

REVIEWING THE AVAILABILITY OF
RESOURCES TO ADDRESS VETERAN HUNGER

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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:06 a.m., in room 210, House Visitors Center, Hon. Mike Levin (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Levin, Rice, Brindisi, Pappas, Lee, Cunningham, Bilirakis, Bergman, Barr, and Meuser.

Also present: Representative Takano.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE LEVIN, CHAIRMAN

Mr. LEVIN. Good morning, everyone, and welcome back as we return from the holiday season to continue our work in the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to call for a recess at any time.

Today's hearing is entitled, "Reviewing the Availability of Resources to Address Veteran Hunger." I am hopeful we can shed some light on a very important issues for veterans around the country.

This hearing will examine Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Agriculture programs that identify food insecurity among nearly 20 million veterans, and provide nutrition assistance to those in need.

Specifically, today's hearing will focus on how veterans access nutrition resources, how recent policy changes have impacted the availability of resources, and how Congress can more effectively support public and non-public agencies that seek to end veteran hunger. It is so critically important. This continues the subcommittee's efforts to review economic factors that contribute to veteran suicide, which we know include homelessness and hunger.

Our subcommittee works in a bipartisan way to strengthen education and job-training programs so veterans can get a good job, but, unfortunately, that is not always the outcome. Sometimes joblessness results in a veteran and their family members experiencing hunger. When that occurs, nutrition resources should and must be made readily available.

However, this committee is concerned that decisions are being made regarding these resources without thoroughly considering the impact on veterans. This subcommittee and Congress as a whole

need to know how United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) considered the effect on veterans as they proposed regulatory changes limiting access to nutrition programs last year. If veterans were not considered, we must understand why USDA felt it was unnecessary or that they were unable to do so, and how we can ensure that veterans are considered now and in the future.

In addition to ensuring the availability of resources, it is essential that we help veterans secure them.

Since 2017, VA has screened millions of veterans for hunger, but it is unclear how that policy is being carried out and what VA is doing when a veteran in need is identified. The many Federal and State programs that assist veterans who are experiencing hunger can only be utilized if veterans are aware of them.

This is a particularly fitting matter for our subcommittee, which has spent this Congress on policies to improve veterans' economic outcomes and ultimately their overall wellness. We have a responsibility to ensure that no veteran falls through the cracks, and I look forward to hearing the testimony from our witnesses today to do just that.

With that, I now recognize my friend, Ranking Member Bilirakis, with whom I have worked on a bipartisan basis, now for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF GUS M. BILIRAKIS, RANKING
MEMBER**

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it. Mr. Chairman, I want to thank the witnesses as well who will testify today on the important issue of veteran hunger.

Food security for veterans, as well as all Americans, is an essential component for a stable life. Food insecurity can be a contributing factor that be detrimental to a person's mental health. It is important for us to evaluate the way we are providing the security to ensure that it is being provided in the most effective manner to help those who need it the most.

Mr. Chairman, neither of us were Members of Congress when President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, also known as the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, into law. By the way, that was a bipartisan bill and a good bill, in my opinion, but right now states are bypassing its original intent.

This law was a bipartisan effort, as I said, to require work or training for work in exchange for the time-related financial assistance. This law also included incentives for states to get those in need back to work as a means to reduce the fiscal burden on the Federal Government and prevent what we now call, and I quote, "multi-generational poverty." We want to prevent multi-generational poverty, something that—again, that is what we should be striving toward, and I know that that is your goal as well.

Broad-based categorical eligibility allows states to circumvent income and asset requirements to extend the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits based on nothing more than an individual receiving a brochure or pamphlet. Currently, of the 2.9 million able-bodied adults without dependents that participate

in SNAP, 2.1 million or 72 percent are not working. Additionally, the number of people currently participating in SNAP still exceeds pre-recession levels. I would like to hear from our panel today on why they think this is happening. With such a low unemployment rate, why are we seeing so many SNAP participants continue to not work and live on these benefits?

I would also like to hear from our panel ways Congress can help lift these people out of poverty and allow them to prosper in this booming economy.

With that being said, under this Administration's leadership and our continued use of pro-growth policies, the national unemployment rate is now 3.6 percent with veteran unemployment rate at an even lower rate of 3.3 percent, again, for the month of November.

Mr. Chairman, it is obvious that the economy is booming. Americans are returning to work in record numbers and encouraging employment is the foundation for Congress' authorization of this program, a great program, which is why I am supportive of the Administration's rule on able-bodied adults without dependents, which implements the existing work requirements from the 1996 law. Again, President Clinton and the Republican House really focused on this and got it right. How does this apply, in my opinion, to this subcommittee? Unfortunately, we know surprisingly very well about how this program affects veterans. We simply do not have the idea on veterans using the SNAP program or how prevalent food insecurity is among veterans.

Mr. Chairman, you were not here when the Farm Bill was authorized last Congress, so you may not be aware that, despite requests from our side of the aisle, the Federal Government still does not require states to conduct meaningful data collection on SNAP participants, including tracking of veterans.

Now, I know that we have veterans that are having a real hard time, because I participate in those Stand Down programs at least on a yearly basis, but by not tracking the information, by not tracking, both Congress and the Department of Agriculture, USDA, are left in the dark about how to improve this program. I would very much like to work with you and our colleagues on the House Agriculture Committee to address this issue by putting in place a requirement for states to track SNAP benefits for veterans, our heroes, my priority in the Congress, I know it is yours as well, Mr. Chairman. Some states already do this, but not all states do this.

I am grateful to our witnesses for giving us an opportunity to hear directly from those involved with this program. I look forward to hearing what they believe works, does not work, and how we in Congress can empower those involved in these programs to ensure that no one who has served our great country goes hungry. That is the bottom line and that is our goal.

Once again, I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. LEVIN. I thank the ranking member for his remarks. I too have participated in veterans Stand Down programs in my district, and I appreciate our shared objectives here and look forward to working on a bipartisan basis with you.

With that, I would like to recognize my friend, the outstanding chairman of the House of Veterans' Affairs Committee, Mark Takano, for his opening remarks.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MARK TAKANO, CHAIRMAN, FULL COMMITTEE

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you, Chairman Levin, for yielding a little bit of time to me this morning to make my opening remarks.

Good morning to all of our witnesses. Thank you all for appearing before this subcommittee.

Like many of our committee members, I was concerned by the SNAP changes that took place last year and how in particular they would impact veterans, but also active duty, Guard, and Reservists. The Guard and Reservists in particular often face employment challenges. And so, you know, we need to find out more; we need better data. As with Chairman Levin and many Members of Congress joined in sending a letter to Secretary Perdue at the USDA on May 24th, 2019, reflecting our many concerns. Without good data, we do not know the scope of the program, and we—you know, we need data that can be done in conjunction with Veterans Health Administration (VHA) appointments, but also other interactions like awards, changes in benefits, and also with vulnerable populations like homeless students and—the homeless population, students, and transitioning veterans.

Many questions exist, so I do appreciate your joining us this morning. We are very, very concerned about how, you know, the changes in the terms of SNAP benefits are going to affect our Nation's veterans, active duty, Guard, and Reservists.

Thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate your interest in this subject and your continued leadership.

That brings us to our witnesses. We have two panels with us today, the first representing the Administration and the second made up of non-governmental policy experts.

First, I want to thank USDA for joining us on this important topic. From USDA, we have Pamilyn Miller, Administrator for the Food and Nutrition Service. We also have Dr. Thomas O'Toole, the Senior Medical Advisor at the Providence VA Medical Center. Thanks for being here. He is accompanied by Christine Going, Co-Chairperson of the VA's Ensuring Veterans Food Security Workgroup.

Thank you all very much for joining us. As you know, you will have 5 minutes for your oral statement, but your full written statement will be added to the record.

With that, Administrator Miller, you are now recognized for 5 minutes. Make sure your microphone is on.

STATEMENT OF PAMILYN MILLER

Ms. MILLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and members of the subcommittee. I am Pam Miller, Administrator of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, which is responsible for administering the Nation's nutrition assistance programs. I am pleased to be joining my colleagues from the Department of Vet-

erans Affairs and appreciate the collaborative relationship we have had in serving veterans together.

We all owe great debts to the veterans who have protected and defended our Nation. They have earned our respect and honor, and they certainly deserve our support as they may face the challenges of life after military service.

Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) programs are not targeted to veterans specifically, but provide food assistance that veterans and their families may need, particularly in tough times. The largest program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, currently serves about 36 million low-income Americans each month. Census data suggests about 1.3 million veterans reported receiving SNAP in 2017.

Let me make clear that, because veteran status is not a condition of SNAP eligibility, we do not have veteran status as part of the data sets that we use to estimate the impact of our rules. Congress debated the collection of this information during the last Farm Bill and decided that it was not necessary or appropriate at this time. I will focus on the purpose and effects of the administration SNAP performs.

The goals of these actions is to align the program with the statute established by Congress to reduce inequities among participants and encourage households toward self-sufficiency. Those eligible to receive nutrition assistance should be treated fairly across this country. Over the years, states have set policies that compromise consistency with certain standards defined in statute, thereby allowing households in one State to be eligible for SNAP or to receive more in SNAP benefits than households in another State.

Last month, USDA finalized a final rule to help more able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 and 49 who do not have dependents, or ABAWDs, into promising futures through job training and employment. With a robust economy, unemployment at a 50-year low of 3 and a half percent, and more than 7.3 million job openings, there is no better time to engage this group of SNAP participants to get the skills they need to be successful in the job market.

This rule does not change work requirements for ABAWDs that were set in the 1996 Welfare Reform Law and have been unchanged in every Farm Bill since. Time limits do not apply to children, their parents, pregnant women, the mentally or physically disabled, or anyone 50 years of age or older. Importantly, the disability exception includes veterans who are totally disabled, permanently homebound, or in need of a regular attendant.

Those subject to time limits can receive SNAP for 3 months in a 3-year period unless they are working, volunteering, or participating in training such as SNAP's employment and training program or one of VA's work programs for at least 20 hours a week. These limits account for the fact that not all participants are fit for employment. States must screen SNAP participants for their ability to work and can exempt part of their caseload from the time limit at their full discretion as established in law.

The final rule did not change any of these policies; what it did was clarify when and where states may seek to waive time limits for those who do not meet the ABAWD work requirements. Pre-

vious regulations were defined so loosely that counties with unemployment as low as 2 and a half percent were waived areas. Implementing the limits where jobs are available encourages ABAWDs to realize their potential, have a sense of community, and move toward an independent lifestyle.

Two other SNAP proposals are pending. One would eliminate a loophole called broad-based categorical eligibility that has been used to provide SNAP benefits without conducting a robust eligibility determination, resulting in benefits going to households that exceed statutory income thresholds. The other would modernize the calculation of State standard utility allowances, which are important in calculating SNAP benefit amounts. Under current policy in one State, an elderly person is receiving SNAP benefits two and a half times as much as an elderly person across the State line in a similar situation simply because of the standard utility allowance.

Both proposals promote a level playing field for SNAP participants, with all treated fairly and consistently. The comment period for each is closed and FNS is analyzing comments to determine next steps.

Other USDA nutrition programs also help veterans and I am happy to address those as well.

In closing, I am confident we can provide Americans, veterans, heroes, with the services and support that they deserve. Not only a nutritional safety net, these programs can help launch participants on a path toward better health and a better life.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF PAMILYN MILLER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Administrator Miller.

Dr. O'Toole, you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF THOMAS O'TOOLE

Dr. O'TOOLE. Good morning, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on ending veteran hunger. I am accompanied by Ms. Christine Going, the VHA Co-Chair of the Ensuring Veterans Food Security Workgroup.

There are three points I want to emphasize. First, not having enough food to eat is very real for too many Americans and for too many of our veterans. Second, the consequences of this food insecurity extend far beyond just going to bed hungry; its impact is seen in a litany of physical and mental health conditions, preventable ER visits and hospitalizations, and avoidable deaths. Finally, the Veterans Administration has a strong and demonstrated commitment to do all we can to address it. One veteran experiencing food insecurity is one too many.

According to the most recent Department of Agriculture survey data, more than 11 percent of all households and almost one in three households at less than 130 percent of the Federal poverty level experience food insecurity. Now, this is despite the robust economy and low unemployment rates we have been experiencing.

Among veterans, while the overall rate is lower, specific populations, including younger veterans with families, women, low-income veterans, and those with underlying depression and psychiatric illnesses, are particularly vulnerable.

In one study, 27 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans reported food insecurity. In another, 48.5 percent of homeless and formerly homeless veterans lacked regular access to food.

The consequences of food insecurity are substantial and significant. Research has consistently shown the link between lacking regular access to food and poorly controlled hypertension, diabetes, HIV disease, asthma, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Among older adults, it is associated with reduced activities of daily living and being over two times more likely to report poor health. Food insecurity is a social determinant of health, that along with not having stable housing, living poverty, experiencing violence, and others are strong predictors for suicide risk among veterans. Several international studies have explicitly linked food insecurity and suicide risk.

It is within this context I would like to shift to what we are doing about it.

In early 2016, the Veterans Health Administration launched the Ensuring Veterans Food Security Workgroup to partner with other government and non-profit agencies in identifying veterans at risk, training VA staff, and coordinating resources and initiatives. Milestones from these past 3 and a half years include implementing an electronic medical record screening tool for identifying veteran food insecurity. To date, almost 100,000 food-insecure veterans have been identified and assisted, men and women who might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Streamlining enrollment of veterans into the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or SNAP, including partnering with USDA and MAZON to create veteran-specific educational materials; training programs for staff, including a toolkit for registered dietitians to support food-insecure veterans; and expanding onsite or mobile food pantries at VA medical centers. There are currently 57 food pantries in place at VA facilities, including the 17 VA Feeding America pantries that alone serve more than 40,000 veterans and their families 700,000 meals.

To conclude, having enough to eat is a basic human need and in this country no one should be going without food. It is a major determinant of health that needs to be viewed no differently than how we consider access to medication or to primary care. It is intimately linked to health, and the ability to prevent and manage a variety of health conditions, not the least of which include mental health and suicide risk.

Across the VA, we are committed to providing the highest quality care our veterans have earned and deserved. Going back to the 1921 Veterans' Bureau Act legislation, we have an explicit duty and mandate to the health, well-being, and welfare of those who served. While we proudly note the progress made to address food insecurity among our veterans, there is more we can and will do to decrease veteran hunger.

Moving forward, we need to increase the number of food pantries at our medical centers to address the urgent need for food, we need

to assist and facilitate enrollment in SNAP to ensure more consistent access to food, and we need to address the root causes of food insecurity through social-determinant-of-health-focused interventions.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today, and we are prepared to answer any questions the committee may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF THOMAS O'TOOLE APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Dr. O'Toole. With that, I recognize myself for 5 minutes to begin the question portion of the hearing.

I did notice the citation that Congress previously rejected veteran data tracking in the previous Farm Bill debate and I am a freshman Member of Congress, that is true, so I was not here, but it is my understanding as well that Congress rejected the very rules that you are here defending today. I might still be a freshman Member of Congress, but I do have some sense of the actions taken by this body in recent years, particularly in my role chairing this subcommittee.

Dr. O'Toole and Ms. Going, a couple questions for you. What proportion of the veterans who screen positive for food insecurity does VA assist with SNAP eligibility screenings, application assistance, or referrals.

Dr. O'TOOLE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

All of our veterans who are screened positive are provided assistance. I would like to defer to Ms. Going on some of the specific interventions that our social workers and registered dietitians do engage in that process.

Ms. GOING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Yes, any veteran who is screened positive is initially offered consultation with a social worker and/or a dietitian, and in both cases then the care is customized to what the veteran needs and one of the questions is are you currently receiving SNAP. If they are, then we provide them additional services; if they are not, then we assist them in applying for SNAP benefits.

Mr. LEVIN. So, VA does then monitor ongoing food security or SNAP participation for veterans who initially screen positive for food insecurity?

Ms. GOING. We do not monitor exactly who has SNAP or who does not; it is part of the individual questioning, but it is not data that is captured.

Mr. LEVIN. You do not. Okay.

How has the VA collaborated with USDA and with community partners to create resources or materials to help raise awareness and respond to veteran food insecurity as it exists?

Ms. GOING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We have worked with USDA and MAZON to develop veteran-specific material on how to apply for SNAP, and we have also engage nationwide that each facility is responsible for developing very specific lists of resources, because resources are different based on each VA. Each facility has been asked to establish that list based on their local resources.

Mr. LEVIN. It seems to me that is a good start, it seems that we can always be doing better, and I guess what I wanted to ask is

what is preventing VA from taking more proactive efforts to respond to the needs of veterans who screen positive for food insecurity?

Dr. O'TOOLE. Well, Mr. Chairman, I would agree with you, there is always more we can do, and I think that is actually one of the efforts and activities that we are actively engaged in through this workgroup. We clearly need to be as proactive in connecting veterans to services, but I think also ensuring that the consequences of food insecurity that may be manifest, and worsening health or mental health, are also being concurrently addressed.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you for that.

Administrator Miller, in considering the proposed rule regarding SNAP time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents, did USDA consult with VA or analyze the impact, specifically the impact on veterans, and, if so, how many veterans did you determine would be impacted?

Ms. MILLER. We have data that does encompass the entire SNAP population. As we were putting forth the rules and looking at our regulatory impact analysis, we looked at our entire SNAP population and how they would be affected, and in there it does include veterans, but as I said, we do not have specific data sets on veterans, because Congress has not given us that authority to collect those types of information.

Mr. LEVIN. Did you consult with VA?

Ms. MILLER. We did not consult with the VA.

Mr. LEVIN. Did you analyze the impact on veterans specifically?

Ms. MILLER. It would have been part of our entire SNAP population data set that we collect.

Mr. LEVIN. But not specifically?

Ms. MILLER. We do not have that data, because it is not eligibility, we are not able to specifically assess that.

Mr. LEVIN. That is important to understand. How about for the proposed rule on broad-based categorical eligibility?

Ms. MILLER. The answer would be the same; again, we look at the impacts on our broad SNAP population. If Congress were willing to engage in technical assistance and have conversation, so if Congress gives that ability to collect that data, we are certainly happy to do so.

Mr. LEVIN. I assume the answer is the same for the proposed rule on the standard utility allowance?

Ms. MILLER. Yes, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Despite the fact that you say that you did not have the congressional authorization to carry forward a dialog with VA, nonetheless you knew—your own statement, I believe, you said 1.3 million veterans received SNAP in 2017; is not that what you said?

Ms. MILLER. Yes, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Then you knew that veterans were a uniquely important community as part of the SNAP program; did you not?

Ms. MILLER. Our program serves all low-income Americans who need assistance and so they would have been captured in our data sets for the entire SNAP population.

Mr. LEVIN. So veterans have no significance, additional importance to you, given their service to our Nation, where even a phone call to VA was warranted?

Ms. MILLER. We certainly want to make sure we are serving all low-income Americans, including veterans. Our programs——

Mr. LEVIN. That is a no, you never contacted VA?

Ms. MILLER. We did not contact VA.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you for that.

I will go ahead and yield to the ranking member for his questions.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it.

Ms. Miller, we are interested in better data collection for veterans, as you know, in SNAP, what is the most efficient way to gather that information?

