



US4WARRIORS

US FOR WARRIORS FOUNDATION

Testimony

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

Hearing

"Ending Veteran Hunger: Examining the Impact of COVID-19 on Food Insecurity"
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Statement of Anthony Stewart

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

Thank you for the invitation to testify at today's hearing on *Ending Veterans Hunger and the Impact of COVID-19 on Food Insecurity*. My name is Tony Stewart. I serve as Chief Executive Officer of the Us for Warriors Foundation, a non-profit Veteran Support Organization serving the needs of San Diego County, California.

Through our small, hardworking staff, adaptive programs and a Warrior Volunteer Force that has, over time, been comprised of over 4,000 dedicated volunteers, Us4Warriors has supported over 35,000 warriors and family members. It is also a true testament to the community in which we serve, as most of our volunteers are also military and veterans who know the struggle and want to help their brothers and sisters to overcome adversity.

Us4Warriors exists to improve the quality of life of military, veterans, and their families. As a veteran who has served nearly two-thirds of my life in the military and veterans' community, I am honored for the opportunity to testify on behalf of those unable to be before you today.

The Target

According to a June 2020 *American Community Survey Report* from the U.S. Census Bureauⁱ, roughly 18 million veterans are living in the United States. It is important for the sake of fighting veterans' hunger, that we ensure we capture the other aspects of this group, including the active-duty military who comprise the next wave of veterans who will join the list soon and the families, including survivors.

"Everything we do is for the Troops, Veterans and their Families"

For perspective, according to the County of San Diego’s Office of Military and Veterans Affairs (OMVA)ⁱⁱ, our Us4Warriors support arena consists of over 243,000 veterans, 160,000 active-duty military and their families that collectively comprise a total of 1.2 million county residents, or 35% of our county population, who – at any time, may succumb to economic hardships.

For further context, San Diego County is home to one of the largest concentrations of Navy and Marine bases in the United States. Prior to the pandemic, the County of San Diego’s OMVAⁱⁱ reported that the total of active-duty military was set to grow by 15,000 over the next few years due to the addition of ships set to be homeported in San Diego. As the single means for producing veterans is through service in the Armed Forces, it is equally important to remain on the pulse of the needs of our military as they become veterans as well and grow families along the way.

Per a Military-to-Civilian Review of 2018 by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairsⁱⁱⁱ, approximately 200,000 men and women leave military service and become veterans each year. Having proudly served, led, and supported military and veterans all my adult life, I can truly attest that the challenges for junior enlisted military members with families, especially those assigned to live in high-cost areas like San Diego, is a constant concern and the struggle has a high probability to transcend to their post-service time.

That said, Food Insecurity in San Diego County continues to be a struggle among the military and veteran community. For those living with food insecurity, the uncertainty of having enough or the ability to meet the needs of their families, brings them to organizations like Us4Warriors.

Per a 2020 Household Food Security study from the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)^{iv}, 10.5% of the overall population, or 13.8 million of U.S. households were food insecure during 2020. Data regarding the veteran segment of that specific metric is not readily available. However, this study found that the overall foothold of food insecurity remained unchanged from 2019 to 2020 indicating more work must be done. A *Federal Practitioner*^v 2020 article synthesizes some of the veteran food insecurity data available just before the pandemic to provide an estimated food insecurity target ranging from 6% to 24%, concluding the figures are nearly twice that of the general U.S. population.

The Tools

We all know that many of today’s economic hardships can happen to anyone, at any time. If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it has shown us that no one is beyond the reach of an unknown adversary and that only together can we exercise resolve to overcome these obstacles.

Together, our Us4Warriors Team supports a mission to help warriors, Live – *for a stronger life*; Prosper – *for a brighter future*; and reach a point of self-reliance to Aspire – *for their dreams*. To assist in fulfilling the first step of our mission, we provide a Food4Warriors program that bundles several, ongoing events, and projects to serve those in need with food and basic needs assistance.

