

U.S. House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition

Testimony of
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Distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Nutrition and Committee on Agriculture, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

I am Abby Leibman, President and CEO at MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national nonprofit organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the US and Israel. Founded in 1985, MAZON partners with literally hundreds of food banks, pantries, and direct service agencies that provide for people who are hungry and advocate for other ways to end hunger and its causes. MAZON's Board of Directors has made hunger among military families a core priority for our education and advocacy efforts. MAZON has a strong interest in the development of sensible and compassionate food and nutrition policies for military and veterans families. It is on this topic that I would like to speak with you today.

MAZON believes that those who make great personal sacrifices in service to our country should not have to struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals to their families.

We first became concerned about this issue more than 4 years ago when our colleagues from the emergency food network shared concerns about the uptick in the number of military families and veterans turning to them for food assistance.

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Across the country, service members were (and still are) showing up at food pantries, sometimes in uniform, looking for help in feeding their families. While many emergency food providers have responded by developing specific and innovative programs to assist food-insecure military families, most of these organizations are strapped by increasing demands for services in general and have limited capacity to address this population.

MAZON was alarmed by these reports about struggling military families and veterans and determined to investigate the issue. We conducted an exhaustive search for accurate data from the Department of Defense, USDA, the Department of Veterans Affairs, Congress, and direct service providers. We found that hunger is experienced too often among veterans, especially those veterans having difficulty transitioning back to civilian life and the workforce, waiting extended periods of time for disability determinations, or struggling to make ends meet when their disability pay is low.

For currently serving members of the military, food insecurity is triggered by a number of different circumstances, including low pay among lower ranking enlistees, high unemployment among military spouses, larger household sizes, challenges around activation and deployment, and unexpected financial emergencies. There is clear evidence of widespread reliance on food pantries and distribution programs on and near military bases; in fact, MAZON learned from a source at the Pentagon that there are food pantries operating on or near *every single* naval and marine base in the United States! There can be no denying that food insecurity among military families is a real and painful reality and that government safety net programs are not adequately meeting the needs of those who serve our country.

There are three important actions that we urge Congress to take now to begin to address this growing problem:

Demand more data – Despite strong anecdotal evidence, food insecurity among military families is not adequately documented or monitored by government agencies, and indeed the problem has long been obscured and ignored. Data are often withheld from the public or are excessively difficult to obtain. What data we have been able to secure are often contradictory, out of date or simply incomprehensible.

For example, USDA's most recent data indicates that approximately 2,000 active duty service members participate in the SNAP program. However, we believe the scope of the need is significantly larger than that number reflects. This figure only counts families that self-report as active duty military and is derived using a methodology that experts have deemed skewed to underreport the number of military families for multiple reasons. Indeed, according to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 19,455 active duty service members were estimated to receive SNAP in 2014. Similar data for WIC is not even available. So no one really knows the military and veteran participation numbers for these programs, let alone estimates for the true level of need in these populations.

Blue Star Family's Military Family Lifestyle Survey offers a glimpse of the economic hardship and food insecurity challenges for active duty families, as well as some of the barriers that make it more difficult for them to get needed assistance. The 2015 survey reported more than 7% of responding active duty military and spouses faced food insecurity within the past year. Nearly 6% of respondents sought emergency food assistance through a food bank, pantry, or charitable organization, while only 2.4% participated in SNAP.

A more complete understanding of the scope and characteristics of the growing problem of food insecurity among military families and veterans will enable DOD, USDA, the VA and Congress to better identify gaps in federal food program usage and provide a meaningful response to the unique challenges confronting these vulnerable households.

MAZON has sought out additional data to help in this effort by working with colleagues in the House Armed Services Committee to request a General Accountability Office report to explore these issues. Having the House Agriculture Committee weigh in on the need for better government data and accountability, including guidance for the GAO report, will give greater urgency to the call for an effective response to this issue.

However, I must underscore here that in our view, if even one military family goes without adequate and nutritious food, this nation is not meeting its responsibility to those who serve our country! Upon Senate passage of the FY16 NDAA bill, the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee stated, "It is critical for our troops to know that we can put politics aside to support them, their families, and their mission to protect our country." Sadly, when the problem of food insecurity among military families continues to go unscrutinized and unaddressed, such self-congratulatory rhetoric rings hollow.

But data alone is clearly not the answer.

Remove policy barriers now -- Federal policies are denying currently serving military families who are struggling the resources they need to help keep them from experiencing food insecurity.

Many lower ranking service members – especially those with multiple dependents who live off base or in privatized housing – are systematically made ineligible for SNAP because their housing allowance is counted as income. For these families, the best option available to them is to frequent food pantries on and off military bases.

The Basic Allowance for Housing is excluded as income for the purposes of calculating income taxes and eligibility for some federal programs, including WIC and Head Start. By the same token, we believe that the BAH should be consistently excluded as income for the purposes of determining eligibility for *all* nutrition assistance programs. The intent of the BAH is to provide housing for uniformed service members with minimal military overhead costs by relying on the civilian housing market. Yet treating the BAH benefit as income for determining eligibility for

SNAP puts some military families at an unfair disadvantage and disqualifies them from receiving vital food assistance.

MAZON strongly urges an immediate fix to this problem in a way that does not come at the expense of access for others or any funding for nutrition assistance programs. This is a simple and common sense policy change that should be immediately undertaken because it is the right thing to do and would rectify a past slight to military families. Though Members of Congress and Pentagon leaders recently expressed worry that current funding levels leave our armed forces at “the lower ragged edge of readiness,” similar concern has been notably absent for the struggling military families who honorably serve our country despite living on their own personal “ragged edge.”