Ms. MILLER. The best way to gather this information is through the SNAP application process. We have more detailed information through the SNAP application process, that is the best way for us to gather that data. If we are to require on the application that households report their veteran status as a condition of eligibility, that does require a statutory change and that is what we are lacking at this point.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. Would it take an act of Congress to get FNS and the states to collect that information? Why cannot USDA require states to provide this data on their own?

Ms. MILLER. Because it would be adding a condition of eligibility to the SNAP application process, which requires a statutory change. What we are embarking on is a study and it would be a survey that would include a question that would help us understand veteran status, and so we are embarking on that now. That will help us maybe get to some of that data without having to change the SNAP application process.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Would FNS find it useful?

Ms. MILLER. Yes, sir, if we could collect the data, that would be useful.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. Second question. USDA just finalized the able-bodied adults without dependence rule, why does USDA believe the criteria for State waivers from the congressionally mandated SNAP work requirement need to be changed?

Ms. MILLER. What we have seen right now is we have a very robust economy, there are more jobs available than there are people who are seeking jobs, and so this is an opportunity for us to really engage these able-bodied adults without dependents with the resources to help them get into the career field. We have got our SNAP Employment and Training Program, we can also work through the VA's work programs, and so many other of our Federal, State, and local partners, to help engage this population.

We have seen areas with unemployment rates as low as 2 and a half percent that have been waived. We think this really is a good opportunity to engage these people and making sure that ABAWDs are able to return to the workforce.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. For the benefit of the public, when do these changes take effect?

Ms. MILLER. The final rule will be implemented April 1st.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. April 1st?

Ms. MILLER. Yes, sir.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. Why are you making these changes when the Farm Bill, the 2018 Farm Bill, made no changes?

Ms. MILLER. We have the authority, our authority was retained so that we could address this issue and so, using our authority that we have, we are able to do this final rule.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. Has this Administration done anything to change the congressionally mandated work requirements that were passed as part of the 1996, again, the Welfare Reform Act implemented Clinton, Bush, and the Obama administrations?

Ms. MILLER. No, sir. This final rule does not change the work requirements, it does not change the time limits. As you said, this first was passed on a bipartisan basis, signed into law by President Clinton, and it has remained unchanged for more than 20 years.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. All right, very good.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

I would now like to recognize Mr. Pappas for 5 minutes.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I share the concern of many folks here that too many veterans are food-insecure. Too many are experiencing economic hardships, including not knowing where their next meal is going to come from.

I think we all need to leave here with a sense that there is so much more to do for those who have worn the uniform of this country, pledged everything to the United States, up to and including their lives, and it is our job to be able to make sure that they are taken care of.

I wanted to just build on a question that Mr. Bilirakis asked you, Ms. Miller, about these rule changes. He asked you for a rationale about why these changes were made, why you sought to propose these rules, you responded by saying we have the authority. I think we are not doubting the authority, but can you explain a little bit more about the rationale and also talk about the broader population that will be impacted, how many will lose SNAP benefits as a result of these rule changes?

Ms. MILLER. Sure. Again, using our authority, we were able to implement this final rule, but what we are seeing is that there, again, are more job openings than those who are seeking jobs, and so knowing this is an able-bodied adult without dependents, so we are talking about individuals between the ages of 18 and 49, the states have a responsibility to be sure they are screening everyone for their assessment for work. We are hopeful that, if we can engage this population, we can really put them on a path toward a better future.

States do have the ability to exempt a certain percentage of their caseload if they are having difficulty finding work or reentering work, but we have had employers reach out to the SNAP program about how can we engage with SNAP participants and make sure they are getting job training and skills that they need to help fill some of the jobs that are out there.

Again, this is—just given the economy right now, this is a great opportunity to engage this population.

Mr. PAPPAS. The chairman asked about data for veterans specifically and you said you did not have that data, but you do have numbers for the broader population of SNAP beneficiaries and how that will decrease as a result of these rule changes. What is that number?

Ms. MILLER. Six hundred and eighty eight thousand is what our estimate showed in Fiscal Year 2021 that may not meet the work requirements and so may lose SNAP benefits.

Mr. PAPPAS. Six hundred and eighty thousand? We are clearly talking about thousands of veterans among that population, I think we can extrapolate that figure pretty safely, and we have got to do all we can to make sure that those vets get what they need. I appreciate the work of the working group, and what you are doing to ask the question and identify ways to help our vets.

I am wondering, Mr. O'Toole, if you could talk a little bit about those vets that are not seeking care at the VA and what the workgroup is doing to reach out to the broader population. As we talk about, you know, mental health and suicide, for instance, we know that most of the vets that are dying by suicide are not connected to care at the VA, a similar situation here with food insecurity and those vets that are not being reached by these programs. How do we get to them and how do we reach them?

Dr. O'TOOLE. Thank you, Mr. Congressman, for the question, and I think it is an important one to acknowledge in that Veterans Health Administration and those enrolled in care in the Veterans Health Administration represent only a portion of all those men and women who has served our country. The VA has launched several initiatives, principally through our suicide prevention program, as a means of engaging some of those veterans at highest risk and in need and in crisis to try to bring them into the system.

You are right to note that many of the suicides occurring are occurring among veterans who are not enrolled in VHA. Several initiatives undertaken to help bring some of those veterans into our system, as well as to provide community resources to them, include the other-than-honorable discharge capacities for veterans to seek emergency care and other care within the VA system, and I think bringing them in within that venue is clearly an option and an opportunity.

I would like to defer, though, to Ms. Going for specific issues within the workgroup that may speak to some of the community partnerships you reference.

Mr. PAPPAS. Okay.

Ms. GOING. Thank you, Mr. Congressman. The workgroup has on an annual basis done education that is intended to the field, as well as to the outside. Our educational opportunities were advertised to our community partners, so that they could participate. You did not have to be a veteran utilizing the VHA to be able to listen and participate in our educational series. We are currently working on a podcast that will also be forward-facing and allow anyone to hear it, it is not limited to just veterans receiving care within the VHA.

Mr. PAPPAS. Okay. Thanks for your work.

I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Pappas. We will get to Mr. Bergman in 1 second.

I just wanted to make sure I understand one thing. You know the number of veterans that receive SNAP, you know the number of overall SNAP beneficiaries that you think will be impacted by this proposed rulemaking, and yet you cannot tell me how many

veterans will be impacted by this proposed rulemaking. I am going to ask both agencies, since you are both here, can you commit to work together to inform this committee how many veterans will be impacted by this proposed rulemaking?

Ms. MILLER. We are happy to work together and look at the data that we have, and follow up with you, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. We will follow up and we make sure that we do everything we can to get that data, because it is very important that this committee understands how many veterans are impacted.

With that, I will yield to Mr. Bergman for his questions.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to all of you for being here. I appreciate Chairman Takano's reference to the Guard and Reserve and I wish—unfortunately, he could have been here to stay, but I guess this is going to be recorded on C-SPAN or somewhere, so he can view it, if he chooses.

You know, we have got challenges. It is not news to anybody and that is why we are having this hearing. When it comes to the Guard and Reserve, as opposed to, let us say, servicemen and women serving on active duty who just serve honorably and then move on with their lives who could be impacted by the subject matter here that we are talking about today, is there any data out there that suggests, that is broken out by Guard and Reserve when it comes to food insecurity? For those of us who have served in the Guard and Reserve, you really do not—you do not move your family, you know, when you get activated and deployed, and when your activation, your mobilization is complete, then you in most cases will return home to your hometown, go back to whatever business you were in before, and then continue on in your Guard and Reserve duty.

The stability of the home life, the family life of the Guardsman or Reserve in some cases does not mirror, in many cases does not mirror that of, you know, men and women serving actively, and then leave active service and then find themselves at risk. Is there any data out there that suggests any correlation between the stability of home life in the Guard and Reserve and active when it comes to this subject?

Dr. O'TOOLE. Thank you, Mr. Congressman, and I think your point is well taken in terms of those specific needs and issues. I would have to defer to the Department of Defense (DOD) on any data that they have been collecting. I do know that Feeding America has conducted some work and has been involved in collecting some of that data, but, again, I would have to defer to them on any specific—

Mr. BERGMAN. I guess—

Dr. O'TOOLE. We do not have that information.

Mr. BERGMAN. No. Thank you for your answering because, actually, this is quite an opportunity for DOD, VA, USDA, whoever else to collaborate on the sharing of data as it relates to all men and women who serve in uniform, whether they be active, guard, reserve.

You mentioned, Dr. O'Toole, about a tie between food insecurity and suicide risk. You also have several—it has been stated from you and from up here that many of these veterans at risk are outside the VA health care system.

Have you tried anything or considered anything that would allow different ways to reach the population outside the VA? I know I heard podcast. But that is only—if that veteran is not connected to the internet and is in a rural or remote area, any different things that you have tried yet, whether they be successful or not?

Dr. O'TOOLE. Thank you for the question, Mr. Congressman. I think it is important as we think about food insecurity to also realize that often times it is not occurring in isolation. As I mentioned, some of the suicide prevention initiatives and efforts of reaching out to the community are one example for how we can be tapping into that population and trying to reach out and engage in a community way.

Other efforts within VA include our homeless outreach to not only veterans, men and women who served who are homeless, but also those who are at risk of homeless through Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) programming, through stand downs and such.

I think the convergence of these issues and needs within those outreach efforts do provide us an opportunity. You know, is there more we can do, absolutely. I think it will always be a challenge for us because there is a lot of people who choose not to go to the VA despite services and capacities that are there. I think these are many—these are some of several efforts across different, you know, population group needs that I think provide opportunities for us.

Mr. BERGMAN. Well, I guess—and you can take this for the record, but what help can we as Veterans Affairs Committee give to VA in this case to enable an outreach that is not currently occurring because people are outside the system, what help can we give you as VA to complete that outreach to those veterans who are outside the system?

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Bergman.

I would now like to recognize Ms. Lee for 5 minutes.

Ms. LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for being here. This is such an important issue for our veterans.

You know, I also sit on the Education and Labor Committee and a few weeks ago we conducted an oversight hearing on the Department of Agriculture's proposed SNAP rule that eliminates broad based categorical eligibility. The finding was that it eliminates access for about a million school children to free and reduced lunch, and incredibly frustrating to be on the committee with this rule that the Department did not include that impact in its initial regulatory impact analysis. Then after it did publish the analysis showing this effect, it continued to pursue the rule.

That is just a—I just wanted to point out that frustration. Then in my home State of Nevada 17,000 veterans receive SNAP benefits, and we know that low income veterans may be unemployed, working low wage jobs or have disability. SNAP provides such an essential support that enables them to purchase food for their families.

You know, given this pattern, I just want to raise a question about the USDA's priorities. Why has the USDA prioritized regulatory actions that would reduce State flexibilities, limit access to

SNAP and increase food insecurity rather than actions that would be more proactive and responsive?

Ms. MILLER. Thank you for the question.

Our goal with these proposed regulations and the final rule is to align the program with the statute. The statute is very clear in setting income limits as well as asset limits for who should be receiving SNAP. We are trying to align the program with the statute and make sure that participants are treated fairly and consistently across the country because we know that folks in California are being determined eligible very differently than folks who are living in Virginia, for example.

What we are trying to do is really make sure that everyone is on a level playing field. Regardless of which State you live in, SNAP participants should know the expectations of how they should apply and what the requirements are because the statute, you know, defines that for us.

We are trying to align the program with the statute and make sure that everyone is treated fairly and consistently.

Ms. LEE. Basically, it is our duty to change the statute if we want to see additional eligibility.

Ms. MILLER. Yes, ma'am. Congress has that ability to do so.

Ms. LEE. Okay.

Ms. MILLER. We are happy to always work with you all, provide technical assistance, if there are any legislative proposals you would like to pursue.

Ms. LEE. One question I have, so we know that there is millions of Americans who are experiencing food insecurity, including veterans, and are eligible to—for SNAP, but they do not receive the benefits. How is the USDA addressing that SNAP participation gap?

Ms. MILLER. We want to make sure that our program does reach those who are in need and those who qualify and are eligible for the program. States have the ability and they do some outreach in making sure that they work with different partners, whether it be through other Federal agencies like our collaboration has been with the VA in making sure that we have provided some training to their case workers and so that they know some of those requirements.

I think there is some outreach opportunities at the State level and working with some of our other Federal partners.

Ms. LEE. The USDA is not taking any ownership of that. It is really through those partnerships?

Ms. MILLER. The law prohibits us from doing direct outreach for SNAP as part of the 2014 Farm Bill.

Ms. LEE. Dr. O'Toole, I wanted to thank you for coming in today and your work with the veteran food security work group. I am particularly concerned given the findings of the 2013 study that vets with food insecurity tend to be younger, not married, earning lower incomes at a lower military pay scale. I cannot help but be concerned about student vets.

I wanted to ask you, you listed numerous actions being taken by the VA identifying veterans who experience food insecurity, and I applaud that. What can we do to capture student veteran hunger?

Dr. O'TOOLE. Thank you, Congresswoman.

The population groups you mentioned are all very vulnerable and part of that vulnerability comes from the many challenges they experience as they transition from military to civilian life, often times with—while still bearing the scars of battle and many of the challenges that are associated with that, whether it is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other conditions and challenges. Being able to enter into gainful employment, being able to fully engage are clearly an issue.

I think obviously the role of student veterans and the dynamics that they are struggling with and shortfalls that may occur in their capacity to sustain a household are equally pronounced.

I would have to take for the record specific plans and actions that we may be able to do specific to that population group, but I appreciate you bringing it up.

Ms. LEE. Thank you.

My time is expired. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Ms. Lee.

I would now like to recognize my friend, Mr. Barr, for 5 minutes.

Mr. BARR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank Chairman Levin and Ranking Member Bilirakis for holding this important hearing and addressing this important issue of food insecurity among our veterans. I particularly appreciate my friend, Mr. Levin, for his passion because we talked about this before the hearing today. I know he is very passionate about it. We all care very, very deeply, especially when we find homeless veterans in our communities, folks who interact with the VA and veterans who do not interact with the VA, who struggle with food insecurity.

Dr. O'Toole, I was obviously moved by your testimony that—when you said that the VA's food insecurity screening tool found that over the last 2 years one and a half percent of all veterans are screening positive for food insecurity. I just think, wow, you know, what about those veterans who do not even get the screening. You have got additional food insecurity there.

My view is that for a veteran that is not disabled, especially a veteran who is not disabled without—and does not have dependents, the best thing we can do for that veteran is to get him a good job, a good job, a job that is a win for that veteran, obviously, because it addresses that issue of food insecurity and shelter insecurity and everything else.

It is great for the employer because these are heroes to our country and they have got great skills to offer these employers. You know, let us face it. The economy is doing really, really well right now and we have a million more job openings in this country than we have unemployed people. What if we could fill those job openings with veterans? That is what we need to do. That is what we have got to focus on doing.

I want to talk about what the USDA is doing to try to encourage work among, not just our veterans, but others, and getting folks back into the labor market.

Let me ask my first question to Ms. Miller. With respect to this able-bodied adults without dependents rule, why does the USDA believe that the criteria for State waivers from the congressionally mandated SNAP work requirements need to be changed?

Ms. MILLER. Thank you, Congressman, and as you just commented it was—it is really focused on the fact that we do have a very robust economy right now, and there are more job openings available than there are job seekers. This seems like a perfect environment where we should be engaging this population and helping them move into work and getting the skills that they need.

We have programs such as our SNAP employment and training program. States are required to run those programs. We do provide them with formula funding as well as we have the opportunity to provide matching funds as they continue to expand and grow their employment and training programs to help SNAP participants, these able-bodied adults without dependents get the job skills that they need.

Mr. BARR. Let us go back, Ms. Miller, to your testimony about—it is congress's job to change the statutory requirements, if needed. I for one do not want to change the statutory requirements. I think the waivers have actually impeded people from getting back in the workforce.

Let us just go back to the statute that was a bipartisan statute and let us just examine that for a minute. The statute limits participation by adults 18 to 49. We are not talking about seniors. We are not talking about anybody younger than 18. We are talking about a prime age worker, 18 to 49, without a dependent and without a disability. We are not talking about veterans with disabilities here. We are talking about non-disabled, no dependent veterans between the ages of 18 and 49, prime working years. Okay. There is a time limit, 36 months for SNAP, unless, unless the individual is working or participating in a work program for at least 80 hours per month, that is 20 hours a week, or volunteering. They can volunteer. They do not even have to work. They just have to volunteer, do something that gets them work capable.

Am I describing the underlying statute correctly?

Ms. MILLER. Yes, sir. Everything you have said is correct.

Mr. BARR. I do not think it is stingy, I do not think the statute is stingy. I think the statute actually creates great, positive incentives for able-bodied, work capable, no dependents, prime age workers to do something to get them back into a productive place where they can be self-sufficient. When we are talking about food insecurity, to me that is what—that is exactly what we need to be promoting.

To the extent that states are impeding that incentive structure, I think that does a great disservice to these heroes to our country and encouraging them to be more dependent than independent.

One final question, Ms. Miller. In MAZON's testimony they tell a story of a Navy veteran in Maine. The veteran's benefits for SNAP were not extended even though the Department of Labor ruled him unable to work. Would the proposed rule change for State waivers impact people in similar situations?

Ms. MILLER. That was—is an unfortunate situation, and so the states have the responsibility to be sure they are properly screening individuals for their fitness for work. We can—if there are situations like that, we can certainly work with the states to provide technical assistance because if he did have information from Department of Labor, that would satisfy those requirements of having

that individual not be subject to the final rule that we are talking about.

Mr. BARR. Okay. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Barr. I appreciate your comments and working with you on this issue on a bipartisan basis.

I would now like to recognize Miss Rice for 5 minutes.

Miss RICE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I do not have a question. I just have a comment. I cannot believe that we are sitting here talking about this. We should all be humiliated that we are talking about taking food away from any man or woman, however able-bodied they may be, who wore the uniform of this country.

We must strive to build communities that truly serve, support and protect our veterans from the very first moment they return to civilian life. I did not say that. Those are the words of President Trump. For him to allow you to implement a ban like this, basically, to take food out of the mouths of a veteran is nothing short of un-American and inhumane. I do not even—I cannot even believe we are sitting here talking about this.

You are sitting here and you are talking about—you are using terms like level playing field when you are talking about taking food away from people. This is disgusting. We are sitting up here saying, what can we do. I think we all know what we can do and we should just do it so we do not have to hear people like you talking about level playing fields when you are talking about men and women who wore the uniform of this country not being able to get food.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Miss Rice.

I would now like to recognize Mr. Meuser for 5 minutes.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all.

Clearly a difficult issue, one in which I think we all agree in the end, anyone who cannot afford to maintain a level of nutrition and food, we—particularly a veteran we as a country, we as communities engage in. I, myself, donate regularly to food banks, and there are quite a few of them. That is for sure. There are some food banks that are—that exist for the purpose of veterans. I have one in my district known as the Keystone Food Bank.

What we need to figure out is how to get it done, right, in a way that is accountable. I have the Lebanon VA in my district. It takes a very holistic view of veteran services. They work with many community organizations to connect whenever they feel that there is benefits that are not in line with what the best interest of the veteran and the deserving.

Is that a best practice that is encouraged or modeled or taught for other VAs to really take this holistic approach, ask the questions, not just look at the data of what their income levels are?

