

FOOD, NUTRITION, AND CONSUMER SERVICES
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Before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity,
House Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to discuss the role of the nutrition assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in serving the nation's veterans. I am Pam Miller, Administrator of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). FNS is responsible for administering America's nutrition assistance programs, which leverage the nation's agricultural abundance to ensure every American has access to wholesome, nutritious food, even when they face challenging circumstances.

Every American owes an immeasurable debt to the veterans who have served and fought to defend our nation. The men and women who have borne the perils and hardships to secure and protect our freedom and our way of life have not only earned our respect and honor, they deserve our support as they deal with the challenges of life after military service.

At FNS, we operate programs that touch the lives of one in four Americans every day. Our programs serve a broad range of households with low- incomes to meet their nutritional needs – such as those of the elderly, pregnant women, infants and young children – and operate in settings where immediate access to food is important, such as schools and child care facilities. While our programs are not targeted specifically to veterans, they are available and designed to provide benefits that veterans and their families may need, particularly when they face difficult economic circumstances.

A recent USDA analysis of dietary intake data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found that, similar to other Americans, veterans' well-being would benefit from improvements in their diets. In particular, their consumption of added sugars and solid fats is too high, and their consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and dairy products is too low relative to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

The largest of our 15 nutrition assistance programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, currently serves about 36 million low-income people each month. Data from the American Community Survey suggests that in calendar year 2017, about 1.3 million veterans reported receiving SNAP at some point during the previous 12 months. This represented less than 3 percent of all SNAP participants. In that same year, about 7 percent of all living veterans received SNAP, while about 14 percent of all Americans received SNAP at some point.

The Subcommittee has asked about the impact of the Administration's SNAP reforms, both proposed and finalized, on veterans. Let me say at the outset that because veteran status is not a condition of eligibility for SNAP, meaning that veterans in need of food assistance qualify for SNAP in the same way that other households do, based on their income, assets, and other non-financial eligibility factors. For that reason, we do not have

veteran's status as part of the administrative datasets that we use to estimate the impact of these rules on different sub-groups of SNAP participants. Given the limited number of veterans receiving benefits, survey data is also limited in what it can reliably tell us. I will instead speak more generally about the purpose and effects of our current and upcoming rules.

Let me begin by explaining the overall purpose of these regulatory reforms, which is to use the authority we have under the current law, including the 2018 Farm Bill, to administer SNAP, and all our nutrition programs, as Congress intended and has specified in law. Overall, we are seeking to achieve a more modern, equitable and effective SNAP program.

The Food Stamp Program was launched in the 1930s, and today's nationwide program was created in the 1970s. SNAP has grown and evolved over time, and it is crucial to continue to make reforms to improve customer service and integrity in the program. SNAP statute provides USDA discretion to allow State agencies – SNAP's front-line customer service organizations – flexibility in certain aspects of administration. While this flexibility works well in several areas, in some it has compromised the consistency of operations over time with certain standards defined in statute, and even led to disparities in benefits for similarly situated individuals and households simply because of the state where they live. For this reason, and in recognition of our responsibility to ensure the program operates consistent with the law, a major portion of the Administration's SNAP agenda seeks to strike a better balance between practical operational flexibility and the national standards that define the program's purpose and support its effectiveness. We have focused in three key areas.

We recently announced changes to the criteria for when and where states may apply for waivers of the time limit for able-bodied adults without dependents between the ages of 18 and 49 – "ABAWDs." This rule does not apply to children, their parents, individuals over 50 including the elderly, pregnant women, or individuals with a disability. The USDA definition in SNAP for individuals with a disability automatically includes veterans who are totally disabled, permanently homebound, or in need of regular aid and attendance, as well as a surviving spouse or child of a veteran who is receiving VA benefits and is considered permanently disabled, so they are also not the subject to this time limit.

The statutory time limit only applies to work-capable adults without children or other dependents. Long-standing SNAP statute sets the limits for this subgroup to three months of benefits in a three-year period – unless they are working, volunteering, or participating in work training for at least 20 hours per week, or participating in workfare, for as little as 6 hours a week. States may waive these limits in areas with an unemployment rate above 10 percent or where there are "not sufficient jobs." However, the previous regulations were defined so loosely that counties with an unemployment rate as low as 2.5 percent are included in currently waived areas. The recent final rule places common-sense limits on such waivers. As a result of the new limits on waivers, significantly more ABAWDs will be expected to work, volunteer, and/or participate in a work program, or participate in workfare, in order to receive SNAP for more than 3 months in a 36-month (3-year) period.