Since introducing our Food4Warriors Program in 2016, our “Food Drop” distribution events have become a reliable source of support throughout San Diego County. As COVID-19 began to change our world, we are thankful that our food distribution model, with outdoor remote locations, pre-packaged groceries, and drive-thru staging, easily adapted to the needs of the pandemic.

Despite significant challenges to funding throughout the pandemic, our ability to host these distributions continued with easy adjustments for social distancing and necessary safety precautions while ensuring that we had zero cancelled events over the last two years. In fact, during those first few months of the pandemic, we encountered a significant increase in demand of our services while other welcomed partners adapted to the mobile, drive-thru model.

Our other food support projects began to increase as well. Our Care4Warriors project has provided thousands of specially, packed food and basic needs assistance items for several years in support of collaborative local standdown events for homeless veterans. Our efforts became even more important over the last two years while these dedicated, support events went through significant changes in dates and requirements to ensure the most stringent, safety protocols were in place and the most valuable, but healthiest environments for healing were maintained under many understandable limitations. We appreciate our partners with North County Veterans Standdown and the San Diego Veterans Standdown for all that they have done in support of homeless veterans despite the many challenges they faced during this pandemic.

As this body is aware, homelessness is a systemic companion of food insecurity. We believe that these efforts are intertwined and deserve a unified approach to help uplift those in need towards a path of self-reliance. When one condition is present, the other is nearby.

Since 2017, our Food4Veterans project has maintained a direct collaboration with the local U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs network of clinics, nutritionists and social workers that make up their “Food Empowerment Program.” We have delivered participating clinics with sacks of specially selected groceries from a dietary menu that the clinics are able to provide for those veterans identified with food insecurity issues. It is well-known, that true healing for veterans dealing with mental health and medical conditions cannot be fully realized if there is a constant risk of hunger in the home. We applaud the efforts of our compassionate VA partners for their foresight and collaboration, both before and during the pandemic. Because of the caring commitment of the VA’s Food Empowerment Team, many veterans can truly heal - free from the uncertainty of knowing when their next, healthy meal will be.

Continuing to focus upon the gaps during the pandemic, our Pantry4Warriors began to provide “Safe Pantry Pick-ups” of pre-packaged groceries for several hours each weekday through a dedicated appointment system that ensured food was on-hand and ready with safe, but limited contact for those in need and consistently available between other food distribution events. For hundreds of families, this became a staple of support for those significantly challenged.

Our Food4Warriors projects and services could not happen through our efforts alone. In the battle to overcome hunger, we are proud agent partners of the Feeding San Diego and the San Diego Food Bank networks. Both amazing hunger relief organizations have warmly made a place for us in this fight over the years and supported our efforts to make a difference down to the smallest detail. During the pandemic, their leadership, guidance, and support for food agents like us has been both remarkable and a catalyst for growth of services and targeted efforts to support many in need. The cooperative approach of these organizations serves as solid benchmarks for bringing together a community to help a network of agents, like Us4Warriors, be our best and meet the demands necessary to assisting those in need.

The Team

This opportunity to speak with you today reminds that when in forums such as this and large collaborative efforts in our communities, we find ourselves both thankful to be part of a community force, but also grateful to be among so many leaders in the field of dedicated, community support that we can learn from, lean on, and work with towards a common goal. Along with others previously mentioned, there have been unsung hero partners in our area that have provided much to our food support efforts.

We could not have established our Food4Warriors program nor sustained it without the support of The American Legion, especially Department of California's District 22, who we have been with us in efforts to help veterans since we established. Equally, we are very grateful for the steadfast efforts of The Veterans of Foreign Wars, especially Department of California's District 1; and, the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks who have been both generous and very active in the support of this cause. These and others have given us venues to host food distributions and donated their time, funds, and resources to help this program grow. During the pandemic, they each endured their own pandemic hardships but never diminished their support.

We are very thankful for the San Diego Veterans Coalition who have boosted our food support efforts and brought forward new colleagues and resources through the Family Life Action Group. In a sea of uncertainty and times of great challenge, Us4Warriors believes that it not only takes a village, but a passionate fleet in constant forward motion regardless of what comes before them. The economic adage of a "*rising tide lifts all boats*" is special to our Us4Warriors Team, as we believe this general truth can also be applied to any problem, any group, any time, and anywhere to help in every way. The San Diego Veterans Coalition has become a strong catalyst for collaborative efforts to help veterans.