Dr. O'TOOLE. Thank you, Congressman, for that question. I think it highlights both an important point and really underscores what we view in the VA as our mission. We see our role and job as going far beyond just making sure that we are managing a health condition or a health problem, but really trying to take care of the entire veteran. That extends through many examples.

I would wholeheartedly concur with the great work that is being done at the Lebanon VA and the leadership there and the staff there and their commitment to those men and women who served. It is a great testimony and example of what we are trying to do. It gets back to the larger issue in the context of food insecurity that we have to look at food insecurity not only in isolation, but what are the root causes to it, and work with the veteran and support the veteran through that context of helping them secure, in addition, stable housing and stable employment to addressing domestic violence issues, providing the supports that they need so they can support their families.

That goes far beyond a prescription pad. I appreciate you bringing it up. That is very much our commitment, and it is also the strategic approach that we have taken to the food insecurity screener and the interdisciplinary and team-based approach to trying to address what is a much deeper problem than just food.

Mr. MEUSER. Yes. I also just want to, before my next question, commend the Department of Veterans Affairs, particularly over the last 2 years, the MISSION Act, the Veterans Choice Act have been implemented on a bipartisan basis, but very much led by Secretary Wilkie and your staff. Most of you are veterans and, if not, you have dedicated your lives more or less, your working lives, to serving veterans. I see that throughout the Veterans Administration, and it is appreciated.

Not only is it appreciated by me, since I have 55,000 veterans in my district, it is appreciated by the veterans and their families. They have seen improvements, not just from the Lebanon VA, but the VA as a whole. You know, it was not too long ago, a couple of years ago, 3, 4 years ago that all we saw were disasters within various veterans administrations. The work that has been done, we are caring for our veterans better now.

Is there work to do? Absolutely. Such things as the Improve Act that we need to pass and provide more community services, so as we have the hybrid approach toward the best possible care for our veterans. I really commend you for your work and your dedication, and thank you for your service.

The other thing I wanted to ask you, the USDA, who is very active in my district, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, do they work in unison? Is there a cooperative effort there in this regard related to food?

Ms. MILLER. Yes, sir, there is. We work closely. We have had some training programs with some of the veterans VA case workers so that they are familiar with our programs and helping connect vets to our programs.

Mr. MEUSER. All right. Great.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Meuser.

With that I would like to thank our first panel. I would now like to call up our second panel. While everyone is switching around we will take just a minute.

[Pause]

Mr. LEVIN. All right. Thank you, everybody.

On the second panel today we have Josh Protas, Vice President of Public Policy at MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger. Thank you for being here.

Also joining us is Denise Hollywood, Chief Community & Programs Officer at Blue Star Families.

Finally, we have Vince Hall, the CEO of Feeding San Diego.

Thank you all so much for joining us. I am looking forward to getting your perspective.

As you know we will have 5 minutes for your oral statement, but your full written statement will be added to the record.

Ms. Protas, you are now recognized for 5 minutes, or Mr. Protas, excuse me. Please use the microphone.

STATEMENT OF JOSH PROTAS

Mr. PROTAS. Thank you.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Josh Protas and I am proud to serve as Vice President of Public Policy for MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger.

Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart the responsibility to care for the most vulnerable in our midst without judgment or precondition. For nearly 10 years we have prioritized addressing the long overlooked issue of hunger among veterans and military families. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP is the most crucial tool in supporting veterans who struggle to put food on the table.

Unfortunately, it is under attack through administrative actions that will increase hunger and hardship for struggling veterans. I would like to tell you about one of these individuals, Tim Keefe, a Navy veteran in Maine. I spoke with Tim last week and he agreed to allow me to share his very painful experience.

After being injured Tim could not return to work and fell on hard times. He applied for SNAP so that he could afford to buy food. Because the State of Maine chose not to waive the time limit for able-bodied adults without dependents or ABAWDs, Tim lost SNAP benefits after only 3 months. 3 months is the limit, not 36.

He repeatedly asked the numerous officials who passed him along in the bureaucratic maze, what do I eat between now and then? Nobody had an answer for Tim. Without SNAP, Tim had no assistance and became homeless. He resorted to scrounging for food and even catching squirrels to eat to get by.

Reflecting on his time, Tim shared, "There were many times when I would go 2 or even 3 days without food. The food bank has only limited resources. I had to add 7 holes on my belt to keep my pants on." For people like Tim, SNAP can literally save lives. We know that SNAP helps about 1.3 million low income veterans, but a recent report suggests that nearly two-thirds of veterans who struggle with hunger and are eligible for SNAP are not currently enrolled. Nobody, and certainly no veteran like Tim, should ever be forced to ask, what do I eat because they cannot get the help they need from the country they fought to protect.

MAZON urges Congress to, one, protect and improve SNAP. USDA must withdraw the 3 harmful proposals that would strip

SNAP benefits from millions of Americans, including veterans. Of particular concern is the rule that would restrict waivers from current SNAP time limits. This rule is not nuanced. It is not flexible. It is not a reflection of the realities of struggling Americans. It is entirely inappropriate for USDA to move forward with changes to SNAP without understanding how they will impact America's veterans.

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 tool in the campaign to end veteran suicide and needs to be prioritized.

Two, connect veterans to SNAP. We are pleased that the VA took MAZON's advice in 2015 to start screening veterans for food insecurity. The current process is not doing enough and does not capture all veterans who struggle. VA must adopt the validated 2 question hunger vital sign screening tool to more accurately identify all veterans who are at risk of food insecurity.

For veterans who screen positive, VA should require and provide onsite SNAP eligibility and application assistance, which is not happening broadly.

Three, share nutrition assistance information during transition. VA should integrate materials about programs like SNAP as part of the transition assistance program and other veteran outreach efforts. Include this information as part of the new solid star veteran suicide prevention initiative and work with USDA and community partners like MAZON to develop veteran specific resources about SNAP.

Four, listen to veterans. Negative public perceptions of SNAP are ramped up by proposals to restrict the program for only certain Americans. This creates a chilling effect and adds to the stigma and shame that make veterans and others reluctant to seek help that they need. This committee should hold a follow up hearing to listen to veterans who have real lived experiences with food insecurity.

Last, Congress must address the related issue of hunger among currently serving military families that has been ignored for far too long. MAZON believes this is an urgent matter of national security, military readiness, retention and recruitment.

The best way we can support and honor the veterans is to ensure that they have what they need and never have to struggle with hunger. For someone like Tim, that means ensuring access to SNAP. When Tim turned 50, the state's SNAP time limit no longer applied and he was able, once again, to get the assistance he so desperately needed. Tim is in a much better place now. He wants to make sure that others, veterans and non-veterans alike, do not fall through the cracks like he did.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOSH PROTAS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you. I appreciate that.

I would now like to recognize Ms. Hollywood for her opening statement.

STATEMENT OF DENISE HOLLYWOOD

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Denise Hollywood and I am the Chief Community & Programs Officer at Blue Star Families.

Blue Star Families builds communities that support military families by connecting research and data to programs and solutions. Since its inception in 2009, we have engaged tens of thousands of volunteers and served more than 1.5 million military family members. Blue Star Families is nationally recognized for our annual military family lifestyle survey, which uses both quantitative and qualitative data to reveal a snapshot of the current status of military families.

In our 2018 survey of our 10,000 respondents, we found that 7 percent of military family respondents and 12 percent of veteran family respondents indicated that someone in their household had faced food insecurity in the past year.

Additionally, 9 percent of military family respondents and 18 percent of veteran family respondents indicated that someone in their household had sought emergency food assistance through a food bank, food pantry or charitable organization.

In order to comprehend the issue of food insecurity among veteran families, we must first understand the factors that contribute to food insecurity while these families are still actively serving in the military.

Such factors include high rates of military spouse unemployment and under-employment, limited availability and high cost of childcare, out of pocket relocation and housing expenses, and unexpected financial emergencies. Many of these factors arise from frequent relocation due to military orders.

According to the Department of Defense, active duty military families relocate on average once every 2 to 3 years typically across State lines or overseas. Frequent relocation makes it difficult for military spouses to find and maintain gainful employment, partly because employers are wary of hiring individuals who have gaps in their resumes as a result of previous moves.

If a military spouse works in a licensed profession, he or she must also undergo the costly processing of re-licensing in a new State. In 2018, we found that 30 percent of military spouse respondents were unemployed. This figure dwarfs the civilian unemployment rate which, in 2018, was less than 4 percent. 56 percent of military spouse respondents who would have liked to be employed cited childcare as a reason for why they were not currently working.

Meanwhile, 70 percent of millennial military family respondents reported that having two incomes was vital to their family's well being. Thus, the military spouse employment crisis directly contributes to food insecurity by preventing military families from achieving a vital second source of income.

The financial difficulties of modern military families are further compounded by frequent out of pocket relocation expenses. Although the Federal Government covers the majority of the expenses incurred due to relocation, one-third of respondents reported

spending over \$1,000 in un-reimbursed expenses during their last military move.

All of these factors, out of pocket expenses, rising costs of childcare, spouse unemployment and others, can contribute to food insecurity among currently serving military families.

Food insecurity among active duty military families does not end when service members retire. To the contrary, the financial difficulties of military families can be aggravated by transition related challenges. It is critical that we work to address the underlying causes of military and veteran family food insecurity.

At the same time, however, this committee can take immediate steps to address veteran hunger by protecting and strengthening programs like SNAP that alleviate veteran hunger; instructing the VA and USDA to be more proactive in their efforts to identify veterans who are experiencing food insecurity; and establishing VA partnerships with non-profits to help reach veterans who are not receiving services through the VA network.

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. Blue Star Families is well situated to help in this endeavor.

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

Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DENISE HOLLYWOOD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Ms. Hollywood.

Now I would like to recognize Mr. Hall for 5 minutes, and thank you for all your good work in my neck of the woods out in North County, San Diego.

STATEMENT OF VINCE HALL

Mr. HALL. Well, Chairman Levin, thank you so much, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the committee. My name is Vince Hall. I'm the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Feeding San Diego, which is a leading hunger relief and food rescue organization in San Diego County. We are also a very proud member of the Feeding American network.

For perspective, San Diego is 4,500 square miles. It has a population of 3.4 million people, making it larger than 20 U.S. states. It has one of the largest concentrations of veterans and military personnel in the world. Our Navy, Marine, Coast Guard bases and National Guard armories are a critical part of this Nation's national defense infrastructure. Our county is home to 143,000 active duty military, 260,000 military dependents, 243,000 veterans, and 583,000 family members of veterans. Over 1.2 million San Diegans, 37 percent of our population, have direct ties to the military. It is a proud heritage, but it comes with solemn responsibilities.

The greatest among these responsibilities is to ensure that our veteran and military families have a dignified quality of life that honors their sacrifices. All too often, despite the efforts of our government, it falls to organizations like Feeding San Diego and Feed-

ing America to close this significant gap between what our heroes have and what they need to provide for their families.

I am proud of my organization, but I take no pride in the fact that our country stations people in San Diego without paying them enough to live in San Diego. I take no pride in seeing ever larger numbers of veterans lining up at our Feeding Heroes food pantries every year.

Now the good news is that Feeding San Diego has innovative food rescue approaches to delivering healthy, fresh and nutritious food that would otherwise go to waste. Last year we rescued 24 million pounds of food that was going to leave the food system and go to the waste system from stores, farms, manufacturers and other sources.

With our faith-based and charitable partners across the county, we distributed 26 million meals worth of food, 97 percent of which was rescued food that otherwise would have gone to a landfill. According to the USDA, 40 percent of the food in this country goes to waste every day. That is more than enough to solve hunger for every man, woman and child in need.

Through our partnership with Feeding America, we rescue food in San Diego County from 200 Starbucks stores every night of the year, 260 grocery stores, 19 school district central kitchens and dozens of other sources. We also rescue fresh produce from 225 farms and packing sheds up and down the State of California through our partnership with the California Association of Food Banks.

We could not do this by ourselves. We are proud to partner with 170 religious and charitable organizations across the county who work hand in hand with us to implement this innovative model. Many of these organizations are specifically focused on the needs of veterans and active duty military families, groups like the United Service Organizations (USO), US for Warriors, Courage to Call, Military Outreach Ministries, and Support the Enlisted Project.

Our distributions reach families through a dignified farmer's market-style model, which allows individuals to select the foods that are best for their families' needs. Our military can access fresh, nutritious fruits and vegetables without stigma or unnecessary bureaucracy through these pantries.

As strong as our efforts are, there is much more to be done and there are serious threats to our progress. We are asking Congress to do several things which would help us to finally solve veteran and military family hunger. Foremost among these is to oppose cuts to the SNAP program which threaten millions of Americans, including many of the veteran and active duty military families that we serve.

Feeding America is 200 food banks strong. For every one meal that is provided by our entire network, the SNAP program provides 9 meals. So even a relatively small cut to the SNAP program threatens to create a staggering increase in demand at America's food banks, a demand that we simply cannot meet.

I also encourage Congress to include needed improvements in child nutrition re-authorization which will help to increase food access for the children of military and veteran families.

I want to end my testimony by sharing Desiree's story. Desiree participates in our Feeding Heroes' program. Her husband is a communications officer in the Navy who makes just over \$34,000 per year. She has 4 kids and her husband has been deployed now for nearly 8 months. She told us that she knew life as a military spouse was going to have its challenges. She never expected that one of those challenges would be feeding her own children.

Thousands of military families face similar challenges. We see too many kids standing in food lines while their parents are serving on the front lines.

It has been an honor to testify today on behalf of everyone we serve at Feeding San Diego, including Desiree and her family.

Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF VINCE HALL APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you so much, Mr. Hall, for your leadership and your work in San Diego. I am glad this has provided an opportunity to highlight some of the great work you are doing.

Really for all 3 of you, thank you as non-governmental leaders and experts for bringing your perspective today.

I want to thank the VA representatives for sticking around to hear them.

Is anyone from USDA still here?

Let the record—yes, someone is from USDA still here? No.

Let the record reflect that no one from the United States Department of Agriculture who administers the SNAP program took the time to stay to listen to non-governmental organization experts who see firsthand in the field how food insecurity is impacting the veteran community. Let the record reflect that.

With now I would like to turn to some questions.

Mr. Hall, I was really delighted to join you recently to tour your distribution center, and I enjoyed learning about all the good work that you are doing and how you do it.

Are most veterans that you see that are referred to Feeding San Diego, do they get there from VA or from elsewhere? Can you comment on any stigma or any reluctance to seek assistance among food insecure veterans?

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The referral system is very informal and it often happens through peer networks. We have different groups of veterans that we serve. Transitioning veterans who have just left the service or perhaps as long as 5 or 10 years who are still trying to find their footing in civilian life find us through support organizations that they turn to shortly after their discharge from active duty.

Senior veterans might come to us through neighborhood-based senior programs, and it is only as we begin to serve them that we learn that they are veterans who might be eligible for VA benefits and services.

A lot of just person to person referrals cause people to find their way to our food pantries, even the VA medical center in San Diego consistently refers people to Feeding San Diego for hunger relief services.

You hit on a key point, Mr. Chairman, and that is stigma; that no one who has worn the uniform of the country feels pride in ac-

cessing food through hunger relief charities. It is really our duty, our obligation morally to support those who have served this country to ensure that they do not need to turn to charitable organizations to have a minimal quality of life after they, themselves, have put their life on the line for this country.

Only by partnering with these organizations that have the trust of veterans do we find that we are able to create safe environments where we minimize that stigma and maximize their dignity. It is still always an ever-present challenge.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you for that.

Mr. Protas, you noted in your testimony that VA's current screening tool of a single question only identifies veterans at risk of very low food security.

Can you explain the difference between very-low and low food insecurity and why it is important to identify and address both.

Mr. PROTAS. Sure. Thank you for the question.

The difference is really a technical difference in the way that USDA defines the two. Low food insecurity is defined as households with reduced—that have reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.

Very-low food insecurity describes that at times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced, because the household lacked money or other resources for food.

The truth is, both of those categories are considered food insecure and that people have to alter their eating habits, which ultimately results in poorer nutrition and poorer health outcomes.

The single question that is being asked, we think, captures, really just those who experience very-low food insecurity, and the rate—it is under 2 percent that they are determining. We know that the rates for certain parts of the veteran population, and veterans in general, are much higher than that, so many people are falling through the cracks.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you for that.

For both you and Mr. Hall, by USDA's own admission, its recent proposed rule changes to SNAP will lead to significant reductions in SNAP participation, which will, no doubt, include loss of SNAP benefits for struggling veterans; although, as I am sure you remember from our first panel, they do not know how many, although they promise to get us that number, though they are not here anymore to hear this.

Mr. Hall, as an organization that provides both, direct food and also enrolls individuals in SNAP, what impact do you think these changes are going to have for your organization, for Feeding San Diego? Do you—and other food banks and pantries across the country, do you have the capacity to make up for these cuts while also maintaining the robust emergency response that you provide to the San Diego community?

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The short answer to the question is no, we do not have that capacity. It is so complicated to get somebody enrolled in SNAP under the current eligibility criteria that we have had to redirect our staff resources to not just helping people apply for SNAP, but,

instead, doing fewer applications and helping more people through the entirety of the documentation process to get them to the finish line where they can receive SNAP benefits. We have actually scaled back our enrollment process to meet the complex bureaucracy that surrounds the existing SNAP program. This is going to add an entirely new layer of complication, which we cannot afford to support.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you.

Mr. Protas, what is the experience in Maine that you highlighted in your testimony teach about the ability for hunger-relief organizations to mitigate the impact to veterans from SNAP policy changes?

Mr. PROTAS. Sure. Thank you for the question.

In 2015, then-Governor LePage, the Governor of Maine, chose not to take State waivers for the time limits on SNAP, even though the State was eligible for those waivers. The State saw an increase in hunger that resulted. Thousands of Mainers, including about 2800 veterans, lost access to SNAP.

It did not mean that they had a bettering of their life circumstances. It did not mean that because they lost the \$1.40-per person, per-meal benefit, that they were inspired to get work.

I think the short goal is to get people back to work who can, but just taking food away from people does not magically make them work, and that was the case that happened in Maine. The story from Tim that I shared was a very personal story of somebody who was hurt, but we know that there were thousands of other veterans and tens of thousands of other Mainers who lost access to SNAP and went hungry, as a result of that change.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you very much.

With that, I would like to turn it over to the ranking member, Mr. Bilirakis.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you—very much.

Mr. Chairman, I understand that the statute—and I agree with you, the USDA should be here; they should have stayed—but I understand they are barred by statute, they cannot request the veteran status, and I would like to discuss that with you, because we have to give them that authority to do so. I would appreciate that. I understand it was taken out in the Farm Bill, that authority. Let us get that done together.

Doing down the panel, and I guess we will start with Mr. Protas—is that okay—would you support an increase in the Federal Government's ability to require States to track the veteran status of SNAP beneficiaries, and if not, why not?

Mr. PROTAS. I think I would support that. I think USDA has ways to collect information right now that they are not. The estimates about the 1.3 million veterans who participate in SNAP currently comes from census bureau data from the American Community Survey. There are ways to get this data and to get information.

I think it would be fine to inquire about veteran status, but that should not be the barrier to USDA in doing more to examine this problem.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. I do want to commend all the groups for all of your good work in helping our heroes. I really appreciate it so much and we respect you tremendously.