Congress was clear that parents with dependent children in the home, those over 50 years old including the elderly, those with a disability, and pregnant women, are not subject to time limits. This rule has no impact on such individuals, including the veterans among them.

Congress also established a wide range of ways for individuals to engage and maintain benefits; the rule did not make changes to existing regulations in this area and FNS continues to encourage SNAP State agencies to leverage SNAP-funded Employment & Training (E&T) programs, as well as services provided by other Federal agencies, including the VA work programs, state and county governments, and local providers, to meet the needs of their participants working toward self-sufficiency. In addition to providing for work and various training programs to count toward the work requirement, current law and regulations also include volunteering for just 6 hours a week through a workfare program, perhaps at a local food bank, as a way to maintain SNAP eligibility while gaining valuable work experience. Similarly, Federal law explicitly exempts certain individuals from the time limit, including those unable to work due to physical or mental challenges – challenges that some veterans may face. An individual does not need to be permanently disabled or receiving disability benefits to be exempted from the time limit under this criterion. Moreover, when an individual’s “unfitness for work” is obvious to the SNAP eligibility worker, States have the discretion to exempt the individual without documentation from a medical office or other source. Federal rules allow States this flexibility to prevent placing unnecessary burden on individuals who are clearly unfit for employment but may be undiagnosed and/or disconnected from supportive services or benefits, such as people with apparent mental illnesses and the chronically homeless. States are responsible for assessing an individual's fitness for work methodically and comprehensively, typically when certifying applicants for benefits.

To be clear, the rule did not change these responsibilities, nor did it take away states’ statutory flexibility to waive the time-limit in areas of high unemployment and to exempt a percentage of their caseload, as established in law, at their full discretion. What the rule did accomplish was to establish clear standards for applying for and receiving waivers. The strong economy is creating opportunities for all, and this Administration’s view is that now is the time to help more Americans enter, re-enter, and succeed in the workforce – including veterans.

Another rulemaking, which we are working to finalize, proposed to eliminate a loophole called “broad-based categorical eligibility” that has been used to provide SNAP benefits to households without a robust eligibility determination by the conferring TANF program. This would end the practice of allowing households to be eligible for SNAP by simply being handed a brochure from another Federal program. Limiting this eligibility rule to those receiving specific, concrete, and work-supporting benefits would retain categorical eligibility’s advantage of streamlining program administration, but in a fiscally prudent way. And it promotes integrity by better aligning eligibility with the income and resource standards set explicitly in statute. The comment period for the proposed rule is closed, and the agency is examining comments as we contemplate a final rule.

The third major reform we have proposed would truly *standardize* and *modernize* the method for setting State SNAP standard utility allowances across the country. For many years,

SNAP rules have allowed states to use their own methods to establish a standard utility allowance in lieu of documenting actual utility costs. Such standards can be a useful program efficiency, but the variation in State methods for determining the allowance amount has resulted in the inconsistent treatment of similarly situated households across state lines. Moreover, it has been so long since state SUA methodologies were assessed that some states cannot explain their original SUA or even the year it was set. USDA's proposal would replace the patchwork of outdated and inconsistent State methods for setting these allowances with a modernized, uniform approach based on up-to-date data on actual household utility costs in each state. The proposal would also replace an antiquated "telephone allowance" with a telecommunications allowance that includes the cost of basic internet service – no longer a luxury, but often a necessity for school, work, and job search for families, including veterans and their families.

The Department recognizes and earnestly undertakes its role to provide SNAP benefits to those who truly need them, while ensuring that SNAP participants have a launch pad to a better life.

Let me emphasize further that these are not the only improvements we are pursuing in SNAP. One that may be of particular interest to veterans that participate in SNAP is a pilot Congress authorized in the Farm Bill for online SNAP purchasing. The Secretary articulated the core principle behind this innovative effort – "People who receive SNAP benefits should have the opportunity to shop for food the same way more and more Americans shop for food – by ordering and paying for groceries online. As technology advances, it is important for SNAP to advance too." The pilot began this spring in New York with three retailer chains. The pilot will expand to more states in 2020. For veterans who may face mobility challenges due to age or service-related injuries or disabilities, or those living in rural areas, this kind of service can be particularly important.

