

Statement of Christopher Overfelt, Veterans for Peace
and member of the Poor People's Campaign

before the
Budget Committee

United States House of Representatives

“Poverty in America: Economic Realities of Struggling Families”

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My name is Chris Overfelt, and I'm with Veterans for Peace and the Poor People's Campaign.

I'd like to thank Chairman Yarmuth, Ranking Member Womack, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to speak today. I want you to know how important it is that ordinary citizens like myself can make our voices heard in the halls of power. There's not a day in my life that I'm not grateful to live under a representative government where I can voice my opinion and have my elected leaders listen.

I was a hydraulics mechanic in the Air Force National Guard. I was based at Forbes Field in Topeka, KS from 2002 to 2011. I worked on the KC-135 aircraft; the airplane that refuels other planes in the air, and deployed to Turkey and Qatar during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. I do not believe that either of these countries will recover from the devastation of these wars in my lifetime. Nothing I can ever do in my life will make up for the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Afghan men, women and children killed in these useless wars.

I joined the military because I wanted to keep people safe and I wanted an education. But that is not what I did in the military. I had to serve in wars that I believe were unjust, negatively impacted many and whose cost undermined the ability of our nation to meet its obligation to the poor and low wealth like me.

When I left the military in 2011, I began substitute teaching in Kansas City and working at an agricultural mentorship program for young people. I've met people in our own country who have suffered from these wars and the misplaced spending priorities that support them.

If you look at the billions upon billions spent on wars and compare that with what is spent to provide health care and other social safety nets for poor and low-wealth workers it is shameful.

I'm also a farmer and many farmers are hurting economically. The enormous money spent on what a Republican Dwight Eisenhower once called the military industrial complex does not help farmers from where I come from.

These money we spend on defense routinely accounts for over half of the federal discretionary budget. And yet we have not done very much for the rest of us who are fighting to make it

through every single day.

On my farm and in my classroom in Kansas City, I work with communities that are in direct need of funding. Instead of the health care, schools, and early childhood education programs young people in my area need, the only investment they get is a militarized police force and punitive mass incarceration programs. Some 39 percent of Missourians are poor or low-income, and black residents are incarcerated at four times the rate of white residents.¹

We need to change the war economy and use those funds instead to provide health care and education to all people. In our Moral Budget, the Poor People's Campaign and the Institute for Policy Studies found that we could save \$350 billion a year by redirecting our foreign policy away from war and militarism, closing our overseas bases, and refusing to subsidize military contractors. We could also cut up to 25 percent of the \$179 billion spent on mass incarceration in the form of police, courts, and private contractors.² All of these resources could be put back into communities all over the country, including the ones I work with in Kansas City. That would bring us real security, both here, and beyond our borders.

I'm Chris Overfelt. I'm a veteran, and I believe we need to work to stop funding systems of brutality and violence, and begin to fund systems of love that support everyone in our communities. Thank you.

¹ Poor People's Campaign, Missouri Fact Sheet, 2018, <https://ips-dc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Missouri-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

² Institute for Policy Studies, "Poor People's Moral Budget: Everyone Has a Right to Live," June 2018, link forthcoming (PDF submitted to committee).