Again, the question for Mr. Protas and Mr. Hall, Feeding San Diego, do you believe that SNAP should be a temporary-assistance program? Mr. Protas first.

Mr. PROTAS. I think for the vast majority of SNAP participants, SNAP is temporary assistance and it works the way it was designed, but there are some individuals—those who are disabled, those who are not able to work—where it may provide longer-term support.

Ideally, people get back to work and SNAP is a stepping-stone, but if they do not have jobs in their communities and there are not job-training opportunities, it is difficult. There are many barriers people face to work.

Ms. Miller talking about employment and training programs, and I think that is really important. We saw in the last Farm Bill that there were 10 pilot programs for employment-training programs and we should see what works out of those. We should see the results of those employment-training programs.

The truth is, there are not job-training slots for every SNAP recipient who wants to better their skills to get work. If we really want to get people back to work, which I think is a shared goal, let us invest in those employment and training programs so that it is—so that SNAP is a temporary assistance.

Just taking food away from people is not the motivator that is all of a sudden going to have somebody, then, seek work. They are looking for work, they just do not have jobs or do not have training opportunities in their communities or they face barriers to work like transportation or childcare.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. All right. Thank you.

Mr. Hall, again, do you believe that SNAP should be a temporary-assistance program?

Mr. HALL. I agree with the previous response that for people with permanent disabilities, with seniors, with people who do not have a path to self-sufficiency, SNAP is an important part of meeting their monthly nutritional needs; however, I also would say that we have a program where the data in San Diego tracks the national average. That the average SNAP person—participant is within the program for less than a year.

It is a successful program that is lifting people out of poverty, and when we look at the number of SNAP recipients who are not working, it is typically not the same people each month, that is, that this is a program that fluctuates and new people find themselves in crisis and people find their way back into the workforce and then they are no longer in the program.

I think the program is functioning well and it is serving its intended purpose.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. A question for Mr. Protas, and Ms. Hollywood, any time you want to chime in, please do not hesitate to. I want to give you an opportunity first, let us do that.

Do you have any questions or do you want to add to that in any way?

[Nonverbal response.]

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. All right.

Mr. Protas, in your written statement, you provide the story of Tim, a veteran, a hero from Maine. Why was the Department of Labor, the determination not enough for him to qualify for SNAP?

Mr. PROTAS. I think there was a misunderstanding between State agencies and unfortunately we know that there is a lot of confusion about disability status; in fact, Ms. Miller noted in her testimony that veterans who receive full disability rating are exempted from work requirements.

That is actually not the case. Any veteran who has a disability rating and receives any benefit at all from the VA is exempted from work requirements. We have the head of the Food and Nutrition Service who did not properly convey that and understand those regulations.

I think there is a lot of confusion and better information needs to be distributed and USDA has a role to play, but then State agencies that administer SNAP and other safety-net programs have to play a role, as well, and I think the VA can play a part in better communicating those guidelines so people do not fall through the cracks like Tim.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. I just want to emphasize that all of us want our veterans, obviously, and their families, to have food security. It is just a matter of, I think we need, you know, more hearings, and as the chairman told me, he would like to have a panel of veterans to get their input on this.

I really appreciate your input, your testimony, both panels today, and I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

Yes, I agree with your suggestion, as part of your testimony, that we should be hearing from veterans, themselves, so we would absolutely love to do that. In addition, I would appreciate the chance to work with the ranking member to get the data to know exactly how many veterans are being impacted by this and, in fact, there are reasons why USDA or VA cannot work together to provide that information. We need to understand that, as well.

We did, at least, get while the USDA administrator was here, the commitment that she would work with VA to try to get that data to us. We will keep at it and it is going to take more hearings, and I look forward to working with you together on that.

With that, I would like to recognize Mr. Pappas for 5 minutes.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to second that recommendation, that we continue to look for ways to listen to the veterans, and I appreciate the way that this panel has brought out some personal stories of how veterans have been impacted by food insecurity and economic hardship, and if there is an opportunity for a roundtable or some way to pull together a forum, Mr. Chairman, I would absolutely love to participate in that.

I appreciate your comments here today, the work you do on behalf of veterans and those who are struggling across our country. We all know, and we heard in the last panel, that 36 million Americans rely on food stamp benefits in this country every month, and that is at a time when we consider that the economy is doing well. 1.3 million veterans accessed the SNAP program, according to recent data, and we have got to make sure that those vets continue

to find ways to be connected, even as this administration seeks to pull the rug out from under those who are struggling, who rely on the SNAP program. I think it is outrageous that they have moved forward with these Draconian measures that target folks who are struggling and who are really living day-to-day.

Mr. Hall, you said a few things that I hear a lot from food pantries, from the food bank, from charities across my district that understand that even at a time of significant economic growth for many in our country, that there are those who are struggling and that the SNAP program does not necessarily meet the needs of those who are food insecure.

I am wondering if you could just continue to talk a little bit about what changes to this program mean for organizations like yours that are already stretched to the max, and why we need to make sure that we are doing all we can to fill in those gaps.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Congressman.

It is a very difficult challenge to convey how the SNAP program works in the real world. There are the complexities of finding eligible populations, and we know that only a percentage of eligible veterans in this country are participating in the SNAP program. We know that the documentation requirements that are required to successfully enroll, the lag time that is created before you receive a benefit card in many instances. In California, this is a County-administered program and the County of San Diego is a terrific partner with Feeding San Diego and has a full-time employee in our food bank office to help us process SNAP applications. Often it can take weeks and weeks to help somebody who is in a crisis to get access to those SNAP benefits.

We also see, sir, that the SNAP benefits off run out the second or third week of the month and we see an increase in demand at food pantries from SNAP beneficiaries because the benefit amount is not enough to secure the quantity of food that they need to properly nourish their families. It is a situation where the program works well within the guidelines that Congress has established for it, but Congress simply has not created the program in a way that is designed to solve hunger in this country. It is absolutely, at this moment, essential, critical, supplemental aid for many, many veterans and, frankly, for many active-duty military families.

If I may just add, for active-duty military families, having their basic allowance for housing counted as income for purposes of disqualifying them from SNAP is an absolutely inexcusable affront. I know many of the members on both sides of the aisle agree on this, but I do not understand why we have not fixed it yet.

Mr. PAPPAS. Certainly no one is getting rich on the four-to-five-dollar-a-day average that SNAP pays for food assistance, and if anyone thinks that is an overly generous benefit, they should try living on it.

I am wondering if we could zero in on the fact that younger veterans—veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, in particular—are experiencing food insecurity at higher rates. Do you know why that is the case and how can we do outreach to those communities to make sure that they are getting what they need?

Mr. PROTAS. A recent study by researchers at the University of Minnesota found food-insecurity rates about 27 percent for vet-

erans who were returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and these are astronomically high rates and very concerning.

It was mentioned before about the economy that is booming, and I just want to say that the economy is not booming for everyone. That jobs are not available in every community, especially in rural communities, and we also have many people who are transitioning from military service, who are taking low-paying jobs and experience underemployment; maybe it is a part-time job without benefits, maybe they are cobbling together a couple of part-time jobs. That underemployment rate was recently documented for recently returning veterans at a rate substantially higher than the civilian population. I think that is part of the situation here and we need to do a better job for those who are transitioning to make sure that they are aware of the benefits that can help them during that temporary time of need.

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Income invariability, I think—income variability, too, I think is a key component here, because people go from getting a steady paycheck on active duty and then suddenly they are thrown into this crisis where they are piecemealing various jobs together in order to get a solid paycheck.

Mr. PAPPAS. Sure. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Pappas.

I would now like to recognize Mr. Bergman.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks to all of you for being here, because what we are talking about—and especially the children of servicemembers—if kids are hungry, they cannot learn, pure and simple. When you think about the things we do in schools because the kids do not have food at home to eat or when they go home on Friday afternoon for the weekend and we send backpacks full of food home with them because of their homelife situation puts them at risk, so I thank you for what you are doing. I have kind of a hodgepodge of questions here based upon the testimony that each of you gave.

Mr. Protas, you used the example of Tim. Was he in the VA system?

Mr. PROTAS. He was not receiving healthcare in the VA system, no.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Was that by choice?

Mr. PROTAS. I am not sure that he qualified for medical care through VA. His disability was not a service-related disability; it was a job-related disability, so I am not sure.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Well, the reason I ask questions like that is because, you know, data counts and when we use examples of things, I want to make sure we do—because what we are trying to do here as the committee—it does not make any difference which side of the alley you are on—to understand what our role here, as Congress is, to do the right thing, in this case, for veterans and their families.

For the whole panel, could each of you give a rough number—this does not have to be accurate—a rough-percentage breakdown of the veterans that you interact with who are inside or outside the VA system, kind of like I just asked about Tim—60/40, 70/30—what do you think?

Mr. PROTAS. I think it is maybe 60/40—60 outside of the VA, 40 in.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay.

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Sir, our survey does not address that specific question. Our survey, specifically—the data that we gather, approximately 85 percent of our respondents are military family members—

Mr. BERGMAN. They are active-duty?

Ms. HOLLYWOOD. Active-duty. Then the other 15 percent are family members and the other 15 percent are active-duty and veterans.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay.

Mr. HALL. Sir, a significant portion of our Feeding Heroes program, sir, is active-duty military families. Within the veteran community, we do not have a mechanism to track how many are actively engaged with the VA versus those who are not, so, unfortunately, I just do not have that data.

Mr. BERGMAN. What could the—and this is not a question to be answered here, but, again, I would really appreciate a response—because active-duty, Camp Pendleton, 32nd Street, you know, Balboa Hospital, North Island, Coronado, okay, what could—again, not to be answered now, unless you have a quick solution you have already thought of—these men and women are stationed there. They are active-duty. They are full-time. In most cases or many cases, they are either living onboard base or they are getting their Basic Allowance Housing (BAH) out in town, okay. I am guessing BAH is relative to the cost-of-living in San Diego, okay.

Is there anything that the—and these people are full-time employees of the U.S. Government, so take it out of the military and let us say we moved all the Forest Service firefighters out there to be stationed temporarily in San Diego to be jumpers in the event we had forest fires, okay: Could they afford to live or is it just because San Diego is a cost-of-living?

By the way, first of all, let me compliment you on your talk about food waste and recapturing food, if you will.

Are you familiar with Anthony Bourdain's 2017, *Wasted! The Story of Food Waste*?

Mr. HALL. Yes, sir.

Mr. BERGMAN. You know, that impacted me greatly when I first saw it. What saddened me is we have got 8, soon-to-be 10 grandkids—and we are now great-grandparents, so we are now looking at three generations down—what saddened me about that movie was it cannot be shown in middle schools or any school, for that matter, because of the language in it. So, if you could impact your fellow filmmakers out there—not that you are in the film business—to make it middle-school presentable, because the messaging we are talking about here is building resiliency.

In the military we have families who are committed to the country. It is our responsibility to be committed to them, but in building that resiliency within the family, within that servicemember so the family can survive and thrive when the servicemember has gone to the fight—and I know I am going over a minute or so, Mr. Chairman, if you will allow me to continue—but the idea is that when they leave active-duty, they have served honorably, they are end of

active-duty, and they are out in the civilian workforce, can families, in your particular case, afford to live in San Diego?

If they got out—they served 4 or 8 years honorably and they got out at the E5 or E6 level or something like that, they do not have a pension because they did not serve 20 years, what do you tell them?

Mr. HALL. It is increasingly hard, General—I am sorry—Congressman.

Mr. BERGMAN. No, that is okay. It is okay here. It is accepted. You just cannot say that in the Armed Services Committee.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, sir.

It is increasingly difficult to understand San Diego's complex housing equation. Our cost-of-living is now about 40 percent higher than the national average, so it is unreasonable to expect that folks in the economic condition that you have described are going to be able to easily locate, find housing, and support their families in San Diego.

Unfortunately, our active-duty military families do not get to make that choice—they are stationed in San Diego—and when their families arrive, the BAH is not sufficient to support them. We have many families traveling from as far away as Riverside and Imperial Counties to work.

Mr. BERGMAN. I know the roadways very well, but San Diego has one problem because of your cost-of-living. San Francisco probably has a similar problem. Places like New York, Boston, D.C. have a similar problem to that, as well.

My district happens to be very rural and remote. We have a slightly different problem; usually the tyranny of distance and the availability of we need more, you know, good-paying jobs, because the economy is on fire in a positive way, not in a wildfire sort of way.

The point is—okay, I see a hand coming up—Mr. Protas.

When Mr. Protas is done answering, I will yield back, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Bergman.

Mr. PROTAS. Sure. Just quickly, thank you for raising the issue about currently serving military families. I agree with Mr. Hall that the basic allowance for housing is a barrier and we have tried in the past in the Farm Bill context, to have that basic allowance for housing excluded as income.

There is been an opportunity in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). We worked very closely with the National Military Family Association and Congresswoman Davis and Congressman Young for a bipartisan solution for a military family basic needs allowance. It would be an allowance to help junior-enlisted personnel who have larger households who really struggle to make ends meet and do not qualify for SNAP, even though they need it because the BAH is counted.

There is something that Congress can do. Congressman Levin has been a cosponsor of that provision, and thank you very much. We would love to see that taken care of in the next NDAA to make sure that those military families are taken care of.

As you mentioned, too, the children in military families are a next-generation issue. When families today who are in the military are struggling or even for veterans who have children, those chil-

dren are much more likely to go into service themselves, and if they experience food insecurity as children, they are more likely to experience obesity and diet-related health conditions that may not make them fit to serve. The Mission: Readiness organization of retired admirals and generals has really prioritized this. So, it is not only an issue for readiness now, but for recruitment down the road.

Mr. LEVIN. Thanks.

Mr. Bergman, I resemble the remark of living in a high-cost area. It is very true, but we are not going to solve all the reasons for that. Certainly, it is not the auspices of this discussion. I think this discussion is a fairly simple one, which is: Are we going to allow veterans to go hungry?

I think the answer should be equally simple: We cannot allow veterans to go hungry. Not one veteran in need should go hungry, period.

With that, I would like to recognize Mr. Barr.

Mr. BARR. Thank you, again, Chairman Levin for your leadership and holding this hearing.

I could not agree with you more: We should not have a single veteran in this country food insecure.

I want to thank our second panel for your organizations, for your dedication, for your work in fighting this problem. I have to give a shout-out to my food pantries back home in Kentucky, who I know serve many veterans. God's Pantry—Mr. Hall, you may know Michael Halligan; he does a great job and it is a great organization—and there is a great network of food pantries within God's Pantry's network in Central and Eastern Kentucky—and Tamara Sandberg, who leads our whole statewide effort in this regard.

I also want to compliment our agriculture commissioner back home in Kentucky who is doing some innovative things to address food insecurity, Commissioner Ryan Quarles. He is working very closely with our food pantry network back in Kentucky.

Mr. Protas, I want to kind of explore a little bit more, the conversation that you were having with Ranking Member Bilirakis about the temporary nature of SNAP, and, obviously, I appreciate your comment that the temporary nature—and Mr. Hall, as well—that the temporary nature of SNAP certainly is applicable to able-bodied, work-capable adults, but obviously should not necessarily apply to a senior citizen, someone who is disabled.

I would just remind everybody that, of course, the underlying bipartisan statute does not apply—the work requirements do not apply to disabled individuals, as far as I read it. That is not—it does not appear to be at issue.

I do take seriously, Mr. Protas, your good point that in Maine, for example, and other places, where there may be—and rural areas—I represent these exact places that you are describing—in rural places, where even in a booming economy, there is underemployment, there is difficulty in finding those 7 million job openings in those particular economic places. As I read the proposed regulation from the USDA, it looks like they are taking that into account, because it moves to an area-specific request for waivers, rather than sweeping statewide waivers.

I would invite you to comment on that.

Mr. PROTAS. Sure. One point about disability, those who are recognized or properly recognized disabilities are exempted from work requirements, but many people fall through the cracks, and I think it would be wrong to discount that, that there are many people with mental health disabilities or physical disabilities that do not get fully recognized. Part of that may be because of economic barriers, because they cannot afford to go to a doctor to get the proper documentation. There are many hoops that people have to jump through sometimes to get their disability properly certified, so—

Mr. BARR. I think that is a fair point and we should probably work together to address that, but when you are talking about a bona fide, non-disabled person, you do agree that this should be a temporary program?

Mr. PROTAS. It should be a temporary program for those who are not able to work and who have opportunities available to them.

As far as the proposed rule change, States—it is limiting State flexibilities. It was not just flexibilities about statewide waivers; there were area waivers that were currently exercised.

I do not know in Kentucky if you feel that USDA has a better sense about the job opportunities than your State officials—I think the way the 1996 welfare reform law worked is that there was a certain amount of flexibility for States to seek those waivers, knowing the job opportunities in their communities. They know best what is—

Mr. BARR. I think that is a fair point, but as I read the proposed rulemaking, the move to area-specific request for waivers make sense because the States can apply for those in those pockets in Rural Kentucky where we do have difficult labor-market conditions.

One other point I read in the regulation that is not received a lot of attention, the proposed rule continues the use of exemptions for adults who are having difficulty entering the workforce. You are aware of that. I mean, that seems, to me, to address a lot of the concerns that you otherwise might have with the rule.

Mr. PROTAS. There is actually—there is a continuation of those exemptions. I believe in the proposed rule, there is an elimination of the carryover of exemptions. That is a concern; it actually limits the number of exemptions.

I am not aware that every State has fully taken advantage of those exemptions to waive. My concern and Mazon's concern is that it is limiting State flexibilities and it is limiting the options to help those who are really struggling.

Mr. BARR. Well, I really do appreciate your work and I appreciate your feedback on this and I certainly will continue to monitor USDA as it implements this because we obviously want these great organizations to continue to serve our veterans when there is a real need and we also want them to encourage work where we can.

Thank you very much. I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Barr.

Now, I would like to recognize Mr. Meuser.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We are, of course, the Veterans' Affairs Committee here, where it focuses on veterans, not necessarily the entire population, although we care greatly about that, as well. No veteran should go

hungry—I think that that is understood—and whatever procedures and perhaps legislation or actions that need to be taken, we need to simply do a better job in assuring that that occurs.

Now, related to your organizations, and I stated earlier that I am very familiar with various food banks, very often the community has to step up and you need campaign fundraising events and things of that nature and other Government participation.

We are, to an extent, talking about a broader issue here, and that is SNAP. The thing is, if you look back at the data on the number—the average participant and the population of those that receive SNAP benefits over the years, something does not add up.

What I mean by that is this, if you go back to 1992, there was a recession, so there were 25 million people on SNAP. As the economy improved, as you would expect, the number of people receiving the supplemental nutritional program reduced quite a bit—went down to 17 million—in 2000. Then it crept up into 2007 to 26 million, and then we had the so-called Great Recession, so, granted, you would expect it to increase; however, it increased from 28 million in 2008, those on the SNAP program, to 45 million in 2000—or excuse me—47 million in 2013, 45 million in 2015. That is equivalent to the population of 22 states, the entire population of 22 states was on the SNAP program.

2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, we have a far-better economy than we did 5 years ago. We have many jobs that are going unfulfilled. The Farm Bill last year did have the idea of some work requirements. I believe it was between the ages of 19 and 56, if you are able-bodied and not caring for children, you needed to work and if you still worked—30 hours I think it was—and if you still worked and your income met the demands, then you would receive the SNAP benefits. It did not get passed.

