

Hunger Among Veterans and Servicemembers Understanding the Problem and Evaluating Solutions

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Statement of

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With Respect To

Hunger Among Veterans and Servicemembers:
Understanding the Problem and Evaluating Solutions

Washington, D.C.

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.

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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 (E1–E4) 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 two 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.

Lastly, 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.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2021, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.