to any questions posed by a Member.

This hearing of the Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations is adjourned. Thank you.
[Whereupon, at 1:41 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]
[Material submitted for inclusion in the record follows:]

SUBMITTED STATEMENT BY HON. JAHANA HAYES, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM CONNECTICUT; ON BEHALF OF BRITTANY DYMOND, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on this important topic.

As an organization, the VFW tirelessly advocates for veterans and their families. From health care to economic opportunity, the VFW works to ensure all veterans—past, present, and future—have the benefits and tools they need to be successful after service. While it is not lost on us that working-age veterans are 7.4 percent more likely to reside in homes experiencing food insecurity, we want to take this opportunity to discuss the unconscionable issue of food scarcity within the ranks of those fighting our nation's battles today.

Our country relies on the patriotism and selflessness of individuals and their families to sustain our all-volunteer force. Those who join willingly accept the inevitable challenges that come with military service including mentally, physically, and emotionally demanding training and often multiple deployments. They further accept that they may sustain irreparable injuries, both visible and invisible. Most prominent of all, service members assume the very real risk that they may make the ultimate sacrifice while serving our nation.

By nature, volunteering for military service means accepting the unknown with the exception of the one assumed guarantee that one will have the means to satisfy their most basic needs after they raise their hand. Unfortunately, an alarming number of service members learn that is not the case. An estimated 160,000 enlisted active duty troops have difficulty feeding themselves and their families. Accordingly, even though military readiness is paramount, many service members cannot fully engage their missions since their families struggle to eat and satisfy other basic necessities. This is unacceptable.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life. A 2020 Blue Star Families (BSF) survey showed that 14 percent of enlisted active duty military families experienced low- or very-low-food security in the twelve months prior to the survey. While junior enlisted families (E-1-E-4) were the most impacted at 29 percent, enlisted families of all ranks reported food insecurity. A separate survey by the Military Family Advisory Network found that between early 2020 and early 2021, 20 percent of currently serving respondents reported challenges with food scarcity.

Why Military Food Insecurity Matters

Food insecurity within the ranks is an issue of national security since it directly impacts recruiting and retention. In general, lack of regular access to enough food can lead to poor long-term health outcomes such as chronic diseases, stress, and weight gain. For children, food insecurity can adversely impact childhood development, lead to more frequent hospitalizations, and create behavioral health issues. A May 2021 National Military Family Association (NMFA) survey of over 2,000 military teens revealed that over 65 percent want to serve in the military. This is in stark contrast to just 13 percent of Americans aged 16 to 24 identified by a Department of Defense survey only 2 years prior. With so many enlisted families experiencing food insecurity, we must consider the likelihood that the eligibility of some of our most promising future recruits has been and is being sabotaged.

The aforementioned NMFA survey also found that nearly 36 percent of military teens are worried about lack of food. Without considering fitness for military service, the experiences of this group may discourage them from joining as they seek alternative career paths with less perceived risk. More broadly, prospective recruits with families may not consider a military career if they are worried about potential food insecurity. Both instances result in the loss of prospective talent, undermining our nation's efforts to attract the best and brightest.

From a retention perspective, food insecurity has been associated with a decreased likelihood of staying in the military. While low base pay is an obvious variable, high rates of spouse unemployment and underemployment due to frequent relocations, licensing challenges, and child care issues, for example, lead to lost household income and hampered spouse career growth. These challenges have been made even more acute by the COVID-19 pandemic as families transitioned to remote schooling. The 2020 BSF survey also found that 35 percent of spouses needed or wanted to be employed, but were not.

Also contributing to families' financial distress is that many do not qualify for state and Federal assistance benefits, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This occurs because Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is included in calculations that determine benefit eligibility. Absent meaningful changes in support for military families, retention of affected service members will continue to be challenged.

What the VFW is Doing

VFW Posts across the nation are doing their part to help solve hunger in their communities. In addition to posts that make fighting hunger a monthly priority, many around the country have stepped up during the COVID-19 pandemic by hosting food drives and teaming up with other community organizations to provide meals to those in need.