Similarly, SNAP is only one of many USDA nutrition assistance programs that provide support to veterans and their families. Low-income veterans starting new families may benefit from the WIC program, which safeguards the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating, and referrals to health care. We have worked with the WIC community, including State administrators and clinic staff, business partners and participants, to explore ways to enhance the food package and improve the WIC shopping experience – with implementation of electronic benefit transfer (EBT), a critical improvement strategy – and questions about access, and the potential role of technology to simplify the client application and participation experience. The President's Budget has consistently funded WIC, our largest discretionary program, to ensure sufficient funding for all eligible women, infants and children who wish to participate.

The children and grandchildren of veterans can rely on the nutritious meals provided through the Child Nutrition Programs, including the school meals programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the summer feeding programs, to get a healthy start in life. USDA has worked closely with program operators to make sure that they can serve children well. Through customer service roundtables and other venues, we heard that school nutrition professionals needed targeted adjustments to existing meal standards to ensure that school meals were both nutritious and appealing to the students being served. So Secretary Perdue extended school meal

flexibilities related to flavored milk, whole grains, and sodium. We also heard that the education and training standards for nutrition professionals USDA implemented under the last reauthorization put strain on small and rural school districts where a disproportionate number of veterans live, and we have responded by revising the rules, in accordance with the law, to allow these districts more hiring flexibility. We are now working on additional flexibilities in schools and in the Summer Food Service Program.

FNS also collaborates and coordinates with other USDA agencies to better serve veterans. The Department's Military Veteran Agricultural (MVA) Liaison, first authorized by the 2014 Farm Bill, coordinates across the Department to provide information, resources and support for active duty military and veterans interested in agriculture, and to facilitate relationships within and beyond USDA to make sure military veterans have full access to resources and services to help them succeed in civilian life. FNS works with the MVA Liaison to ensure eligible service members and their families have an understanding of nutrition assistance eligibility criteria, employment opportunities for transitioning members as they arise, and available nutrition resources to assist the family towards a healthy lifestyle.

FNS's work in support of our nation's veterans is just one facet of USDA support. Veterans make up 13 percent of on-board employees, and the Department provides on the job training through apprenticeship programs as agricultural commodity graders, wildland firefighters and food inspectors. Many USDA agencies have programs focused on veterans:

- The Economic Research Service prepares valuable research related to veterans, including the diet quality report that I mentioned, and a forthcoming report that examines food security among households with working-age veterans.
- The National Institute of Food and Agriculture supports veterans in the agricultural sector through programs such as the Enhancing Agricultural Opportunities for Military Veterans Competitive Grants Program (AgVets), the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) – which devotes at least five percent of its funding to serving military veterans, the National AgrAbility Project for military veterans, and a range of other partnerships to support and strengthen military families.
- Under USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, veterans receive preference and higher payment rates for certain conservation programs including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). These voluntary conservation programs provide financial and technical assistance to producers to address concerns, strengthen operations, protect, and restore conservation practices.
- The Farm Service Agency provides farm loan programs to help veterans purchase farmland, buy equipment, and make repairs and upgrades.
- USDA's rural housing programs can help veterans become homeowners, repair or improve their existing homes, and offset the costs of rent. Veterans starting or expanding rural businesses may seek USDA funding and technical support in the form of loans, loan guarantees, processing and marketing of products, and energy efficiency improvements.

- USDA's Office of Advocacy and Outreach works with states and organizations to create programs to assist veterans with transitioning to farming, ranching, and other agricultural jobs. One key program is the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program, which provides training, outreach and technical assistance to underserved and veteran farmers and ranchers.

In closing, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to join you, and again emphasize our interest in and dedication to providing America's veteran heroes with the service and support that they deserve. I am confident that we can continue to do so while advancing this Administration's broader nutrition assistance priorities – to improve customer service for partners and participants, to protect and enhance integrity, and to strengthen the bonds between FNS programs and a better life through employment.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.