What we now have done over the last 2 years is not change the criteria to my understanding, but enforced eligibility requirements. We now have 34 million people, okay, last year, 34 million versus years past. So, in 2000, it was 17 million. In 2019, after reducing it, double that—double that. That is still 18 states—18 states, all population on the SNAP program.

I guess it is a—you have to understand it is a reasonable question with hundreds of thousands of jobs being created, a very strong economy, a 3.5 percent—not my district, mind you—it is higher—so I get it. There is still a lot of work to be done and more people need to be included in this strong economy, but overall it is going very well, and so placing reasonable work requirements on SNAP recipients—and by the way, if they cannot get a job, the Farm Bill called for 20 hours of volunteer service would be sufficed and clearly would not have raised their income levels that much. They still would have been recipients.

I just find it hard to believe that we do not want to really take into consideration levels of accountability and have an organized approach so that the money is there for those who need it. I make that comment and I ask for your comments in response.

Mr. PROTAS. I think it is alarming how many Americans struggle with food insecurity and I think rather than the concern being directed at how many people participate in SNAP, there should be concern about how many people struggle. Thirty-six million Ameri-

cans who are currently served by SNAP, you say it is 18 states—that is larger than the entire population of Canada.

What is wrong in this country that that many Americans struggle to put food on the table?

In terms of the increases in SNAP participation——

Mr. MEUSER. I could argue, what is wrong with the organization and accountability and enforcement of eligibility requirements is what is trying to be done.

Mr. PROTAS. Well, I think you also need to recognize that SNAP helps the working poor and the vast majority of working-age adults who can work, do work. So, we have low-income households who are receiving extra help that they need from SNAP, people who are working two or three part-time jobs.

There is something wrong with——

Mr. MEUSER. My time is over, so I do recognize it, but it is at a very, very high level—it includes will 18 states—34 million versus 20 years ago, 17 million; that is a bit of a disparity.

I yield, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Meuser.

With no further questions, we can begin to bring this hearing to a close. I really want to thank our witnesses on both, the first and the second panel, and I would like to—I will have a brief close, but I would like to thank my friend, the ranking member, Mr. Bilirakis, for a brief closing statement.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Briefly—again, I really appreciate you holding this hearing and, again, we got some answers today, but we need some more answers—obviously, we need the data and then giving the USDA the authority statutorily to provide this data, as well, for our veterans.

Again, no veteran should go hungry. I mean, all of us agree with that. I mean, we serve on this committee. It is our top priority, I understand—at least mine and I know the chairman's—to take care of our veterans and their families.

I do believe—and, again, we need to explore this even more and I really appreciate your testimony—but I do believe long-term—we have to think long-term—and I think all of you agree that job training so that our veterans can provide for their families in the future is really the key.

Short-term-wise, sure, absolutely. No veteran should go hungry, and we will continue to work on this issue.

I appreciate everyone's input today, and I yield back, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it.

Mr. LEVIN. I thank the ranking member for his work on this and look forward to continuing to work with him on a bipartisan basis to address this pressing issue.

I thank my colleagues on both sides of the aisle for their thoughtful questions and comments today. You know, it is an interesting day that we are holding this hearing. We are voting on a war-powers resolution later today and I am thinking of the men and women of extraordinary character who are serving this country and sacrificing for our national security and the very least we can do is provide our military families and our veterans with food security; it is the very least we can do.

This committee asked earlier in this hearing how many veterans will be impacted by the administration's proposed changes to the SNAP program, and I appreciate that USDA agreed to work with VA, to the very least, to try to provide us with that data. That does not tell the whole story, does not go far enough in my opinion.

Our veterans are more than statistics and, furthermore, there are those veterans who are suffering from mental illnesses who are undiagnosed. How is this decision going to impact them? It would be definitely worth that discussion.

Hearing from veterans, themselves, I think is critically important. I look forward to working with you all and to making sure that that happens in the weeks and months ahead.

I am particularly concerned with how USDA will work with VA to communicate better. I am concerned that USDA did not see fit to have a representative here to hear from these non-governmental experts in this area. It does not take an act of Congress to pick up the phone, to communicate, to speak with one another; it just takes a level of care and concern.

We set the highest expectations of our military to serve our country and we need to set equally high expectations of ourselves to serve them. We should not be allowing a single veteran in need to go hungry ever.

If we want to serve veterans, we have to start by making sure they are not hungry—this really is not that hard.

Again, I thank our witnesses for joining us today.

All members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include additional materials.

Without objection, the subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:07 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

Prepared Statement of Pamilyn Miller

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to discuss the role of the nutrition assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in serving the Nation's veterans. I am Pam Miller, Administrator of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). FNS is responsible for administering America's nutrition assistance programs, which leverage the Nation's agricultural abundance to ensure every American has access to wholesome, nutritious food, even when they face challenging circumstances.

Every American owes an immeasurable debt to the veterans who have served and fought to defend our Nation. The men and women who have borne the perils and hardships to secure and protect our freedom and our way of life have not only earned our respect and honor, they deserve our support as they deal with the challenges of life after military service.

At FNS, we operate programs that touch the lives of one in four Americans every day. Our programs serve a broad range of households with low-incomes to meet their nutritional needs – such as those of the elderly, pregnant women, infants and young children – and operate in settings where immediate access to food is important, such as schools and child care facilities. While our programs are not targeted specifically to veterans, they are available and designed to provide benefits that veterans and their families may need, particularly when they face difficult economic circumstances.

A recent USDA analysis of dietary intake data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found that, similar to other Americans, veterans' well-being would benefit from improvements in their diets. In particular, their consumption of added sugars and solid fats is too high, and their consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and dairy products is too low relative to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

The largest of our 15 nutrition assistance programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, currently serves about 36 million low-income people each month. Data from the American Community Survey suggests that in calendar year 2017, about 1.3 million veterans reported receiving SNAP at some point during the previous 12 months. This represented less than 3 percent of all SNAP participants. In that same year, about 7 percent of all living veterans received SNAP, while about 14 percent of all Americans received SNAP at some point.

The Subcommittee has asked about the impact of the Administration's SNAP reforms, both proposed and finalized, on veterans. Let me say at the outset that because veteran status is not a condition of eligibility for SNAP, meaning that veterans in need of food assistance qualify for SNAP in the same way that other households do, based on their income, assets, and other non-financial eligibility factors. For that reason, we do not have veteran's status as part of the administrative datasets that we use to estimate the impact of these rules on different sub-groups of SNAP participants. Given the limited number of veterans receiving benefits, survey data is also limited in what it can reliably tell us. I will instead speak more generally about the purpose and effects of our current and upcoming rules.

Let me begin by explaining the overall purpose of these regulatory reforms, which is to use the authority we have under the current law, including the 2018 Farm Bill, to administer SNAP, and all our nutrition programs, as Congress intended and has specified in law. Overall, we are seeking to achieve a more modern, equitable and effective SNAP program.

The Food Stamp Program was launched in the 1930's, and today's nationwide program was created in the 1970's. SNAP has grown and evolved over time, and it is crucial to continue to make reforms to improve customer service and integrity in the program. SNAP statute provides USDA discretion to allow State agencies – SNAP's front-line customer service organizations – flexibility in certain aspects of administration. While this flexibility works well in several areas, in some it has com-

promised the consistency of operations over time with certain standards defined in statute, and even led to disparities in benefits for similarly situated individuals and households simply because of the State where they live. For this reason, and in recognition of our responsibility to ensure the program operates consistent with the law, a major portion of the Administration's SNAP agenda seeks to strike a better balance between practical operational flexibility and the national standards that define the program's purpose and support its effectiveness. We have focused in three key areas.

We recently announced changes to the criteria for when and where states may apply for waivers of the time limit for able-bodied adults without dependents between the ages of 18 and 49 – “ABAWDs.” This rule does not apply to children, their parents, individuals over 50 including the elderly, pregnant women, or individuals with a disability. The USDA definition in SNAP for individuals with a disability automatically includes veterans who are totally disabled, permanently homebound, or in need of regular aid and attendance, as well as a surviving spouse or child of a veteran who is receiving VA benefits and is considered permanently disabled, so they are also not the subject to this time limit.

The statutory time limit only applies to work-capable adults without children or other dependents. Long-standing SNAP statute sets the limits for this subgroup to 3 months of benefits in a 3-year period – unless they are working, volunteering, or participating in work training for at least 20 hours per week, or participating in workfare, for as little as 6 hours a week. States may waive these limits in areas with an unemployment rate above 10 percent or where there are “not sufficient jobs.” However, the previous regulations were defined so loosely that counties with an unemployment rate as low as 2.5 percent are included in currently waived areas. The recent final rule places common-sense limits on such waivers. As a result of the new limits on waivers, significantly more ABAWDs will be expected to work, volunteer, and/or participate in a work program, or participate in workfare, in order to receive SNAP for more than 3 months in a 36-month (3-year) period.

Congress was clear that parents with dependent children in the home, those over 50 years old including the elderly, those with a disability, and pregnant women, are not subject to time limits. This rule has no impact on such individuals, including the veterans among them.

Congress also established a wide range of ways for individuals to engage and maintain benefits; the rule did not make changes to existing regulations in this area and FNS continues to encourage SNAP State agencies to leverage SNAP-funded Employment & Training (E&T) programs, as well as services provided by other Federal agencies, including the VA work programs, State and county governments, and local providers, to meet the needs of their participants working toward self-sufficiency. In addition to providing for work and various training programs to count toward the work requirement, current law and regulations also include volunteering for just 6 hours a week through a workfare program, perhaps at a local food bank, as a way to maintain SNAP eligibility while gaining valuable work experience. Similarly, Federal law explicitly exempts certain individuals from the time limit, including those unable to work due to physical or mental challenges – challenges that some veterans may face. An individual does not need to be permanently disabled or receiving disability benefits to be exempted from the time limit under this criterion. Moreover, when an individual's “unfitness for work” is obvious to the SNAP eligibility worker, States have the discretion to exempt the individual without documentation from a medical office or other source. Federal rules allow States this flexibility to prevent placing unnecessary burden on individuals who are clearly unfit for employment but may be undiagnosed and/or disconnected from supportive services or benefits, such as people with apparent mental illnesses and the chronically homeless. States are responsible for assessing an individual's fitness for work methodically and comprehensively, typically when certifying applicants for benefits.

To be clear, the rule did not change these responsibilities, nor did it take away states' statutory flexibility to waive the time-limit in areas of high unemployment and to exempt a percentage of their caseload, as established in law, at their full discretion. What the rule did accomplish was to establish clear standards for applying for and receiving waivers. The strong economy is creating opportunities for all, and this Administration's view is that now is the time to help more Americans enter, re-enter, and succeed in the workforce – including veterans.

Another rulemaking, which we are working to finalize, proposed to eliminate a loophole called “broad-based categorical eligibility” that has been used to provide SNAP benefits to households without a robust eligibility determination by the conferring TANF program. This would end the practice of allowing households to be eligible for SNAP by simply being handed a brochure from another Federal program. Limiting this eligibility rule to those receiving specific, concrete, and work-sup-

porting benefits would retain categorical eligibility's advantage of streamlining program administration, but in a fiscally prudent way. And it promotes integrity by better aligning eligibility with the income and resource standards set explicitly in statute. The comment period for the proposed rule is closed, and the agency is examining comments as we contemplate a final rule.

The third major reform we have proposed would truly *standardize* and *modernize* the method for setting State SNAP standard utility allowances across the country. For many years, SNAP rules have allowed states to use their own methods to establish a standard utility allowance in lieu of documenting actual utility costs. Such standards can be a useful program efficiency, but the variation in State methods for determining the allowance amount has resulted in the inconsistent treatment of similarly situated households across State lines. Moreover, it has been so long since State SUA methodologies were assessed that some states cannot explain their original SUA or even the year it was set. USDA's proposal would replace the patchwork of outdated and inconsistent State methods for setting these allowances with a modernized, uniform approach based on up-to-date data on actual household utility costs in each State. The proposal would also replace an antiquated "telephone allowance" with a telecommunications allowance that includes the cost of basic internet service – no longer a luxury, but often a necessity for school, work, and job search for families, including veterans and their families.

The Department recognizes and earnestly undertakes its role to provide SNAP benefits to those who truly need them, while ensuring that SNAP participants have a launch pad to a better life.

Let me emphasize further that these are not the only improvements we are pursuing in SNAP. One that may be of particular interest to veterans that participate in SNAP is a pilot Congress authorized in the Farm Bill for online SNAP purchasing. The Secretary articulated the core principle behind this innovative effort – "People who receive SNAP benefits should have the opportunity to shop for food the same way more and more Americans shop for food – by ordering and paying for groceries online. As technology advances, it is important for SNAP to advance too." The pilot began this spring in New York with three retailer chains. The pilot will expand to more states in 2020. For veterans who may face mobility challenges due to age or service-related injuries or disabilities, or those living in rural areas, this kind of service can be particularly important.

Similarly, SNAP is only one of many USDA nutrition assistance programs that provide support to veterans and their families. Low-income veterans starting new families may benefit from the WIC program, which safeguards the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating, and referrals to health care. We have worked with the WIC community, including State administrators and clinic staff, business partners and participants, to explore ways to enhance the food package and improve the WIC shopping experience – with implementation of electronic benefit transfer (EBT), a critical improvement strategy – and questions about access, and the potential role of technology to simplify the client application and participation experience. The President's Budget has consistently funded WIC, our largest discretionary program, to ensure sufficient funding for all eligible women, infants and children who wish to participate.

The children and grandchildren of veterans can rely on the nutritious meals provided through the Child Nutrition Programs, including the school meals programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the summer feeding programs, to get a healthy start in life. USDA has worked closely with program operators to make sure that they can serve children well. Through customer service roundtables and other venues, we heard that school nutrition professionals needed targeted adjustments to existing meal standards to ensure that school meals were both nutritious and appealing to the students being served. So Secretary Perdue extended school meal flexibilities related to flavored milk, whole grains, and sodium. We also heard that the education and training standards for nutrition professionals USDA implemented under the last reauthorization put strain on small and rural school districts where a disproportionate number of veterans live, and we have responded by revising the rules, in accordance with the law, to allow these districts more hiring flexibility. We are now working on additional flexibilities in schools and in the Summer Food Service Program.

FNS also collaborates and coordinates with other USDA agencies to better serve veterans. The Department's Military Veteran Agricultural (MVA) Liaison, first authorized by the 2014 Farm Bill, coordinates across the Department to provide information, resources and support for active duty military and veterans interested in agriculture, and to facilitate relationships within and beyond USDA to make sure military veterans have full access to resources and services to help them succeed

in civilian life. FNS works with the MVA Liaison to ensure eligible service members and their families have an understanding of nutrition assistance eligibility criteria, employment opportunities for transitioning members as they arise, and available nutrition resources to assist the family toward a healthy lifestyle.

FNS's work in support of our Nation's veterans is just one facet of USDA support.

Veterans make up 13 percent of on-board employees, and the Department provides on the job training through apprenticeship programs as agricultural commodity graders, wildland firefighters and food inspectors. Many USDA agencies have programs focused on veterans:

- The Economic Research Service prepares valuable research related to veterans, including the diet quality report that I mentioned, and a forthcoming report that examines food security among households with working-age veterans.
- The National Institute of Food and Agriculture supports veterans in the agricultural sector through programs such as the Enhancing Agricultural Opportunities for Military Veterans Competitive Grants Program (AgVets), the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) – which devotes at least 5 percent of its funding to serving military veterans, the National AgrAbility Project for military veterans, and a range of other partnerships to support and strengthen military families.
- Under USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, veterans receive preference and higher payment rates for certain conservation programs including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). These voluntary conservation programs provide financial and technical assistance to producers to address concerns, strengthen operations, protect, and restore conservation practices.
- The Farm Service Agency provides farm loan programs to help veterans purchase farmland, buy equipment, and make repairs and upgrades.
- USDA's rural housing programs can help veterans become homeowners, repair or improve their existing homes, and offset the costs of rent. Veterans starting or expanding rural businesses may seek USDA funding and technical support in the form of loans, loan guarantees, processing and marketing of products, and energy efficiency improvements.
- USDA's Office of Advocacy and Outreach works with states and organizations to create programs to assist veterans with transitioning to farming, ranching, and other agricultural jobs. One key program is the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program, which provides training, outreach and technical assistance to underserved and veteran farmers and ranchers.

In closing, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to join you, and again emphasize our interest in and dedication to providing America's veteran heroes with the service and support that they deserve. I am confident that we can continue to do so while advancing this Administration's broader nutrition assistance priorities – to improve customer service for partners and participants, to protect and enhance integrity, and to strengthen the bonds between FNS programs and a better life through employment.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Thomas O'Toole

Good afternoon, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the topics of ending Veteran hunger, our partnership with the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide nutrition assistance to Veterans, and economic factors that may contribute to Veteran suicide. I am accompanied today by Ms. Christine Going, VHA Co-Chairperson for Ensuring Veteran Food Security Workgroup.

Introduction

Food insecurity is a social determinant of health along with homelessness. Research published in 2015 in the Public Health Nutrition journal, found that Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan disproportionately report experiencing food insecurity. Approximately 27 percent of those studied reported food insecurity. These Veterans tended to be younger, unmarried/unpartnered, unemployed or working in lower incomes positions, and living in households with more children compared to other veterans. Understanding the behavioral, social, and environmental

significance of social determinants of health is the first step in keeping people healthy.

The link between food insecurity and health issues needs to be part of any population health strategy. Research published in the 2017 Health Research and Educational Trust journal showed 40 percent of factors contributing to health issues are social or economic, compared to 20 percent that are medical care issues. This research confirms the relationship between food insecurity and the poor management of health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, HIV, and depression. A review of socio-economic factors, such as the inability to afford food, physical environmental factors including lack of access to a grocery store, and clinical care factors, such as the lack of access to care, all have effects on overall health.

The cycle of food insecurity and is most prominent in low income populations. As a person becomes more unwell, the likelihood of missing work and health care costs increase, and the financial burden leading to difficult financial tradeoff decisions all fuel the continuation of the food insecurity cycle.

Food Insecurity Linked to Mental Health and Suicide Risk

Suicide is a complex issue with no single cause. It is a national public health issue that affects people from all walks of life, not just Veterans. Suicide is often the result of a multifaceted interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, community, and societal levels. Thus, VA has made suicide prevention its top clinical priority and is implementing a comprehensive public health approach to reach all Veterans—including those who do not receive VA benefits or health services.

VA's promise to enrolled Veterans remains the same: to promote, preserve, and restore Veterans' health and well-being; to empower and equip them to achieve their life goals; and to provide state-of-the-art treatments. Veterans possess unique characteristics and experiences related to their military service that may increase their risk of suicide. They also tend to possess skills and protective factors, such as resilience or a strong sense of belonging to a group. Our Nation's Veterans are strong, capable, valuable members of society, and it is imperative that we connect with them early as they transition into civilian life, facilitate that transition, and support them over their lifetime.