On a national level, together with Humana, the VFW oversees the Uniting to Combat Hunger (UTCH) campaign. Established in 2018, our campaign has partnered with several organizations to provide meals to those in need. Between launch and 2019, UTCH joined Harvesters (a regional Feeding America affiliate) and the VFW Department of Florida to provide over 550,000 meals to those in need—enough for over 137,500 families of four. In 2020, when faced with the health and safety challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the team turned to food pantries located within Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals. Leveraging generous cash donations, UTCH had provided the equivalent of over 1,000,000 meals by the end of July 2020, which marked the close of the 2020 campaign.

With COVID-19 precautions continuing during 2021, UTCH is again leveraging cash donations by partnering with Feeding America. By August 15, 2021, the equivalent of over 505,000 meals had already been generated. To maximize participation, the 2021 campaign will continue through December 31, 2021, with the goal of providing another 1,000,000 meals. Donations are sent to Feeding America affiliates closest to U.S. military bases and VA hospitals.

Solutions

Counting BAH as income creates inequities among military families and also between military and civilian families. Cost of living differences between bases result in vastly different BAH rates, which can inflate or deflate income calculations used to determine assistance eligibility. As such, some military families in high cost-of-living areas are ineligible for food assistance even though they might have otherwise qualified had they been stationed at a base with lower living costs. Since BAH is similar to Federal housing assistance, the VFW believes it should not count as income when determining eligibility for SNAP and similar food assistance programs. Accordingly, USDA should amend this program's guidelines to exempt BAH from counting as income.

Furthermore, Congress should pass the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) as outlined in H.R. 4350, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022*, as this version would exclude BAH from the BNA eligibility calculation. For families experiencing food insecurity, this additional benefit would bring urgently needed relief as they continue to navigate COVID-19-related challenges and regain financial stability going forward.

Last, while we understand other fixes may not be in this Committee's jurisdiction, the VFW believes Congress must diligently address barriers to military spouse employment. This includes policies that generate, provide, or otherwise support flexible and remote working opportunities that accommodate the military lifestyle. Congress must also work to expand on-base child care access that is high quality, affordable, and accommodating of military work schedules.

Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the Subcommittee Members may have.

SUBMITTED STATEMENT BY HON. DON BACON, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM NEBRASKA; ON BEHALF OF STEPHEN ROSSETTI, PRESIDENT, AMERICAN LOGISTICS ASSOCIATION

Thank you, Chair[wo]man Hayes and Ranking Member Bacon, for the opportunity to provide this statement on this vital issue and we appreciate the Committee's involvement and interest.

The American Logistics Association is a 100 year old trade organization that represents all companies in the military food supply chain from source to shelf. This includes major consumer packaged goods companies, distributors, brokers, and marketing and technology organizations.

We have been on the front lines of military and Veteran food insecurity both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic.

The military and veteran food insecurity issue has two major aspects.

One is financial. There indeed is the difficulty of some families to make ends meet and this often results in having to trade off between food and other necessities. And, there is a program designed to address this much of this difficulty: It's called the military commissary system. Taxpayers and patrons of these commissary stores have invested billions of dollars into a food insecurity prevention infrastructure and Congress annually provides nearly \$1.1 billion per year to offset operating costs. This results in an average 24 percent savings off of food prices outside the gate and often these savings reach 40 percent or higher in certain locales. The law protects these savings with Congress saying that if the average savings ever dips below 23.7 percent, Congress will appropriate additional funding to provide for these savings levels. The commissary program not only exists for active duty military and their families but also for millions of retirees and veterans including some 3.5 million disabled veterans that were provided the commissary benefit only a few short years ago.

