



## **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 children<sup>i</sup>, 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.<sup>ii</sup>

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.<sup>iii</sup> 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<sup>iv</sup>**

	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.<sup>v</sup>
- 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.<sup>vi</sup>
- 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.<sup>vii</sup>
- 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.<sup>viii</sup>

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

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.

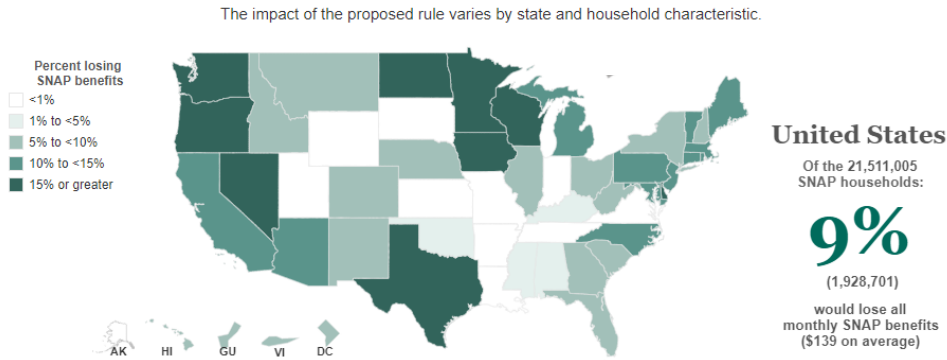
#### **Rule #1: ABAWD Time Limit Waivers from Work Reporting Requirements**

- 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.

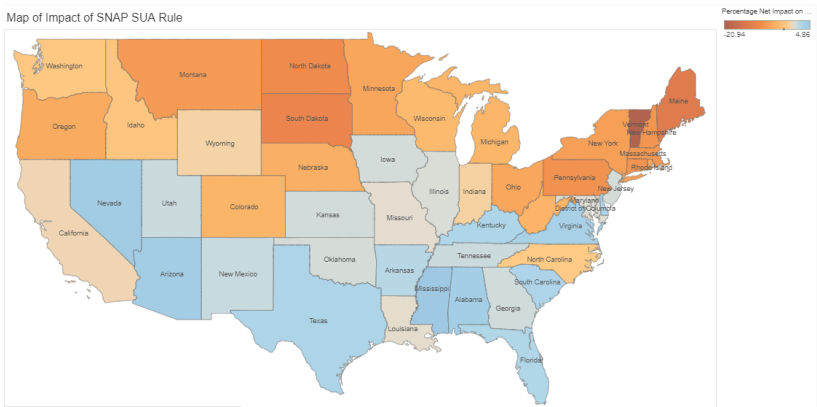
- The Administration estimates the proposal would cut 3.1 million individuals from SNAP. Additionally, nearly 1 million children would lose direct access to free school meals because their enrollment in school meals is directly linked to their family’s participation in SNAP.
- The people losing access 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:



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## **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

<sup>i</sup> 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/>

<sup>ii</sup> Office of Military & Veterans Affairs, County of San Diego Health & Human Services Agency

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

<sup>iv</sup> 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](#),

<sup>v</sup> 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.

<sup>vi</sup> 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.

<sup>vii</sup> 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.

<sup>viii</sup> 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.

<sup>ix</sup> Mathematica, “[Impact of Proposed Policy Changes to SNAP Categorical Eligibility by State](#),” September, 2019.

<sup>x</sup> 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>.