



U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture

“Hunger Among Veterans & Servicemembers: Understanding the Problem and
Evaluating Solutions”
November 10, 2021

Chairman 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—the largest national non-profit 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’m here to share with you what our surveys have revealed about food insecurity.

In 2020, 14% of enlisted active-duty family respondents and 12% 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 child care, 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 child care continues to be a major contributor to military spouse unemployment—with 34% of active-duty spouses who were unemployed but needed or wanted to work citing the high cost of child care as a barrier to their employment.

Military family financial stress is further compounded by out-of-pocket housing expenses. Today, the Basic Allowance for Housing is pegged to 95% 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 cards 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 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 like to again thank 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.