And, now, to augment this commissary investment and in recognition of the plight of some military families, the Congressional Defense Committees are moving to focus funding on the most distressed families with a "Basic Needs Allowance." And, we believe that this Basic Needs Allowance can be turbo-charged by leveraging the commissary system. For every dollar of the Basic Needs Allowance that would be redeemed in the commissary stores, the military family member gets an additional 25 percent in value for their dollar. This means that for every dollar the taxpayer invests in the basic needs allowance, an additional 25 percent is gained when using the commissary.

The second aspect of addressing and preventing food insecurity for veterans and military is taking care of the food supply chain from source to shelf.

Mobilizing to provide food for military families during the pandemic was no less a war mobilization task than moving equipment and personnel into a combat theater. It was a mobilizing to care for people to meet a human need instead of war-time need but a need no less.

First, we want to bring to the Committee's attention the tremendous work that the Defense Commissary Agency has done in ensuring products for our military families during the pandemic. Particularly we wish to recognize and salute the tens of thousands of brave commissary and military exchange workers and industry partners who went into the stores to serve the military when the pandemic was hitting in full force. They showed up, rolled up their sleeves and went to work for military families—at great risk. This included thousands of shelf stockers, warehouse workers, cashiers, and military broker and manufacturer representatives.

The Pandemic exposed vulnerabilities to the military's food supply chain that we are still working through including shoring up key distribution hubs on the East and West Coasts to military families overseas. We are working with the Department of Defense to have them recognize the need to bolster the military food supply chain. This supply chain is global, constant, and essential with long-lead times to far-flung corners of the globe.

The performance of commissaries, their exchange brethren and industry partners in the military consumer marketplace was magnificent during the pandemic. It was only a short 14 months ago during the darkest and most uncertain days of the pandemic when COVID hit overseas areas first—areas where military bases were located—South Korea, Italy, Spain, Germany, Japan. The military supply chain went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that products were supplied. The Department of Defense declared commissaries as "Mission Critical" and major work-arounds were instituted to ensure that product got to military families. This included airlift in many cases as borders closed and massive efforts to keep distribution hubs disinfected at great cost to distributors. It's the untold story of the pandemic, a story of bravery, innovation and a tremendous demonstration of the best of the private- and public-sectors coming together to care for the best people in the world—our military. Manufacturers worked to get product to distribution centers and these distribution centers went to expensive and massive efforts to stay open by sanitizing trucks, pallets, and all of those things that go into keeping the supply chain humming.

We appreciate the efforts to provide food banks for Veterans, military personnel and their families and ALA member companies provide product and labor to support efforts such as the Military Family Advisory Network's million meals challenge. And, we appreciate and support a basic needs allowance for truly needy families that can't make ends meet. But handing out free meals is not sustainable over the long-term. We believe that the long-term and sustainable solution for military and

Veteran hunger rests with the private-sector and public-sector coming together to underpin and leverage the existing investment that has been made and continues to be made in the commissary benefit.

We believe a multi-faceted long-term sustainable approach is called for:

- Leverage the investment that the taxpayer has made in these commissary stores.
- Develop mechanisms to incentivize and encourage food manufacturers to recognize the unique aspects of the military food supply chain and allocate adequate product to provide for military family needs at commissaries at home and abroad.
- Stop or limit the practice of recovering some costs of operating the commissaries through price increases and return to the pre-2017 practice of selling goods to military and Veteran consumers at the cost that the government pays for products. In a food insecurity and inflationary environment, it doesn't make any sense to mark up food at the shelf at a time when Congress is looking to provide additional funding to help military families put food on their table[.]
- Include food distribution to the military bases as a "critical supply chain capability" that must be funded, maintained and bolstered just as Department of Defense is moving to shore up other critical supply chains for vital Defense components and systems. Recognize and fund personal protective equipment and other measures needed to ensure that main distribution hubs do not go down.
- Provide an identification credential that enables Veterans that have the commissary privilege to easily access military bases and take advantage of their commissary benefit.
- Provide funding for delivery of discounted groceries from the commissary stores to patrons living off base.
- Stretch any funding of the Basic Needs Allowance by 25 percent or more by developing ways to incentivize and promote the use of the commissary stores including easy redemption of their Basic Needs Allowance in the stores and waiving the five percent surcharge for customers redeeming the Basic Needs Allowance.

