

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

"Reviewing the Availability of Resources to Address Veteran Hunger"

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January 9, 2020

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 Josh Protas, and I am proud to serve as Vice President of Public Policy for MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national social benefit corporation working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the U.S. and Israel. Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart the responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst without judgement or precondition. In *Deuteronomy 15: 7-8*, we are commanded: "If there is among you a poor person, one of your kin, in any of your towns within your land which God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against them, but you shall open your hand to them, and lend them sufficient for their needs, whatever they may be." Founded in 1985, MAZON identifies emerging and persistent hunger needs and works to promote policies to address these needs. This work is informed by longstanding partnerships with hundreds of food banks, pantries, and other anti-hunger direct service agencies as well as more recent relationships with direct service providers and advocates for veterans, military families, Tribal nations, rural communities, college students, and seniors.

Our Board of Directors has made hunger among veterans and military families a core priority for our education and advocacy efforts. We hold a strong interest in the development of effective and compassionate federal food and nutrition policies for veterans and military families. This is not MAZON's first time appearing before Congress on this topic. Four years ago, Abby Leibman, MAZON's President and CEO, spoke as a

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witness before the House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition to discuss military and veteran hunger. In 2015, MAZON sponsored the first ever Congressional briefing on the issue of veteran food insecurity, and in January 2018, MAZON coordinated and moderated a Congressional briefing about “Veterans in the Farm Bill.” Each of these occasions proved to be significant in shining a more prominent spotlight on these long-ignored issues and resulted in positive steps by federal agencies to take a more active role in collecting data about and addressing veteran food insecurity.

While there has been some progress in addressing veteran food insecurity in America made by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) since 2015, that progress has been extremely modest compared to the severity of the problem. If Congress and federal agencies do not take timely and concerted efforts to prioritize this critical issue, it will only get worse and become more difficult to resolve. This is in part due to the harmful impact of administrative changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) promulgated by the current Administration, which are condoned and even celebrated by some Members of Congress.

There are tens of thousands of veterans struggling to adjust and survive following the transition from military service. Some have recently returned from combat, while others are elderly and facing challenges they thought they had long overcome. Far too often, this struggle leads to despair because there is either an actual, or *perceived*, lack of support; and available support is tinged with stigma or shame, involves an overly complicated application process, or veterans simply do not know that help exists or how to access it. The result for those of limited financial means is often a downward spiral that triggers despair, hopelessness, and tragically can lead to self-harm or even suicide. In fact, recent findings from the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests ways to address the troubling correlation between economic hardship and “deaths of despair.” The study found a significant reduction in non-drug suicides among adults with high school education or less due to simple policy interventions that improved their economic well-being: an increase in the minimum wage and the earned income tax credit.¹ As part of the efforts to address the recent suicide epidemic by veterans and military service members, policy makers must recognize the vital importance of federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP in helping to meet their basic needs. It is clear that Members of Congress should support policy proposals that expand access and participation in SNAP in an effort to strengthen the program, not weaken it. Failing to make improvements to SNAP, as well as failing to ensure that veterans are aware of and connected to the program, ignores a valuable and effective tool in the campaign to end veteran suicide.

The scope of food insecurity among veterans is complex, and we simply need more data to be able to respond effectively to the needs of America’s food insecure veterans. What we do know is that SNAP helps about 1.3 million low-income veterans, based on American Community Survey data, and that about 7 percent of veterans live in households that receive SNAP. Florida has the largest number of veterans participating in SNAP (116,000), followed by Texas (97,000), California (94,000), Pennsylvania

¹ Dow, WH; Godoy, A; Lowenstein, CA; Reich, M. “Can Economic Policies Reduce Deaths of Despair?” *The National Bureau of Economic Research*. April 2019. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25787>.

(63,000), and New York (59,000).² Several years ago, Blue Star Families helpfully added questions about food insecurity to its Annual Military Lifestyle Survey. However, we should not have to rely solely on this survey—the federal government should routinely gather comprehensive national data to better inform proactive and robust policy responses to this unacceptable—yet solvable—problem.

Data about veteran SNAP participation only tell part of the story. Appallingly, we do not know how many veterans are struggling with hunger, without the assistance of SNAP.

