

San Diego County is California's second largest county by population size, is home to more than 3.3 million residents, and spans over 4,500 square miles. San Diego County takes pride in its Military history and is home to the largest number of Military personnel in California. 16 Military installations belonging to the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Coast Guard, are located throughout the County where 110,000 Military personnel are employed locally, in addition to over 118,000 family members and over 240,000 Veterans who reside in the County. San Diego County is surrounded by the Pacific coastline, mountains, and deserts and for over 100 years has served as a key location for the Military, making it a popular place for many Military personnel and Veterans to visit and retire.

As representatives of San Diego County, we oversee public assistance programs in addition to the Office of Military and Veterans Affairs. San Diego County is committed to serving Veterans by linking them to several essential services and resources including conducting multiple monthly outreach events, assisting with VA claims, appointment walk-ins, and linking Veterans to disability pay including monthly compensation and pensions. During the last fiscal year, San Diego County linked Veterans to disability pay which resulted in over \$13.6 million in benefits, more than any other County in California. San Diego County also serves Veterans through public assistance programs and currently over 2,700 Veterans access the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), otherwise known as CalFresh here in California.

Food insecurity has been on the rise across the State and Nation, however the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic has been devastating across the region, impacting many populations including Veterans. During the Pandemic, many Veterans and Military families have become reliant upon alternative sources to supplement their income and food budgets, including utilizing food banks and SNAP. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, many efforts were made statewide and locally to help supplement food budgets for vulnerable populations including food boxes, Pandemic EBT, COVID stipends, SNAP Emergency Allotments, and food bank resources. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the county experienced a 40% increase in our SNAP caseload and enrollment is at a record high with over 360,000 residents currently receiving benefits.

Many things can be done to help uplift our Veterans including ensuring that they identify themselves as Veterans when applying for programs so they can be appropriately screened for all services or benefits they may qualify for. Once individuals are properly identified as Veterans, the County can help them apply for critical services and programs including SNAP and help them maintain their benefits. Addressing any outstanding stigma associated with receipt of public assistance is also critical in order to encourage eligible Veterans to not only apply for services, but also utilize the benefits that they are entitled to. Additional complications such as the lengthy application process, interviews, and multiple reporting requirements throughout the year can also introduce additional barriers to Veterans attempting to access SNAP benefits. Because there are no special waivers or rules for Veterans with regards to SNAP eligibility, they are subject to the same stringent guidelines as all other applicants. Implementing processes such as categorical eligibility or express lane enrollment into SNAP could benefit many disadvantaged Veterans as the program is critical to battling and reducing food insecurity.

We would like to thank you for your time today and would hope that this committee would consider reducing barriers to enrolling or maintaining SNAP eligibility for Veterans to help combat food insecurity. We are available to answer any questions you may have.