The relationship between food insecurity and known risk factors for suicide in the Veteran population is emerging. According to research published in 2016 in the journal, *SSM-Population Health*, Veterans who report food insecurity are more likely to have poor mental and physical health those without food insecurity—studies of the general population revealed similar findings. In 2018, the *Women's Health Issues* journal published research that found food insufficiencies contribute to higher risks for mental health conditions in women Veterans. In addition, data published in 2019 in the *Aging and Mental Health* journal found people who experience food insecurity are more likely to report suicidal ideation, suicidal behavior, or both. Research published in 2017 in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* even found a dose-response relationship—as food insecurity increases, one's mental health becomes poorer and vice versa.

In 2018, VA published its National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, which guides VA's efforts for suicide prevention. This 10-year strategy provides a framework for identifying priorities, organizing efforts, and focusing national attention and community resources to prevent suicide among Veterans through a broad public health approach with an emphasis on comprehensive, community-based engagement. This approach is grounded in four key focus areas as follows:

- Primary prevention that focuses on preventing suicidal behavior before it occurs;
- Whole Health offerings that consider factors beyond mental health, such as physical health, social connectedness, and life events;
- Application of data and research that emphasizes evidence-based approaches that can be tailored to fit the needs of Veterans in local communities; and
- Collaboration that educates and empowers diverse communities to participate in suicide prevention efforts through coordination.

Through the National Strategy we are implementing broad, community-based prevention initiatives, driven by data, to connect Veterans in and outside our system to health care with support on national and local facility levels.

Ensuring Veteran Food Security Workgroup

In early 2016, VHA created the Ensuring Veteran Food Security Workgroup. The purpose of the interdisciplinary group was to collaborate with a number of government and non-profit agencies, including but not limited to the USDA, the Depart-

ment of Defense (DoD) and a non-profit organization MAZON, to focus on the issue of food insecurity, the identification of Veterans at risk, VHA staff training, and the coordination of resources and initiatives to support the Veterans for whom we care.

The VHA group membership includes staff from various VHA Offices, including Nutrition and Food Services, Social Work Services, Community Engagement, Homeless Patient Aligned Care Teams, Homeless Programs, Nursing Service, Voluntary Service, Veterans Canteen Service, Employee Education System, and ad hoc members from Health Informatics, as well as research consultants.

The Ensuring Veteran Food Security Workgroup charter outlined the objectives for the workgroup, which included the development of an initial screening tool for Veterans relating to food insecurity; a process for enrollment of eligible Veterans into the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the creation of agreements with community non-profit organizations and other government agencies; the establishment of nutrition support and resources specific to the needs of Veterans with food insecurity issues; and the development and coordination of existing and enhanced training programs for staff on the policy and resources and collaborations that are created to support food security among our Veteran population.

In October 2017, VHA rolled out a national food insecurity screening tool as part of the regular screenings that occur during VA Primary Care visits. All Veterans are screened on an annual basis unless they are a resident of a nursing home or long-term care facility. If the Veteran is screened positive for food insecurity, a Veteran will be screened every 3 months thereafter. Veterans positively identified for food insecurity are offered a referral to a social worker and a dietitian, and VA further assesses for clinical risk and complications.

Progress Made from the Ensuring Veteran Food Security Workgroup

As of November 30, 2019, the data show the following information:

- Total number of Veterans screened – 6,224,359;
- Total number of Veterans screened positive – 93,815;

A review of our data underscores some important observations. First, the overall incidence of food insecurity among the entire Veteran population appears to be low based on the six million Veterans screened to date. However, there is extremely high food insecurity among certain types of Veterans – specifically, our Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn Veterans, homeless Veterans, and Veterans with limited access to food (such as those who lack of transportation or reside in a ‘food desert’) – whose rates of reported food insecurity exceed the USDA national average for 2018 of 11.8 percent. Second, the screening tool utilized by VHA is different from what is used in other surveys and was designed to capture real time incidence of food insecurity to allow for referrals at the time of screening. VHA’s screen is different from the 18-question survey used by the USDA which assesses food insecurity over a 12-month period compared with VHA’s screener which queries the previous 3 months. The VHA screening question is based on the one question screener developed by Kleinman et al. from Massachusetts General Hospital and validated in a community clinic-based sample of 1750 families. That survey had high sensitivity and specificity and time-to-time reliability when compared with the USDA Household Food Security Scale. The VA team worked with these researchers when modifying it for a VA ambulatory care setting with findings from the VA trial published in peer reviewed literature.

The Workgroup has been involved in several activities that assist food insecure Veterans. Among these are:

- Ensuring that the screening tool has been installed at every VHA site that offers primary care across the country;
- Presenting to Congress at the Educational congressional Meeting in support of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (the 2018 Farm Bill);
- Supporting the expansion of the number of facilities involved in the VA/Feeding America program, which establishes onsite or mobile food pantries on VA property (There are currently 17 pantries serving more than 40,000 Veterans and their families with roughly 700,000 meals. This is in addition to the approximately 40 reported food pantries already onsite that are managed outside of the current Memorandum of Agreement with Feeding America.);
- Working with USDA and MAZON to create Veteran-specific SNAP educational materials;
- Establishing relationships with like-minded stakeholders, including Food Research and Action Center, the National Military Families Coalition;

- Providing two national webinars to educate clinical staff on the clinical reminder screening tool, the impact of food insecurity on medical care management (diabetes/hypoglycemia), and the use of data to drive change on the local level;
- Developing a Toolkit for Registered Dietitians to support food insecure Veterans; and
- Presenting at the 2019 Anti-Hunger Policy Conference on VHA's response to food insecurity among enrolled Veterans.

Next Steps

VA plans to continue working to identify Veterans with low food security and connect them to resources that will alleviate food insecurity. With that in mind, our goals and projects for the coming year include:

- Expanding food insecurity screening to acute care patients and Veterans seeking health care through emergency departments;
- Continuing to support the expansion of the Feeding America/VA relationship;
- Maximizing the utilization of the food insecurity screener throughout VHA to include generating local data that will drive interventions;
- Evaluating the possibility of modifying our current screening tool language to be more specific in its ability to identify the different degrees of food insecurity based on clinical feedback; and
- Conducting data analysis on the characteristics/demographics of those Veterans screening positive for food insecurity.

Conclusion

VA believes food security, like housing, is a basic human necessity and is a major determinant of health. There is a relationship between food insecurity and the management of a variety of health care issues, including mental health. One Veteran experiencing hunger or food insecurity is one Veteran too many. VA is committed to providing the high-quality care our Veterans have earned and deserve. We continue to improve access and services to meet the nutritional needs of Veterans, and we support all efforts to decrease Veteran hunger.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the Committee may have.

Prepared Statement of Josh Protas

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Josh Protas, and I am proud to serve as Vice President of Public Policy for MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national social benefit corporation working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the U.S. and Israel. Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart the responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst without judgment or precondition. In *Deuteronomy 15: 7–8*, we are commanded: "If there is among you a poor person, one of your kin, in any of your towns within your land which God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against them, but you shall open your hand to them, and lend them sufficient for their needs, whatever they may be." Founded in 1985, MAZON identifies emerging and persistent hunger needs and works to promote policies to address these needs. This work is informed by long-standing partnerships with hundreds of food banks, pantries, and other anti-hunger direct service agencies as well as more recent relationships with direct service providers and advocates for veterans, military families, Tribal nations, rural communities, college students, and seniors.

Our Board of Directors has made hunger among veterans and military families a core priority for our education and advocacy efforts. We hold a strong interest in the development of effective and compassionate Federal food and nutrition policies for veterans and military families. This is not MAZON's first time appearing before Congress on this topic. Four years ago, Abby Leibman, MAZON's President and CEO, spoke as a witness before the House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition to discuss military and veteran hunger. In 2015, MAZON sponsored the first ever congressional briefing on the issue of veteran food insecurity, and in January 2018, MAZON coordinated and moderated a congressional briefing about "Veterans in the Farm Bill." Each of these occasions proved to be significant in shin-

ing a more prominent spotlight on these long-ignored issues and resulted in positive steps by Federal agencies to take a more active role in collecting data about and addressing veteran food insecurity.

While there has been some progress in addressing veteran food insecurity in America made by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) since 2015, that progress has been extremely modest compared to the severity of the problem. If Congress and Federal agencies do not take timely and concerted efforts to prioritize this critical issue, it will only get worse and become more difficult to resolve. This is in part due to the harmful impact of administrative changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) promulgated by the current Administration, which are condoned and even celebrated by some Members of Congress.

There are tens of thousands of veterans struggling to adjust and survive following the transition from military service. Some have recently returned from combat, while others are elderly and facing challenges they thought they had long overcome. Far too often, this struggle leads to despair because there is either an actual, or *perceived*, lack of support; and available support is tinged with stigma or shame, involves an overly complicated application process, or veterans simply do not know that help exists or how to access it. The result for those of limited financial means is often a downward spiral that triggers despair, hopelessness, and tragically can lead to self-harm or even suicide. In fact, recent findings from the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests ways to address the troubling correlation between economic hardship and “deaths of despair.” The study found a significant reduction in non-drug suicides among adults with high school education or less due to simple policy interventions that improved their economic well-being: an increase in the minimum wage and the earned income tax credit.¹ As part of the efforts to address the recent suicide epidemic by veterans and military service members, policymakers must recognize the vital importance of Federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP in helping to meet their basic needs. It is clear that Members of Congress should support policy proposals that expand access and participation in SNAP in an effort to strengthen the program, not weaken it. Failing to make improvements to SNAP, as well as failing to ensure that veterans are aware of and connected to the program, ignores a valuable and effective tool in the campaign to end veteran suicide.

The scope of food insecurity among veterans is complex, and we simply need more data to be able to respond effectively to the needs of America’s food insecure veterans. What we do know is that SNAP helps about 1.3 million low-income veterans, based on American Community Survey data, and that about 7 percent of veterans live in households that receive SNAP. Florida has the largest number of veterans participating in SNAP (116,000), followed by Texas (97,000), California (94,000), Pennsylvania (63,000), and New York (59,000).² Several years ago, Blue Star Families helpfully added questions about food insecurity to its Annual Military Lifestyle Survey. However, we should not have to rely solely on this survey—the Federal Government should routinely gather comprehensive national data to better inform proactive and robust policy responses to this unacceptable—yet solvable—problem.

Data about veteran SNAP participation only tell part of the story. Appallingly, we do not know how many veterans are struggling with hunger, without the assistance of SNAP.

A recent issue brief by Impaq International notes that among food insecure veterans, less than one-third were in households receiving SNAP, and among veterans in households with incomes below the poverty threshold, only about 4 in 10 were in SNAP-recipient households.³ These findings should be deeply troubling to this Subcommittee—this means that the majority of veterans who experience food insecurity do not get the help they need and to which they are entitled. These veterans struggle needlessly, and we fail them as a country when we leave SNAP benefits that they desperately need on the table. If we take the figure of 1.3 million veterans who participate in SNAP and then project—based on the findings by Impaq Inter-

¹Dow, WH; Godoy, A; Lowenstein, CA; Reich, M. “Can Economic Policies Reduce Deaths of Despair?” The National Bureau of Economic Research. April 2019. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25787>.

²“Number of Veterans Living in Households Where Someone Participates in SNAP (2016–2018).” December 20, 2019. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities updated data from 2018 report and analysis of data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-helps-almost-14-million-low-income-veterans-including-thousands-in>.

³Pooler, P; Srinivasan, M; Mian, P; Miller, Z. “Veterans and Food Insecurity.” Impaq International. November 2018. <https://www.impaqint.com/work/issue-briefs/veterans-and-food-insecurity>.

national—how many more should be receiving SNAP benefits, an estimated 4.3 million veterans experience food insecurity but do not receive SNAP. Nearly 4.3 million veterans who could have assistance available to them are instead are struggling in vain for unacceptable reasons. Connecting these food insecure veterans with SNAP would support better physical and mental health outcomes, employment and economic security, and overall well-being. It would also realize significant long-term health care savings by preventively addressing costly diet-related chronic health conditions. This simple but impactful action should be a top priority for the VA, USDA, and Congress.

Furthermore, we are deeply concerned about special populations of veterans that face heightened rates of food insecurity:

- In a study of **post-9/11 veterans** at the Minneapolis VA Healthcare System, over one in four veterans (roughly 27 percent) reported problems with food security—about twice the rate of the general population.⁴
- Recent academic research has noted that more than one in four **women veterans** struggle with hunger and that this prevalence of food insecurity is associated with delayed access to health care and worse health outcomes.^{5,6}
- A recent study about “Hunger & Homelessness at Worcester State University,” which is part of a growing body of research about food insecurity among college students, found that an alarming 67 percent of **student veterans** reported being food insecure. While this represents a small sample size from a single college campus, it illustrates the need for additional data about the concerning level of need among student veterans.⁷
- Rural and remote areas also experience higher rates of poverty and food insecurity than urban and suburban regions, and **Native American and rural veteran** populations face greater barriers to accessing many critical supports and services including employment, healthcare, transportation, and nutritious food. Furthermore, American Indian and Alaska Native veterans serve in the Armed Forces at higher rates per capita than any other group and this population experiences food insecurity at rates higher than any other demographic group in the U.S. Though there has not been specific data collected about food insecurity rates for Native American or Alaska Native veterans, it is clear that there is a high level of need that exists and is not being adequately addressed.
- Recent research indicates that low-income, **working-age veterans raising children** have more than twice the odds for very low food security compared to non-veterans.⁸

Food insecurity and SNAP participation rates among veterans are clearly tied to issues of unemployment and underemployment for many veterans. While veteran unemployment rates have declined in recent years, underemployment affects more veteran job seekers than non-veteran job seekers. A recent report found that nearly one-third of veteran job seekers are underemployed—a rate 15.6 percent higher than non-veteran job seekers.⁹ Current SNAP work requirements do not increase employment outcomes, nor do they reduce poverty or food insecurity. USDA’s rule change that would limit those who could be exempted from existing work requirements, particularly individuals who are underemployed or have difficulty maintaining reg-

⁴Widome, R; Jensen, A; Bangertter, A; Fu, S. “Food Insecurity Among Veterans of the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” *Public Health Nutrition*, 18(5), p. 844–849. May 2014. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-health-nutrition/article/food-insecurity-among-veterans-of-the-us-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/F03B64DD63287F2BE5F2067F3E5AC5FB>.

⁵Nerain, K; Bean-Mayberry, B; Washington, DL; Canelo, IA; Darling, JE; Yano, EM. “Access to Care and Health Outcomes Among Women Veterans Using Veterans Administration Health Care: Association With Food Insufficiency.” *Women’s Health Issues*, 28(3). February 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29475630>.

⁶Petersen, H. “Our Veterans Shouldn’t Go Hungry.” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Vantage Point Blog. December 4, 2019. <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/69018/veterans-shouldnt-go-hungry/>.

⁷Saltsman, A; Fowler, M; Dogali, M; Johnston, G; Wetherell, O. “Hunger & Homelessness at Worcester State University.” Urban Action Institute of Worcester State University and WSU’s Department of Urban Studies CityLab. March 2019. <https://www.worcester.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=13534>.

⁸Kamdar, N; Lester, H; Daundasekara, S; Greer, A; Utech, A; Hernandez, DC. “Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans with Children: Findings from NHANES 2011–2014.” Poster presentation at American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA. November 2019.

⁹Barrera, Cathy & Phillip Carter. “Challenges on the Homefront: Underemployment Hits Veterans Hard.” Call of Duty Endowment & ZipRecruiter. November 2017. https://www.callofdutyendowment.org/content/dam/atvi/callofduty/code/pdf/ZipCODE_Vet_Report_FINAL.pdf.

ular schedules with sufficient hours, would move us further in the wrong direction. Taking food away from people makes it more difficult for them to find and sustain meaningful work. Restrictive and arbitrary SNAP work requirements only act as a barrier to accessing the program, exacerbating the problem of food insecurity for veterans and others who struggle instead of helping to solve it.

SNAP is the cornerstone of our Nation's nutrition safety net—it helps approximately 36 million low-income Americans by providing a modest allowance to help people pay for food. While the main goal of SNAP is to provide nutrition assistance, there is a ripple effect in communities that supports the Federal, State, and local economies—every \$1 spent in SNAP benefits generates \$1.70 in economic activity.¹⁰

SNAP also supports and encourages work, with a carefully designed benefit formula that contains an important work incentive—for most SNAP households, the program provides income support as they earn more and work toward self-sufficiency.

Another important facet of SNAP is that it supports healthy eating. For all Americans, research has made it clear that adequate nutritious food is a vital prerequisite for good health and for reaching one's full potential in life. For those with medical challenges, that connection is even more crucial. The billions of dollars invested in health care for veterans cannot, and must not, overlook the relationship between food security and health. Modest investments in nutrition support could mean the difference between emotional and physical well-being and poverty and despair for countless veterans.

While SNAP is one of the most successful and efficient Federal assistance programs, veterans often face unique barriers to accessing the program. For a veteran trying to find out about and access SNAP, the process can often be difficult and confusing. While SNAP guidelines are set at the Federal level, each State designs its own application process—the rules are complicated, they vary from State to State, and the application can be lengthy, often requiring recertification. This obviously makes for a complex landscape for an applicant.

We must work together to ensure that struggling veterans and those who serve them: (1) know that SNAP exists, (2) know they might be eligible for SNAP, (3) know where to apply for SNAP, and (4) know how to apply for SNAP. No program can work effectively if it is too difficult to access, if potential recipients are unaware that it exists, and if it comes with restrictions that unintentionally leave out vulnerable populations like veterans, among others.

In the past year, we have seen unprecedented administrative attacks that would restrict and cut SNAP for millions of Americans, including veterans. There is no more insidious rule than that which proscribes harsh and arbitrary work requirements for childless unemployed and underemployed adults age 18–49 (otherwise known as “Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents,” or ABAWDs). On February 1, 2019, the Trump Administration posted a notice for proposed rulemaking that, by USDA's own estimate, would result in nearly 688,000 people losing access to SNAP. Mazon submitted comments to USDA expressing deep concern that this rule change would severely impact populations like veterans, who often face unique challenges and may require more than 3 months to secure employment that enables them to be self-sufficient. On November 12, 2019, my organization participated in a meeting with the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) to further explain our deep concerns, then on December 4, 2019, USDA seemed to dismiss our formal comments and tens of thousands of others as they issued a Final Rule.

In order to understand the misguidedness of this administrative change, it is important to note that most SNAP recipients who are able to work do, in fact, actually work. Under current law, childless adults ages 18 to 49 are restricted to only 90 days of SNAP benefits in 3 years unless they can prove they are working or participating in an employment and training program for 80 hours per month. States currently have flexibility to request waivers from this harsh and arbitrary time limit for communities that face high unemployment or insufficient job opportunities.

It is clear that a significant number of those who are subject to this rule are veterans. This rule is not nuanced, it is not flexible, it is not a reflection of the realities of struggling Americans in general, and it clearly does not recognize the realities of veterans in that age bracket. These are men and women who often endure many transitions before they secure long-term employment. They are among our Nation's underemployed, picking up work when and where they can. Mazon continues to urge USDA to withdraw the rule, and we are committed to pursuing all available advocacy strategies to ensure that this draconian measure is overturned. If the goal

¹⁰“Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. June 25, 2019. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/policy-basics-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

of USDA and the current administration is to move able-bodied recipients of SNAP toward self-sufficiency and into employment, there are clearly more effective actions—including targeted investments in employment and training programs that are sorely lacking in most communities—to prioritize instead of the current ideologically driven approach.