We appreciate the Committees interest and stand ready to assist in any respect to address this vital issue.

SUBMITTED QUESTIONS

Questions Submitted by Hon. Don Bacon, a Representative in Congress from Nebraska

Response from Mia Hubbard, Vice President of Programs, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

Question. Do you think it is the role of the Department of Agriculture to subsidize the Department of Defense? If so, why?

Answer. May 13, 202[2]

Dear Congressman Bacon:

Thank you for the interest in the recent hearing on the topic of hunger among veterans and servicemembers, and for your request for additional information.

The Jewish community has a rich tradition of asking questions and wrestling with different perspectives in order to discover the meaning and truth about an issue. However, asking the *right* questions is critical in the pursuit of understanding. The questions that you posed—about whether I think it is the role of USDA to subsidize the Department of Defense, and if so, why?—strike me as misguided and based on some questionable assumptions.

I challenge you to ask some other questions as well, to help inform a more comprehensive understanding about the nature of food insecurity within the military and veteran populations. For instance, how have Congress and Federal agencies allowed military hunger to manifest and persist? How can Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Administration address these long-overlooked issues?

In my response below, I will try to briefly share perspectives from MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger's expertise on military and veteran hunger and suggest other questions that might be worthy of your consideration.

First in response to your question: no, I do not think that it's the role of USDA to subsidize DOD, but I do not believe that was the focus of our conversation during the hearing. If you're referring to SNAP, it's clearly more than just a "subsidy"—

it is our country's most important anti-hunger program, providing critical benefits to millions of people each year. We believe that USDA and DOD must coordinate more closely to make sure that military families are not falling through the cracks of our nutrition safety net—as you know, MAZON has advocated for the Administration do this through removing the policy barrier that currently prevents some servicemembers from accessing SNAP and strengthening the newly-mandated “Military Family Basic Needs Allowance” to ensure that all military families can put food on the table.

I believe Congress must update military compensation policies to better reflect the current reality of our Armed Forces, which includes many more military families than in previous generations. However, until those compensation structures are rectified and/or the basic needs of military families are fully met through implementation of directed supports—such as the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance that passed in the House version of the FY22 National Defense Authorization Act—then SNAP should be available to provide needed assistance to struggling families, be they civilian or military.

I think the notion implied in your question is that it is not appropriate for military families to receive support from SNAP. Informing that notion might be a negative characterization of SNAP, one that has been fed over the years by some harmful and sometimes racially coded cultural stereotypes.

So in response to your question, I would say that it should be the role of the Department of Defense to provide adequate compensation and benefits to all servicemembers so that they are able to fully meet the basic needs of their families. Because this is not the current reality and there are thousands of military families struggling to meet their basic needs, then I do think that SNAP benefits should be available to provide assistance until the needs of military families are fully addressed, either through adjusting existing compensation and benefits or through another mechanism, such as a fully adequate benefit that reaches all military families in need through the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance.

As you consider solutions to address the issue of food insecurity among our military families, there are some different questions that I would urge you and your staff to explore and reflect upon:

- Why has this situation been allowed by Congress, the Department of Defense, and Federal agencies to persist for so long?
- Why has the Department of Defense been so uncooperative in collecting data, making it publicly available, and advancing solutions to this problem?
- Why has the Department of Defense previously denied that there is a significant problem with military hunger and suggested that those who are struggling have only themselves to blame because of their own financial mismanagement?
- If it is not the role of USDA to support struggling military families, what more does Congress and the Department of Defense need to do to fulfill its responsibilities and truly take care of those who serve?
- Given the issues of shame, stigma, and fear of retribution that surround the issue of food insecurity within the military, what can be done to eliminate the negative perceptions and stereotypes that have made it more difficult for individuals to seek needed assistance?

