



U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

“Reviewing the Availability of Resources to Address Veteran Hunger”

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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% of military family respondents and 65% 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% of military family respondents compared to 7% of civilian families).

Such financial distress can lead to food insecurity among active duty and veteran families. In 2018, 7% of military family respondents and 12% of veteran family respondents indicated that someone in their household had faced food insecurity in the past year. Additionally, 9% of military family respondents and 18% 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:

- 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% of military spouse respondents were unemployed (not working but had actively sought work in the past four weeks); and among the 46% of military spouse respondents who were employed full-time or part-time, more than half (56%) 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%.

The military spouse employment problem is further exacerbated by a scarcity of affordable childcare. In 2018, 56% 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% of female service members and 65% of male service members were not able to find consistent childcare.

Meanwhile, 70% 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% 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% 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% of respondents had out of pocket costs of less than \$500 per month;
- 8% had out of pocket costs between \$500 and \$1,000 per month; and
- 2% 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%) 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 availability 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% 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 look forward 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.