Furthermore, we have proof that this type of policy increases hunger and hardship.

The State of Maine offers a cautionary tale. In 2015, then-Governor LePage chose not to seek a State waiver for SNAP ABAWD requirements, even though his State was eligible for the waiver due to limited job opportunities throughout the State. The devastating impacts of this decision rippled across Maine, with increased demand on the charitable emergency food network, which was already overburdened and straining to keep up with the need. Mainers struggled to find work, in many cases settling for low-wage jobs with limited or no benefits. Thousands of individuals were forced to make painful tradeoffs—having to decide whether to pay for food or medicine.

MAZON’s partners in the State reported on the widespread food insecurity that persisted and the harmful impact on Mainers in need, including an estimated 2,800 veterans in Maine who were affected by the newly imposed SNAP time limits. Preble Street—our local partner that provides barrier-free services to empower people experiencing homelessness, hunger, and poverty—has submitted a packet of materials to be included in the official record for today’s hearing, documenting increased food insecurity among Mainers, including veterans, due to this situation. These materials include personal testimonies from several veterans who were directly impacted by the SNAP policy changes.

I would like to briefly tell you about one of these veterans, Tim Keefe. I spoke with Tim last week and he agreed to allow me to share about his very painful experience since he is not here to do so himself. I urge this Subcommittee to hold another hearing on this topic to be able to hear directly from veterans like Tim who have lived experience struggling with food insecurity—it is critical to hear the voices of those personally impacted by this issue.

Tim is a Navy veteran living in Maine. After being injured at work and completing all measures included in the worker’s compensation process, Tim found himself unable to return to work and fell on hard times. With no income, Tim applied for SNAP so that he could buy food. Though the Department of Labor determined that Tim was medically unable to work, he was told that this was not an acceptable verification of disability status for SNAP. Because of the SNAP policy change made by the State of Maine to no longer waive the time limit for “able-bodied adults without dependents,” Tim lost his SNAP benefits after 3 months. The question he repeatedly asked—to officials at the State SNAP office, to officials at the Social Security office where he inquired about the appeal process for disability claims, and to others in the bureaucratic maze he was forced into as he sought assistance—was, “What do I eat between now and then?”

Nobody had an answer for Tim, and he went through a very difficult and painful period. Without SNAP, Tim had no assistance, and he became homeless. Tim endured the harsh weather in rural Maine, living in a tent until he was found and then moving again and again. He resorted to scrounging for food and even catching squirrels to eat to get by. Tim shared in his testimony before the Maine State legislature calling for an exemption for veterans from SNAP work requirements, “There were many times, more than I’d like to try and count, when I would go two or even 3 days without food. I had to add seven holes to the only belt I’ve owned for this year to keep my pants on.” Tim turned to the Preble Street Veterans Housing Services that helped him with emergency housing and he was able to get food from the local food bank. But that only went so far. Tim noted that, “the food bank has limited resources. Last month I was able to eat two meals a day for 10 days and one meal a day of rice and beans or a canned vegetable for the remainder of the month. I am truly grateful for that food, but I know that I am still lacking in nutrition and calories.”

After Tim turned 50, the SNAP time limit no longer applied to him and he was able once again to get the assistance from SNAP that he so desperately needed. Fortunately, Tim is in a much better place now. But he wants others to know about the unnecessary and heart-breaking ordeal that he went through to help inform policy change so that other struggling individuals—veterans and non-veterans alike—do not fall through the cracks like he did. Nobody should ever be forced to ask, “but what do I eat?” because they can’t get the help they need from SNAP.

MAZON has time and again raised concerns about the impact of SNAP time limits for people like Tim who need assistance from SNAP. During the 2018 Farm Bill process, we persistently urged the House and Senate Agriculture Committees to pro-

tect and strengthen SNAP for all who need it, including veterans. We testified before the House Agriculture Committee and participated in Farm Bill Listening Sessions, raising concerns about proposals that would make it harder for people to know about, apply for, and access SNAP. As a result of thoughtful and engaged debate and deliberation, in the end Congress agreed that significant changes to the SNAP ABAWD waivers were unwarranted and unwise. The final Farm Bill—which passed both chambers with historic bipartisan margins of support—instead strengthens ten pilot programs that are currently examining best practices for SNAP employment and training.

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, we urge this Committee to consider the following policy recommendations:

1. Protect and Improve SNAP

USDA must withdraw its three harmful administrative proposals that would strip SNAP benefits for millions of Americans. Congress must continue to reject these changes to SNAP that would severely hurt veterans, among others. The policies are misguided and ill-informed, and we simply do not know enough about how populations like veterans will be impacted. It is entirely inappropriate for USDA to move forward with administrative changes to SNAP without making any effort to understand how this will negatively impact the lives of America's veterans.

Furthermore, Congress and USDA should increase the amount of SNAP benefits to better support nutritious food purchases, invest further in the SNAP Employment and Training Program to build on successful models, with targeted Veterans E&T initiatives, and support the Veteran Farmers Market Nutrition Program initiative to incentivize purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables from farmers markets.

2. Connect Veterans to SNAP

In response to Mazon's 2015 congressional briefing about veteran food insecurity, the VA initiated the Ensuring Veteran Food Security Working Group, piloting and later implementing across the VA network a formal process to identify veterans who are food insecure. While this represented an important initial step, we are concerned that these actions do not go far enough and that more oversight is needed.

The VA should adopt the validated two-question Hunger Vital Signs screening tool, which is used by groups like the American Academy of Pediatrics, in order to more accurately identify all veterans who are at risk of food insecurity. The current screening tool of a single question only identifies veterans at risk of very-low food security, which is not sufficient. The results of the VA food insecurity screenings indicate very low rates of food insecurity and do not track with academic research and other data, including from Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey. Too many struggling veterans fall through the cracks with the current screening protocol and the VA must adopt a more comprehensive and validated screening method. The VA must also require a more comprehensive intervention and response for veterans who screen positive for food insecurity, including onsite SNAP eligibility screening and application assistance in addition to a broader nutrition consultation and/or referral to a local food pantry or other local services. Mazon recommends the initiation and funding of a VA pilot program to demonstrate and evaluate such a SNAP application assistance program.

There has been evidence of confusion and misinformation about veteran eligibility for SNAP, particularly regarding the consideration of VA disability ratings and the exemption from SNAP time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents. To provide clarification and help ensure that fewer veterans experience food insecurity, USDA should prepare and distribute guidance specific about veterans and SNAP eligibility to USDA regional offices, State SNAP agencies, VA centers, veteran service organizations, and community partners.

3. Integrate Nutrition Assistance Information into Transition Materials and Training

The transition to civilian life poses significant challenges for many veterans, and many do not feel that they have adequate preparation and resources to help them succeed. Key findings from a recent Pew Research Center survey of veterans highlighted difficulties experienced by many veterans during the transition to civilian life—only about half of veterans say the military prepared them

well for their transition to civilian life; post-9/11 veterans were more than twice as likely than pre-9/11 veterans to say that readjusting to civilian life was difficult; and about one third of veterans say they had trouble paying the bills after leaving the military, yet only 12 percent indicated that they received food assistance from the government. Furthermore, about 40 percent of veterans say that the government has not given them enough help.¹¹

As part of its efforts to meet the needs of veterans who are recently transitioning, underemployed, or vulnerable, the VA must proactively address the issue of veteran food insecurity. The VA should integrate information about Federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP as part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) materials and trainings; include information about Federal assistance programs like SNAP as part of the VA's new "Solid Start" suicide prevention program; and work with community partners and USDA to create and actively distribute veteran-specific resources about food insecurity and SNAP. All relevant VA staff must be trained on issues of food insecurity, so that they know and understand SNAP and its rules.

4. Listen to Veterans

The stigma associated with receiving SNAP poses an intangible yet formidable barrier that is especially pronounced for the veteran population. Negative public perceptions of SNAP have been heightened in recent years as a result of rhetoric associated with regulatory changes proposed by the Trump administration designed to restrict access to SNAP. This creates a chilling effect and adds to the stigma that makes veterans and other individuals in need reluctant to seek help and apply for SNAP.

This Subcommittee, or the full House Veterans' Affairs Committee, should hold a follow up hearing on the issue of veteran food insecurity to include the perspective of individual veterans who have real lived experience with this issue, researchers who have examined food insecurity within the veteran and general populations, and additional veteran service organizations to explore models for community partnerships around outreach and SNAP enrollment.

4We also urge USDA and the VA to collaborate with veteran service organizations and anti-hunger organizations to develop a strategic outreach plan for veterans who do not receive care or services through the VA, including peer-to-peer outreach. Such efforts ideally could take place within the context of a Federal interagency task force focused on veteran food insecurity, modeled on the successful example of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness that has made great strides toward the goal of ending veteran homelessness in the U.S. Exploration of such an interagency approach to addressing veteran food insecurity would be a worthy next step for this Subcommittee, in collaboration with the House Committee on Agriculture's Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations.

5. Explore Related Issues

Last, I implore Congress—especially members of this Subcommittee who also serve on the House Armed Services Committee (Reps. Bergman, Brindisi, Banks, and Luria)—to address the separate but related issue of food insecurity among currently serving military families. This is another long-neglected issue of national security, military readiness, retention, and recruitment, and we at MAZON have proposed easy, common-sense policies for Congress to enact as soon as possible.

In closing, I would like to again thank Chairman Levin and Ranking Member Bilirakus for inviting me to share MAZON's perspective on this critically important issue. The failure to address veteran food insecurity undercuts our next generation of Americans who want to serve in the Armed Forces and presents a challenge to our national security. Children from families where a parent served in the military are much more likely to enlist for military service than counterparts from civilian households. But low-income, working age veterans raising children have much higher odds of experiencing very low food security compared to non-veterans.¹² As we

¹¹ Parker, K; Igielnik, R; Barroso, A; Cilluffo, A. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation." Pew Research Center. September 10, 2019. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>.

¹² Kamdar, N; Lester, H; Daundasekara, S; Greer, A; Utech, A; Hernandez, DC. "Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans with Children: Findings from NHANES 2011–2014." Poster presented at the 2019 National Conference on Food Insecurity, Washington, DC.

are reminded by Mission: Readiness, an organization of over 750 retired admirals, generals, and other top military leaders, obesity—which is directly related to food insecurity and poor nutrition—limits the pool of eligible recruits for military service and negatively affects our national security.¹³ Failing to address the crisis of food insecurity and obesity for our Nation's children—especially the children in military and veteran households who are more likely to serve in the military—threatens our national security.

While food pantries across the country provide critical food assistance to veterans and others in need, they were only conceived as a temporary and emergency response to the widespread problem. Veteran food insecurity will not be solved by food pantries that are already struggling to keep up with current demands and cannot make up for the gaps in our safety net programs, which continue to be at risk of harmful changes and cuts.

Allowing veterans who have made great personal sacrifices in service to our Nation to struggle with hunger is shameful, insulting, unnecessary, and costly. Indeed, it is unconscionable. If our Federal agencies and Congress do not take more proactive steps to identify veterans who may experience food insecurity and to connect them with available benefits and resources, we do these veterans and our Nation as a whole a grave disservice.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

Prepared Statement of Denise Hollywood

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Denise Hollywood, and I am the Chief Community and Programs Officer at Blue Star Families (BSF). BSF builds communities that support military families by connecting research and data to programs and solutions, including career development tools, local community events for families, and caregiver support. Since its inception in 2009, BSF has engaged tens of thousands of volunteers and serves more than 1.5 million military family members.

With strong ties to all branches of service, active duty, veterans, and their families, BSF is nationally recognized for its annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey. The largest of its kind, the survey provides both quantitative and qualitative data that reveals a snapshot of the current State of service members and their families. The annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey is used at all levels of government to help inform and educate those tasked with making policy decisions that impact service members and their families – who also serve.

Financial Issues a Top Stressor for the First Time

In our 2018 Survey of over 10,000 respondents, we found that 62 percent of military family respondents and 65 percent of veteran family respondents reported experiencing some or a great deal of stress regarding their family's current personal financial condition. Moreover, "financial issues/stress" was ranked as the top stressor for the first time among military families. When comparing military family respondents to their civilian counterparts, military family respondents reported higher rates of difficulty making ends meet than civilian families (13 percent of military family respondents compared to 7 percent of civilian families).

Such financial distress can lead to food insecurity among active duty and veteran families. In 2018, 7 percent of military family respondents and 12 percent of veteran family respondents indicated that someone in their household had faced food insecurity in the past year. Additionally, 9 percent of military family respondents and 18 percent of veteran family respondents indicated that someone in their household had sought emergency food assistance through a food bank, food pantry, or charitable organization.

Unaddressed Factors During Active Duty May Contribute to Veteran Families Facing Food Insecurity

In order to comprehend the issue of food insecurity among veteran families, we must first understand the factors that contribute to food insecurity while these families are still actively serving in the military. Such factors include:

tation at American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA. November 2019.

¹³Maxey, H; Bishop-Josef, S; Goodman, B. "Unhealthy and Unprepared." Council for a Strong America. October 2018. <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/737-unhealthy-and-unprepared>.

- high rates of unemployment and underemployment among military spouses,
- limited availability and high costs of childcare,
- out-of-pocket relocation and housing expenses,
- unexpected financial emergencies.

Many of the factors contributing to military family food insecurity – including spouse un/underemployment, lack of affordable childcare, and out-of-pocket expenses – arise from frequent relocation during the service member's tenure of service. According to Department of Defense statistics, active duty military families move an average of once every two to three years, typically across State lines or overseas.

Frequent relocation makes it difficult for military spouses to find and maintain gainful employment – partly because employers are wary of hiring individuals who have gaps in their resumes as a result of previous moves. If a military spouse works in a licensed profession, he or she must also undergo the time-consuming and often costly process of relicensing whenever they relocate to a different State.

In 2018, we found that 30 percent of military spouse respondents were unemployed (not working but had actively sought work in the past 4 weeks); and among the 46 percent of military spouse respondents who were employed full-time or part-time, more than half (56 percent) reported that they were underemployed (meaning they were overqualified, underpaid, or underutilized in their current position). Compare these findings to the civilian unemployment rate, which, in 2018, was less than 4 percent.

The military spouse employment problem is further exacerbated by a scarcity of affordable childcare. In 2018, 56 percent of military spouse respondents who would have liked to be employed cited the lack of quality, affordable childcare as a reason for why they were not currently working.

Finding affordable childcare can be particularly difficult for military families shortly after they move. Among those service member respondents who resided in their community for less than a year, 79 percent of female service members and 65 percent of male service members were not able to find consistent childcare.

Meanwhile, 70 percent of millennial military family respondents (37 years old and under) reported that “having two incomes was vital to their family's well-being.” Among military spouse respondents who were not working but would like to be, only 10 percent reported that they were financially secure with just their service member's paycheck. Thus, the military spouse employment crisis directly contributes to food insecurity, by preventing military families from achieving a vital second source of income.

The financial difficulties of modern military families are further compounded by frequent out-of-pocket housing expenses. As of 2019, the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) has been reduced to 95 percent of local area rent. This means that military families are increasingly forced to pay out-of-pocket for quality housing. In 2018, we asked: “What amount of your monthly out-of-pocket housing costs, including utilities, are not covered by your BAH?” We found that:

- 43 percent of respondents had out of pocket costs of less than \$500 per month;
- 8 percent had out of pocket costs between \$500 and \$1,000 per month; and
- 2 percent reported out of pocket costs of over \$1,000 per month.

Furthermore, military family respondents identified the cost of housing as their top financial stressor after military spouse un/underemployment. Your colleague, Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA-53), once summarized the issue as such: “The military pay system is not designed for junior enlisted members with families in high-cost areas.”

Finally, although the Federal Government covers the majority of the expenses incurred due to relocation, one-third (31 percent) of our 2018 respondents reported spending over \$1,000 in unreimbursed expenses during their last move. These respondents likewise reported relocating an average of four times due to military orders. Thus, over an average of four moves, military families may spend upwards of \$4,000 in out-of-pocket moving expenses.

All of these factors – out-of-pocket expenses, rising costs of childcare, spousal un/underemployment, and others – can contribute to food insecurity among currently serving military families. Food insecurity among active duty military families does not end when service members retire. To the contrary, the financial difficulties of military families can be further compounded by transition-related challenges.

Government Safety Net Programs Are Not Adequately Meeting Family Needs

It is no doubt critical that we work to address the underlying causes of military family food insecurity (by eliminating out-of-pocket expenses, increasing the avail-

ability of affordable childcare, and improving spouse employment outcomes). However, these issues are persistent and will take time to resolve. In the interim, Congress ought to tackle the issue of veteran food insecurity upstream by removing senseless legislative barriers which prevent many military families from qualifying for Federal nutrition assistance, despite being food insecure.

As detailed in a 2016 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), BAH is currently treated as income for the purpose of determining eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). As such, many military families are barred from qualifying for SNAP, despite being food insecure. Meanwhile, housing vouchers for low-income civilians are not treated as income for the purposes of determining SNAP eligibility. Furthermore, BAH is not treated as income for Federal income tax purposes or for determining eligibility for most Federal assistance programs. Current policy for SNAP eligibility thus establishes an unnecessary and harmful barrier to nutrition assistance for struggling military families.

In 2018, Blue Star Families and MAZON endorsed an amendment to the farm bill which would have excluded the Basic Allowance for Housing as income when calculating SNAP eligibility. That effort failed, and the final 2018 farm bill further confounded the issue by only omitting the first \$500 of a service member's BAH from being treated as income for the purpose of determining SNAP eligibility.

Undeterred, Blue Star Families and MAZON then endorsed the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance (MFBNA), which would have alleviated military family food insecurity by supplementing the base pay of junior enlisted members at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty line. 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. Thus, the MFBNA was structured in a streamlined and efficient manner to eliminate common barriers to nutrition assistance, including shame, stigma, and fear of retribution.

While the MFBNA was included in H.R. 2500 (the House version of the NDAA), it was ultimately excluded from the final draft of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 – which instead commissioned a report on military family food insecurity. While we commend the inclusion of such a provision and loforward to providing assistance to Congress and the DoD as they seek to undertake this effort, such a report will be of little consolation to those military families who are struggling at *this very moment* to put food on the table.

We therefore call upon Congress to take immediate action to support active duty and veteran families facing food insecurity by adopting the following recommendations put forward by our friends at MAZON:

1. Protect and strengthen programs (like SNAP) that seek to alleviate veteran hunger;
2. Instruct the VA and USDA to be proactive in their efforts to identify veterans who are experiencing food insecurity and thereon connect them with SNAP;
3. Establish VA partnerships with VSOs and anti-hunger organizations to help reach veterans who are not receiving services through the VA network.

The Federal Government must also work to expand its data collection around veteran and military family food insecurity, so as to better inform policy responses to these issues.

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. Blue Star Families welcomes the opportunity to lend our expertise to Congress as they seek to resolve this critical issue.