You will find some reflections on the questions above as well as additional information and recommendations in MAZON's report, *“Hungry in the Military”*.¹ I encourage you and your staff to review the findings in this report as you consider solutions to address this long-overlooked and unacceptable problem.

I hope that my response, and the additional questions that I have shared with you, are helpful as you and your colleagues work to end military hunger. MAZON greatly appreciates your concern about this issue and your leadership as a cosponsor of the Military Hunger Prevention Act, which mirrored the full Military Family Basic Needs Allowance provision that passed in the initial House version of the FY22 NDAA. We also recognize your engagement with Mission: Readiness and the concerns about childhood obesity that threaten future recruitment for our Armed Forces and note that addressing the military hunger crisis now will help to support the goals around future recruitment and fitness to serve by ensuring support for children from military families that experience food insecurity. MAZON looks for-

¹<https://mazon.org/news/mazon-statements/new-mazon-report-hungry-in-the-military/>.*

* **Editor's note:** the report referred to is retained in Committee file.

ward to partnering with you to once and for all put an end to the preventable problem of military hunger.

Sincerely,

Mia M. Hubbard

MIA HUBBARD,
Vice President of Programs,
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger.

Response from Lt. Col. Denise Hollywood, (Ret.), U.S. Air Force; Chief Community and Programs Officer, Blue Star Families

Question. Do you think it is the role of the Department of Agriculture to subsidize the Department of Defense? If so, why?

Answer. Ongoing government efforts to address military family financial insecurity by working to increase child care availability, solve spouse employment challenges, and address military pay inadequacies all are vitally important. However, military families facing hunger need access to immediate interventions, such as SNAP benefits, to prevent negative health and financial consequences while long term solutions are identified and implemented. Providing access to resources that allow military families to lead productive, healthy lives while in service to our country is the responsibility of all government departments to the fullest extent allowable within their respective authorities.

Response from Nipa Kamdar, Ph.D., R.N., FNP-BC

Question. Do you think it is the role of the Department of Agriculture to subsidize the Department of Defense? If so, why?

Answer. As a reminder, I am testifying as a private citizen. The views and opinions expressed in this testimony are mine and do not necessarily express the official policy or position of Baylor College of Medicine or the Veterans Health Administration.

My area of research focuses on Veterans. However, in speaking with Veterans, they remind me that active-duty Service Members take an oath to defend our nation and are willing to risk their lives in their service. In contrast, making sure that they have adequate access to healthy food for themselves and their families seems like a small ask. The primary responsibility for this assurance should be that of the Department of Defense. Service members need to have livable wages that meet the cost-of-living for the area where they are based.

As one Marine Veteran explained: Troop welfare must come first. They can't be mission ready if they are struggling to get food on their table. The Marine Veteran told me about how he and his partner, even after careful budgeting, only had \$62 per month to spend on groceries while he was serving. He did not realize at that time how close to the edge of financial collapse he and his partner were living.

Having said that, if a subsidy from the Department of Agriculture will reduce the struggle to get food to the table, then yes—a subsidy is needed. Yet there needs to be an awareness that a subsidy does not solve the underlying issue of financial stability. A subsidy from the Department of Agriculture, if it is treated similar to the SNAP program, would provide immediate, temporary relief from food shortage; however, until underlying contributors to food insecurity—like low wages, inadequate childcare, spouse employment opportunities—are not addressed, Service Members and their families will continue to live in a state of financial stress which could impact their health and wellness.

Response from Timothy Keefe, Veteran, U.S. Navy

Question. Do you think it is the role of the Department of Agriculture to subsidize the Department of Defense? If so, why?

Answer. The sad part of this question is that so many active duty families cannot survive on a military salary and until they can, they should surely be able to access food, [whether] in the form of [SNAP] benefits (you don't join the military to get rich so lots live below the poverty line), or governmental or military food distribution, so my answer is yes, if the military budget is too small to take up the slack, then the Dept. of Agriculture should.