We must also bring light to the government agencies that have pressed forward during this period of uncharted territory to care for those in need by broadening eligibilities, increasing flexibilities, and constantly striving to incorporate the recognition of veteran sacrifice into available opportunities for support during this pandemic.

We are grateful of the work of the USDA to facilitate an increase to the emergency SNAP benefits (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as CalFresh in California) during the pandemic and the continuous focus to ensure that those struggling the most were not limited and able to get the assistance that they need. Recent Census Bureau data¹ reports that 1.64 million veterans nationwide receive public assistance, including SNAP benefits. These emergency allowances are critical for many veteran households, and we will continue to work with our partners get the word out regarding these important opportunities.

That said, understanding that the focus is upon veterans, the military members with families, who will soon become veterans, still need support to mitigate the effects of SNAP eligibility criteria that counts the Basic Allowance for Housing as income. Focusing ahead of problems, this situation prevents resources to reduce the strain on struggling military families, can perpetuate barriers to self-reliance and lead to a growing path of need that will extend well beyond their military-to-veteran transition. Finding a solution is important for both today and tomorrow.

As a non-profit charity, we are also extremely grateful for efforts that have supported funding for businesses during the pandemic. For many, it has kept organizations in the path of providing key food support. Therefore, we thank the Small Business Administration (SBA) for adapting to meet the needs of the incredible, heavy lift of supporting businesses and charities like ours who are dedicated to helping others. For our organization and many of our contemporaries, without the SBA's Paycheck Protection Program and COVID-19 Emergency Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) benefits, we may not have had the necessary funding to continue our mission. However, thanks to these critical funding sources, we were able to continue our efforts without cancellations and increase our capabilities with effective, strategic planning. Looking towards the latest EIDL increase opportunities, we simply ask for continued vigilance regarding support of loan applications for veteran support organizations, especially those previously approved in the initial offering. It is making a difference for many groups helping others.

Overall, in the fight against military and veterans' hunger, we also believe more work is needed to further the collection of data to find the gaps for building the strongest net of support. This will help shape better policies and provide veteran support organizations with valuable information to combat food insecurity and support our nation's leaders and public agencies doing the same.

There is little doubt that the pandemic created an unprecedented crisis that has affected every corner of our lives, especially the efforts to support the common good. Only the ability to come together with joint resolve has allowed many of us to push forward. With each effort, we learn and adapt in equal measure; facing the challenges of our veterans and their families by embracing shared paths to break cycles of need, leading towards self-reliance. Food insecurity is a challenge that truly demands cooperation and a steady course forward. Those veterans who have already made significant sacrifices in their lives deserve all that we can give them.

I thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the battle for ending veterans' hunger. We are extremely grateful for your efforts. We implore you to continue this good fight and ask that you call upon us if we can help.

After the devastating reach of COVID-19 fades and current economic damage control measures expire, there will still be a food insecurity issue. Only marching together can we close the gap.

Thank you for allowing Us4Warriors to be on the field supporting our veterans.

- ⁱ Vespa, J. E. (2020). *Those who served: America's veterans from World War II to the War on Terror* (ACS-43). American Community Survey Report, U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau.
- ⁱⁱ *San Diego Military & Veterans Advisory Council (SDMVAC) Overview*. (2019). County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The Military to Civilian Transition 2018: A Review of Historical, Current, and Future Trends*. (2018). U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- ^{iv} Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M. P., Gregory, C. A., & Singh, A. (2021). *Household Food Security in the United States in 2020* (ERR 298). *Economic Research Service*, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- ^v Cohen, A. J., Randolph, J. L., Thomas, K. S., Archambault, E., Bowman, M. M., Going, C., Heisler, M., O'Toole, T. P., & Dosa, D. M. (2020). Food Insecurity Among Veterans: Resources to Screen and Intervene. *Federal Practitioner*, 37(1), 16-23.