MAZON has been working for several years with anti-hunger advocates, military service organizations, food banks and pantries, and champions on Capitol Hill to eliminate this unnecessary and harmful policy barrier. Legislation was introduced in 2015 in both the House and Senate that proposed excluding the BAH as income for the determination of nutrition assistance benefits. Sadly, these proposals were swiftly blocked and the problem of food insecurity for currently serving families remains.

Surely we owe it to our military families to remove unfair barriers to access for needed benefits. Making this policy correction supports the national goal of mission readiness for our armed forces and also promotes fiscal responsibility as these families – particularly the children - experience improved health outcomes from higher levels of food security and better nutrition, which in turn yield reductions in long-term health care costs. The recent report about SNAP by the White House Council of Economic Advisers vividly demonstrates the important role of SNAP in reducing both poverty and food insecurity and documents the significant long-term impacts of SNAP for children in the areas of health, education, and economic self-sufficiency.

Urge agency collaboration – A growing number of veterans – and particularly disabled veterans -- are getting caught in the middle of bureaucratic delays and federal agency silos, unaware of or unable to access nutrition assistance benefits despite their obvious need.

Unacceptable portions of the veteran community, who used to get “three squares a day” as soldiers, now do not know where their next meal will come from. It is estimated that over 300,000 elderly veterans are food insecure and confront the same barriers faced by all seniors trying to access benefits – stigma, misinformation about potential eligibility, and a daunting application process. More recent vets face serious challenges as well. According to a 2012 University of Minnesota study of soldiers returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, one in four veterans report being food insecure (27%), and 12% of those vets were classified as having very low food security. These rates are nearly double the prevalence of food insecurity and very low food security for the general US population. In addition, we know that many veterans return from combat with disabilities that make it more difficult to maintain gainful employment and provide food for themselves and their families. Households with a disabled veteran are nearly twice as likely to be food insecure as households that do not have someone

with a disability. Ensuring that all veterans have access to adequate and nutritious food is critical, and providing such access to disabled veterans is the least this nation owes to its returning and injured soldiers.

Unfortunately, this is a promise that is not always kept. Veterans who are awaiting a disability determination face enormous challenges in making claims through the VA's daunting claims process, where delays and multiple appeals are commonplace. During this waiting period, many veterans are unable, or limited in their ability, to access nutrition assistance benefits.

For veterans applying for assistance or seeking medical care through VA facilities, USDA and the VA must do more to help these veterans navigate the application process and connect them to benefits and resources available to help them meet their basic needs. USDA could help the VA serve as a conduit for outreach and education about SNAP and proactively link vets to nutrition assistance through eligibility screenings and application assistance. Better coordination between USDA and the VA would go a long way in connecting disabled, aging, and struggling veterans with available nutrition assistance, contributing to better long-term health outcomes, lowering health care costs, and reducing unnecessarily high rates of poverty and homelessness in this population.

A simple but highly effective intervention would involve VA social workers and health care professionals adopting as standard practice the utilization of a two-question food insecurity screening tool and then referring those who screen positive to resources that support access to adequate, healthy food, including SNAP. The recent adoption of a similar policy by the American Academy of Pediatrics provides an exciting precedent for an effective intervention that promises smart and cost-effective ways to help ensure that veterans don't come home to hunger.

Perhaps the best way to prevent hunger among veterans is to protect and strengthen the SNAP program. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that SNAP effectively reduces food insecurity and poverty rates, contributes to long-term health care costs, and positively impacts long-term health, education, and economic self-sufficiency outcomes. And yet, recent attempts to cut SNAP – including a proposal during the last Farm Bill process that put 170,000 veterans' benefits at risk – only exacerbate the problem of veteran hunger. And right now, an estimated 60,000 veterans face the loss of SNAP benefits because of the expiration of the time limit waiver for ABAWDs. Cuts to SNAP, in addition to causing harmful impacts on American families struggling to get by and get back on their feet, also hurt military families and veterans who receive critical assistance from the program.

Conclusion

The unfortunate reality of what I have outlined today – of limited data, unfair policy barriers, and bureaucratic silos -- comes at a time when the need among military families and veterans has never been greater.

There has been a sad and ineffective response to military hunger issues in the past. When media stories about military families on SNAP circulated in the late 1990s, Congress was concerned about the *optics* of members of our military receiving food stamps. In order to get these families off of SNAP, Congress in 2000 created a parallel program – the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance (FSSA) – administered by the Department of Defense with an explicitly stated goal of removing military families from the SNAP rolls. This little-known and poorly administered DOD program did not work either to get military families off of SNAP, or more importantly, to adequately address the challenges of food insecurity that are faced by some military families. It was such a failure, in fact, that Congress recently voted in the 2016 NDAA bill to sunset the failed FSSA program domestically at the end of 2016. However, without any additional action taken, Congress has effectively abandoned the thousands of struggling military families who fall through the cracks of SNAP eligibility and turn instead to the emergency food system out of desperation. These families deserve more than failed policies and government indifference.

Therefore MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger strongly urges Congress to take action now to effectively address the problems of military and veteran food insecurity that I have shared with you and that have been tragically ignored for far too long. The bipartisan-appointed National Commission on Hunger, in its final report released just last week, made recommendations to address military food insecurity consistent with what I have outlined for you today. I hope that my testimony and the personal reflections shared by Erika Tebbens provide the necessary justification for expeditious Congressional action.

The principle of leaving no one behind is deeply embedded in the ethos of the US military. If Congress continues to ignore the problem of hunger among service members and veterans, we are surely leaving them behind and in the enemy hands of hunger and poverty.

MAZON welcomes the opportunity to work with you to create lasting and meaningful change to meet the needs of our military and veteran families. Thank you.