Prepared Statement of Vince Hall



Testimony

Submitted to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
United States House of Representatives

Hearing

"Reviewing the Availability of Resources to Address Veteran Hunger"

Thursday, January 9, 2020

House Visitors Center, Room 210

Statement of Mr. Vince Hall

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Dear Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation to testify at today's hearing on how food insecurity impacts Veterans of our nation's Armed Forces. My name is Vince Hall. I serve as CEO for Feeding San Diego, a hunger relief and food rescue organization in San Diego, California. I am proud to lead an organization with an innovative food rescue and distribution model; one that unites and mobilizes a diverse network of stakeholders, including 300 food distribution partners, 530 local retail donor locations, 225 produce donor locations, 14,000 volunteers, and 8,500 financial donors. Our model is unique because, unlike many other food banks, Feeding San Diego does not receive TEFAP or other federal commodities. Feeding San Diego is focused on ending hunger through food rescue. In fact, more than 97 percent of the 26.3 million meals we distributed last year was rescued food that would otherwise have gone to waste.

Today I am honored to testify on behalf of more than 360,000 people facing food insecurity in San Diego County, including approximately 120,000 children¹, many of whom are Military family members, Veterans, or their dependents.

For perspective on the size of our challenge, San Diego County has a population larger than 20 U.S. states. When it comes to Veteran and Military families, Feeding San Diego has a special responsibility because according to the San Diego County Office of Military & Veterans Affairs, our county has the second largest Veteran population in the state, with 243,369 Veterans and 582,631 family members of Veterans.

San Diego is also the proud home to one of the largest concentrations of Navy and Marine bases in the U.S., resulting in 143,000 Active-duty service members with 260,000 Military dependents stationed in our community. This total is expected to grow by 15,000 within the next three years as five additional ships will be homeported in San Diego. All told, San Diego County is home to over 1.2 million Veterans, Active-duty Military, and dependents, meaning 37 percent of our county's population is directly associated with the military.ⁱⁱ

My remarks will address the critical role federal nutrition programs and the availability of food assistance services play in addressing Veteran and Military hunger. While this hearing is intended to focus on Veteran hunger, Active-duty Military members become veterans and their overall well-being while on active duty directly impacts their well-being as veterans, thus some of my remarks will address Military hunger as well.

My intent is to share insights about the role Feeding San Diego and other Feeding America organizations play through innovative public-private partnerships as well as how SNAP and other federal nutrition programs are critical to our efforts.

Background

Established in 2007, Feeding San Diego is the leading hunger-relief and food rescue organization in San Diego County. We are also one of 200 members of the Feeding America national network who provide similar services through 60,000 food programs including food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, afterschool programs, summer feeding sites, and many other hunger-relief services.ⁱⁱⁱ Feeding San Diego provides more than 26 million meals every year to children, families, seniors, college students, Military families, Veterans, people facing homelessness, and other underserved populations. We distribute meals in partnership with 300 local charities, schools, faith communities, meal sites, and food pantries throughout the region.

Feeding San Diego rescues high-quality food before it goes to waste from over 530 locations in San Diego County and over 225 farms and packing sheds throughout California. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 40 percent of food produced in the United States is wasted, which means that all of the energy, water, and other resources that went into producing the food is wasted along with the food. This staggering amount of food waste, which is an estimated 72 billion pounds a year, takes on increased urgency when you consider the impact this nutritious food could have on people facing food insecurity, including Veteran and Military families. At Feeding San Diego, more than 97 percent of the food we provide to the community is rescued. By diverting this food from the landfill, Feeding San Diego not only ensures nutritious food reaches our neighbors in need, but also significantly reduces greenhouse gas emissions that lead to climate change, comparable to taking 5,000 cars off the road for one year.

In addition to rescuing and distributing nutritious food, Feeding San Diego ensures people can access additional food resources. We help individuals enroll in SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as CalFresh in California) to purchase groceries for their families. Like our Feeding America colleagues across the nation, we work daily to address Veteran and Military family hunger in our community.

Food insecurity in San Diego County and across our country, continues to be a significant concern with a staggering number of people who are affected as shown in Table 1:

Table 1, Food Insecurity^{iv}

	San Diego County	California	United States
Food Insecurity	360,530	4,354,400	40,044,000
Child Food Insecurity	120,360	1,638,430	12,540,000

To date, there have been a limited number of studies that have looked at the intersection of Military service and food insecurity. Further, most studies have not had a primary focus on food insecurity and coping behaviors. Available studies include:

- A 2012 survey of Minnesota-based veterans using the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs health-care system found high rates (nearly 27 percent) of food insecurity among Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans.^v
- An analysis of data on veterans from the Veterans Aging Cohort Study who were also engaged with the US Department of Veteran Affairs found that nearly a quarter expressed some concern about having adequate food for themselves or their families.^{vi}
- An analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) data shows that use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by active-duty personnel, veterans, and reservists is lower than the overall national population, but that rates are higher among veterans and reservists compared to active-duty personnel.^{vii}
- An analysis of Current Population Survey (CPS) revealed much lower rates of food insecurity (8.4 percent) and very low food security (3.3 percent) among Veteran households than in non-veteran households (14.4 percent and 5.4 percent, respectively), but that the probability of food insecurity was significantly higher among some recent veterans and significantly lower for those who served during the Vietnam War.^{viii}

Although not always visible, Veteran and Military family hunger remains a significant problem in the United States. Millions of families do not have the resources to purchase the food that they need to thrive. At Feeding San Diego, we believe that our heroes deserve more. They put everything on the line to take care of us, and we need to do the same for them.

Military Family Services

Feeding San Diego helps local Military families and Veterans struggling with hunger through an initiative called Feeding Heroes. The initiative reaches families and veterans on or near base, in Military housing areas, and in public schools serving a high percentage of Military families. Through a dignified farmer's market-style distribution where individuals select the foods that are best for their needs, families can access fresh, nutritious food, especially fruits and vegetables, without stigma or unnecessary bureaucracy.

Feeding San Diego distributed 2.3 million meals to Veteran and Military families last year. On average, 64 percent of the food we provided through Feeding Heroes was fresh fruits and vegetables.

Feeding San Diego collaborates with Military-focused partners well known within the Military community, including USO, US for Warriors Foundation, Courage to Call, and others. Other partners also help serve Military families, including Jewish Family Service, who operate a food

pantry at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, the Armed Services YMCA, the Murphy Canyon Military housing complex, and other Military housing sites.

Feeding San Diego serves families with children at 40 local K-12 campuses through the School Pantry program. A portion of our School Pantry sites, including Dewey, Perry, and Angier Elementary Schools, serve high percentages of Military families.

Our Mobile Pantry program provides twice-monthly distributions to Military families outside the fenceline but adjacent to local Military bases, including Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton. These distributions allow families to choose the foods they want, including a majority of fresh produce.

Feeding San Diego also has a robust disaster response program, which was activated last year during the government shutdown. During that difficult time, Feeding San Diego assisted many federal workers, including corrections officers at the Federal Bureau of Prisons, U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents, U.S. Treasury employees, and U.S. Coast Guard personnel, all of whom were working without pay. As an example, we distributed 6.5 tons of food to nearly 500 Coast Guard families at U.S. Coast Guard Air Station San Diego.

Veteran Services

Feeding San Diego partners with more than 150 local religious and charitable organizations across the county, many of whom serve a high percentage of Veterans. Veterans served by Feeding San Diego's programs include transitioning Veterans who were recently discharged and are transitioning back to civilian life, senior Veterans struggling with San Diego's high cost of living, homeless Veterans, and other Veterans who fall on hard times and are suddenly in need of assistance.

The partners we work with, including those named above, are successful in reaching both Veterans and Military families in convenient and comfortable locations, including their faith communities, Military-focused support groups, and outreach centers.

Because Feeding San Diego's food is privately donated, we are able to offer a dignified system of food distribution which does not require client registration. This removes a barrier to access for many veterans, but also makes it difficult to provide precise data on the number and demographics of the veterans we serve. We know from regularly interacting with our clients, and from the demographics of our county (described above) that at least 15 percent of our clients are veterans, and many more are dependents.

One of our clients who agreed to share her story is a Military spouse named Desiree, who receives food regularly through our Feeding Heroes initiative. Desiree's husband is a communications officer in the U.S. Navy who makes just over \$34,000 a year. She has four kids and a husband who has been deployed for nearly eight months. She knew that life as a Military spouse would come with challenges. She did not expect for one of those challenges to be feeding her kids. But being stationed in San Diego, with a cost of living 40 percent higher than the national average, has put her family into a financial crisis.

Thousands of Military families across the country face similar challenges as Desiree and her family. At Feeding San Diego we are doing everything we can to change that. It is tragic that

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many Military service members are deployed in combat zones while their kids are going hungry back in San Diego.

Many of these Veterans and Military families are the hardest working people I have ever met in my life. They skip meals so that their kids have something to eat. They work multiple low wage jobs to make ends meet. I take great pride in the work we do to meet this critical need, but I take no pride in the fact that our country stations families in San Diego but doesn't pay them enough to live in San Diego.

Feeding San Diego will continue to do our part, utilizing our innovative food rescue model to help Veterans and Military families, but demand for our services could be quickly expand well beyond our capacity if the federal government enacts cuts to critical safety net programs serving these vulnerable San Diegans.

Innovation and Policy Solutions

There are several policy changes Congress should make that would help reach more Veterans and Military families with food assistance throughout the year beyond protecting and strengthening all federal nutrition programs. First, we need to remove policy barriers that prevent currently serving Military families from qualifying for food assistance. Second, we need to protect and strengthen federal nutrition programs and their ability to serve Veterans and Military families. Third, we need more data and research to better understand the complex and specific needs of Veteran and Military families facing hunger.

Remove Policy Barriers

Currently, certain federal policies prevent actively serving Military families facing hunger from accessing the resources they need to put food on the table. Many service members receive a Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH). This housing allowance helps Active-duty Military afford housing for their families. However, for the purposes of calculating eligibility for SNAP, the BAH is counted as income. Oftentimes, this makes the difference between being eligible for SNAP or scrambling to find other ways to meet the need. We know that many of these families seek assistance from Feeding San Diego to make ends meet.

Certain federal assistance programs exclude the BAH as income, such as Head Start and WIC. The BAH is also not counted as income during calculation of income taxes. Congress should exclude the BAH from income during the calculation of SNAP benefits to ensure our Active-duty Military families qualify for the food assistance they need.

In the past, legislation has been introduced that proposed excluding the BAH as income for SNAP benefit calculation. Both the House and Senate proposed this change in 2015, but these proposals were not adopted and the problem of Military family hunger remains. We need to serve those that serve our country and do everything we can to remove barriers that prevent our Military families from accessing the nutrition they need to protect our nation and their families. SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger in this nation, and we owe it to the people on our front lines to ensure their families receive this protection.

Strengthen and Protect Federal Food Assistance Programs**SNAP**

In addition to removing policy barriers, we need to stop additional barriers from preventing Veteran and Military families from accessing the food assistance programs they need. Since February 2019, USDA has proposed three rules that will limit SNAP eligibility and cut food assistance for nearly 3.7 million individuals if all three rules were implemented. Active-duty Military, Veterans, and their families will see cuts to SNAP or lose assistance altogether if these rules were to be enacted.

For each meal provided by our nationwide network of 200 Feeding America members, SNAP provides nine meals. We know that our network cannot compensate for the substantial cuts these three rules would impose. These policy changes will increase the risk of food insecurity for millions of people, including Veterans and Military families, many of whom will turn to our network for food assistance. This reflects a step backward in our vision of a hunger-free America.

Included below is a high-level overview of the changes proposed by each rule and the expected impacts. Of special concern, particularly given the challenges many Veterans can face as they seek to re-enter the civilian workforce, is that the finalized SNAP rule on time limit waivers for Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents would make it harder for states to exempt this population from work requirements. There are many reasons why Veterans have higher unemployment rates and there are organizations working to address this challenge. However, increasing food insecurity will exacerbate these challenges for our most vulnerable Veterans.

Rule #1: ABAWD Time Limit Waivers from Work Reporting Requirements

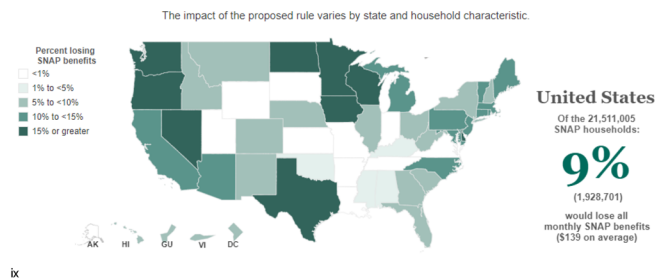
- On December 5, 2019, USDA published a final version of the proposed rule it had initially posted in the Federal Register on February 1, 2019. The final rule is scheduled to be implemented beginning April 1, 2020.
- This rule will mean a loss of SNAP eligibility to an estimated 688,000 individuals and result in a loss of 6.2 billion meals over ten years.
- Unemployed or underemployed adults without dependents face strict time limits for receiving benefits if they are unable to find work. Specifically, adults ages 18 to 50 who do not receive disability benefits and do not have children are only able to receive SNAP benefits for three months, over the course of a three-year period, unless they can document at least 20 hours per week of work or participation in an approved workforce program or training.
- States can request waivers from the time limit for areas of high unemployment.
- The final rule would drastically restrict criteria used to request a waiver.
- Veterans and Military families face SNAP cuts as a result of this rule.

Rule #2: Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE) or ("Cat-el")

- On July 24, 2019, USDA proposed a rule change to SNAP that would severely restrict the Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility option in SNAP, a change that would impact all states by removing this important flexibility moving forward.

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- The Administration estimates the proposal would cut 3.1 million individuals from SNAP. Additionally, nearly 1 million children would lose direct access to free school meals because their enrollment in school meals is directly linked to their family's participation in SNAP.
- The people losing access to SNAP would mainly be working families (including Active-duty Military), seniors (including Veterans), and people with disabilities (including Veterans).
- The rule would reduce SNAP eligibility and participation by restricting state flexibility to eliminate the SNAP asset test and use a higher-income test. Below is a map of expected impact of the rule, from an analysis conducted by Mathematica:



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Rule #3: Standard Utility Allowances (SUA)

- On October 3, 2019, USDA proposed a rule that would force families to choose between putting food on the table and paying their utilities.
- Nearly 20 percent of households nationally will see a loss of SNAP benefits. If enacted, the proposal would cause a loss of 568 million meals per year. The rule would cut SNAP benefits for Veteran and Military families.
- The rule changes the way SNAP benefit levels are calculated, 29 states will see a significant cut in benefits, with only a few seeing net increases. Even in the few states seeing net increases, many individuals will lose SNAP benefits.
- Below is a map of expected impact from the rule with the darkest red regions seeing the highest percentage net cut to SNAP benefits:



x

Child Nutrition Reauthorization

Each year, millions of low-income children in the United States, including children in Veteran and Military families, lack access to summer, after-school, and school meals. For example, only 17 percent of children who participate in free or reduced lunch through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) participate in summer meals sites. That leaves 83 percent of eligible children without access to summer meals.

Congress has an opportunity to close the meal gap by improving the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act. A few policy changes to current law, would ensure more children facing hunger in Veteran and Military families receive adequate daily nutrition including expanding access to the summer grocery card program, allowing flexibility for off-site meal consumption, and streamlining summer and afterschool meal sites.

In California, over 2 million children lack access to summer meals. Feeding San Diego and Feeding America's network of food banks are concerned we will not be able to provide more meals to children facing hunger if Congress doesn't make improvements to the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act.

Feeding San Diego works to help children have access to meals during school break times like summer, after-school, and weekends. We do this by providing food and program support for summer meal sites, after-school meal programs, school pantries, and weekend backpack programs. When the school year ends, millions of children who are eligible to participate in summer meals lose access because they live in areas not eligible to operate summer meal sites, rural areas, areas of extreme weather and more. Changes to the summer meal program to allow flexibility for off-site meal consumption or to provide a summer EBT card would ensure food banks and other community-based providers would be able to serve more children in hard to reach areas. Feeding San Diego and other community service providers face barriers to providing healthy, nutritious meals and snacks to more children because the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) are required to operate as separate programs. By streamlining these programs, our organization would be able to feed children year-round through one seamless nutrition program. We urge you to encourage committee members and leadership to move forward with legislation that strengthens critical child nutrition programs to give children the meals they need to grow and thrive.

Require More Data and Research on Veteran and Military Family Food Insecurity

Limited research is available on the experience and needs of Veteran and Military families facing food insecurity. While the research that does exist provides a foundation for insight, the literature is limited in scope and depth of understanding the deeper experiences of food insecurity patterns, related challenges (e.g., mental and physical health), and the nuanced experiences of different groups of Veterans. In order to best serve Veteran and Military families, more research and data is needed to better understand the complex and specific needs of Veteran and Military families facing hunger.

Summary of Recommendations**Remove Policy Barriers that Prevent Military Families from Accessing SNAP**

- Exclude the BAH as income for the purpose of SNAP benefit calculations

Strengthen and Protect Federal Nutrition Programs

- Encourage USDA to halt the three proposed rules which restrict access to SNAP and school meals
- Encourage committees and leadership to include improvements in Child Nutrition Reauthorization
 - Authorize summer grocery/EBT card
 - Relax on-site meal consumption requirement in targeted areas
 - Streamline summer and afterschool feeding programs to allow one program to operate year round
 - Strengthen access to school meal programs

Conduct More Research on Veteran and Military Food Insecurity

- More research is needed on these populations to better understand the complex and specific needs of Veteran and Military families facing hunger.

Making real progress toward ending Veteran and Military family hunger and ensuring opportunity for all of our nation's families will require investing new resources toward increasing access. I encourage the Committee on Veteran Affairs to advance recommendations to strengthen nutrition programs for Veteran and Military families thereby helping to end hunger in this country.

It has been my honor to testify today on behalf of everyone we serve at Feeding San Diego, including Desiree and her family. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Vince Hall
CEO
Feeding San Diego

ⁱ Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, A. Crumbaugh, M. Kato & E. Engelhard. *Map the Meal Gap 2019: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2017*. Feeding America, 2019. <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>

ⁱⁱ Office of Military & Veterans Affairs, County of San Diego Health & Human Services Agency

ⁱⁱⁱ Feeding America, *Hunger in America 2014*, National Report. August 2014. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/hunger-in-america>

^{iv} Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, A. Crumbaugh, M. Kato & E. Engelhard. *Map the Meal Gap 2019: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2017*. Feeding America, 2019. <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>; for national data.

^v Widome R, Jensen A, Bangerter A et al. (2015) Food insecurity among veterans of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Public Health Nutr* 18, 844–849.

^{vi} Wang EA, McGinnis KA, Goulet J et al. (2015) Food insecurity and health: data from the Veterans Aging Cohort Study. *Public Health Rep* 130, 261–268.

^{vii} London, AS & Heflin CM. (2015) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Use Among Active-Duty Military Personnel, Veterans, and Reservists. *Population Research and Policy Review* 34 (6), 805-826.

^{viii} Miller DP, Larson MJ, Byrne T et al. (2015) Food insecurity in veteran households: findings from nationally representative data. *Public Health Nutrition* 19(10), 1731-1740.

^{ix} Mathematica, "[*Impact of Proposed Policy Changes to SNAP Categorical Eligibility by State.*](#)" September, 2019.

^x Map Analysis performed by Feeding America, November, 2019 using Regulatory Impact Analysis, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Standardization of State Heating and Cooling Standard Utility Allowances*, <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FNS-2019-0009-0002>.