

*For release only by the
House Committee
on Veterans Affairs*

**Statement of Ms. Lindsey Seegers, Director of External Affairs at Kitchens for Good,
Before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Lindsey Seegers, and I serve as the Director of External Affairs at the San Diego-based nonprofit Kitchens for Good. I am pleased to appear before you today to testify about a critical issue facing our community and our country – the need for emergency responsiveness and long-term solutions for our veterans experiencing hunger. I am the adopted daughter and granddaughter of U.S. Navy veterans. I have spent over 15 years working in the community and dining alongside veteran men and women experiencing homelessness, carrying in my heart countless stories of the challenges of returning to civilian life.

Hunger in America is a complex issue with many root causes. For veterans, that issue is complicated further by impacts of their previous service and unique needs as they return to civilian life. But, the Center for Strategic & International Studies states that “the same risk factors that contribute to food insecurity among the general population—having a low income, being a racial minority, experiencing homelessness, or suffering physical or mental illness—also put veterans at risk.” Vulnerable populations experiencing challenges like these are the individuals we serve at Kitchens for Good, and I believe the unique job training program we operate helps hold the key to ending veteran economic hardship and hunger.

Since 2015, Kitchens for Good has served as a unique player in this network of nonprofit programs responding to hunger and poverty in San Diego. Kitchens for Good offers transformative opportunities to individuals whose lives have been impacted by trauma. We operate three California State-Certified Apprenticeship Programs in Culinary, Baking, and Foodservice Management.

Through this program, apprentices gain technical skills training, life coaching, and career counseling, readying them for careers in the hospitality industry. Additionally, over 100,000 nutritious meals are prepared annually in our kitchens to help San Diego families, seniors, veterans, and community colleges students experiencing food insecurity. The difference in the Kitchens for Good training model, particularly regarding a supportive learning environment for veterans, is our emphasis on trauma-informed training. Our chefs and career coaches teach and model sobriety, self-advocacy for mental health, and nonviolent navigation of the often stressful professional kitchen environment to the same degree they emphasize technical culinary skills.

In my testimony before this Subcommittee, I will share success stories from veteran graduates of Kitchens for Good, how the Paycheck Protection Program helped our organization provide direct

relief to neighbors experiencing hunger in the wake of COVID-19, and our approach to trauma-informed job training as a sustainable solution to food insecurity among working-age veterans.

With her permission, I am honored to tell you about Kitchens for Good alumni, Chef Marytza. Marytza is a veteran, a SeamanE3 of the Navy Reserves. She is also a mother, an entrepreneur, a baker, and an established culinary professional. She is one of twenty veteran students who have participated in Kitchens for Good's job training program. She joined our fifteenth class of culinary apprentices, among other highly motivated job seekers pursuing a fresh start. At the time, Marytza had recently begun her sobriety journey. She was also on probation and without a driver's license.

What never surprises us about our military personnel are the many strengths they bring to hospitality roles. Marytza was, and is, no exception: to her job training; she brought discipline, self-motivation, and a tenacious work ethic to her studies as she discovered her talent for both culinary and pastry work. With Kitchens for Good, Marytza completed 2,460 paid on-the-job training hours as a cook and graduated as a Certified Apprentice from California during the height of the pandemic.

The reason I, with Marytza's blessing, share *her* words with *my* voice is because this veteran's tenacity, creativity, and talent launched her into the life she dreamed. Since gaining her apprenticeship certification, she recently relocated with her daughter and partner back to her hometown in central California, where she is employed as a full-time cook and successful entrepreneur with her own line of salsas and sauces.

Marytza said: "I wouldn't trade this job for any other! The accomplishment of a night of meal tickets makes my drive home full of purpose... maybe I am in love with tough work. Whatever it is, it's what I get up for each day."

Marytza, like many in the hospitality industry, served as an essential worker during the pandemic. During that stressful time, as she risked her health and safety to keep the economy in motion, she was quickly promoted to a Food Production Manager, allowing her to pay off some of her debt.

The Paycheck Protection Program allowed Kitchens for Good to keep our doors open every day of the pandemic and employ our apprentices as first responders to the growing food insecurity just beyond the doors of our kitchen. We hired Alfred, another veteran, whose culinary job training pivoted to emergency response in our hunger-relief meal program.

We mobilized our culinary training instructors and students, like Alfred, to chop thousands of pounds of produce and proteins, growing meal production from 2,000 to 15,000 meals every week. We turned our event space in a socially distanced meal packing operation where students and volunteers safely packaged, labeled, and sorted meals to meet the basic food needs of vulnerable seniors, displaced workers, veterans, and families in San Diego. In twelve months, we handcrafted nearly 210,000 individually packaged entrees.

On March 30, 2020, Kitchens for Good launched our free Grab-and-Go Kiosk, safely providing curbside distribution of frozen heat-and-serve hunger relief meals as well as staple grocery bags to Southeastern San Diego families three days per week. This safe meal distribution ensured both families and our unsheltered neighbors could enjoy a hot meal by simply popping into the local 7-11 to use a microwave.

The hospitality industry has survived recessions before. It is a resilient industry of resilient people—and who better embodies that quality than the men and women of our armed forces? We saw restaurants step up in emergency response to provide food for many experiencing hunger for the first time. But for those of us, like myself, spending our professional lives in food banking and hunger-relief work, we see that poverty and food insecurity is a difficult cycle to break.

At Kitchens for Good, we know that wages and employment are critical long-term solutions to hunger. Veterans like Marytza want the opportunity to use their skills to become self-sufficient. When we empower them to take control of their lives, physical and mental health, sobriety, and future through fulfilling careers, we are ending the cycle of poverty that affects many former military personnel.

Thank you for your time.