A recent issue brief by Impaq International notes that among food insecure veterans, less than one-third were in households receiving SNAP, and among veterans in households with incomes below the poverty threshold, only about 4 in 10 were in SNAP-recipient households.³ These findings should be deeply troubling to this Subcommittee—this means that the majority of veterans who experience food insecurity do not get the help they need and to which they are entitled. These veterans struggle needlessly, and we fail them as a country when we leave SNAP benefits that they desperately need on the table. If we take the figure of 1.3 million veterans who participate in SNAP and then project—based on the findings by Impaq International—how many more should be receiving SNAP benefits, an estimated 4.3 million veterans experience food insecurity but do not receive SNAP. Nearly 4.3 million veterans who could have assistance available to them are instead are struggling in vain for unacceptable reasons. Connecting these food insecure veterans with SNAP would support better physical and mental health outcomes, employment and economic security, and overall well-being. It would also realize significant long-term health care savings by preventively addressing costly diet-related chronic health conditions. This simple but impactful action should be a top priority for the VA, USDA, and Congress.

Furthermore, we are deeply concerned about special populations of veterans that face heightened rates of food insecurity:

- In a study of **post-9/11 veterans** at the Minneapolis VA Healthcare System, over one in four veterans (roughly 27%) reported problems with food security—about twice the rate of the general population.⁴

² “Number of Veterans Living in Households Where Someone Participates in SNAP (2016-2018).” December 20, 2019. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities* updated data from 2018 report and analysis of data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-helps-almost-14-million-low-income-veterans-including-thousands-in>.

³ Pooler, P; Srinivasan, M; Mian, P; Miller, Z. “Veterans and Food Insecurity.” *Impaq International*. November 2018. <https://www.impaqint.com/work/issue-briefs/veterans-and-food-insecurity>.

⁴ Widome, R; Jensen, A; Bangerter, A; Fu, S. “Food Insecurity Among Veterans of the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” *Public Health Nutrition*, 18(5), p. 844-849. May 2014. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-health-nutrition/article/food-insecurity-among-veterans-of-the-us-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/F03B64DD63287F2BE5F2067F3E5AC5FB>.

- Recent academic research has noted that more than one in four **women veterans** struggle with hunger and that this prevalence of food insecurity is associated with delayed access to health care and worse health outcomes.^{5,6}
- A recent study about “Hunger & Homelessness at Worcester State University,” which is part of a growing body of research about food insecurity among college students, found that an alarming 67% of **student veterans** reported being food insecure. While this represents a small sample size from a single college campus, it illustrates the need for additional data about the concerning level of need among student veterans.⁷
- Rural and remote areas also experience higher rates of poverty and food insecurity than urban and suburban regions, and **Native American and rural veteran populations** face greater barriers to accessing many critical supports and services including employment, healthcare, transportation, and nutritious food. Furthermore, American Indian and Alaska Native veterans serve in the Armed Forces at higher rates per capita than any other group and this population experiences food insecurity at rates higher than any other demographic group in the U.S. Though there has not been specific data collected about food insecurity rates for Native American or Alaska Native veterans, it is clear that there is a high level of need that exists and is not being adequately addressed.
- Recent research indicates that **low-income, working-age veterans raising children** have more than twice the odds for very low food security compared to non-veterans.⁸

Food insecurity and SNAP participation rates among veterans are clearly tied to issues of unemployment and underemployment for many veterans. While veteran unemployment rates have declined in recent years, underemployment affects more veteran job seekers than non-veteran job seekers. A recent report found that nearly one-third of veteran job seekers are underemployed—a rate 15.6% higher than non-veteran job seekers.⁹ Current SNAP work requirements do not increase employment outcomes, nor do they reduce poverty or food insecurity. USDA’s rule change that would limit those who could be exempted from existing work requirements, particularly individuals who are underemployed or have difficulty maintaining regular schedules with sufficient hours, would move us further in the wrong direction. Taking food away from people makes it more difficult for them to find and sustain meaningful work. Restrictive and arbitrary SNAP work requirements only act as a barrier

⁵ Nerain, K; Bean-Mayberry, B; Washington, DL; Canelo, IA; Darling, JE; Yano, EM. “Access to Care and Health Outcomes Among Women Veterans Using Veterans Administration Health Care: Association With Food Insufficiency.” *Women’s Health Issues*, 28(3). February 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29475630>.

⁶ Petersen, H. “Our Veterans Shouldn’t Go Hungry.” *U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Vantage Point Blog*. December 4, 2019. <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/69018/veterans-shouldnt-go-hungry/>.

⁷ Saltsman, A; Fowler, M; Dogali, M; Johnston, G; Wetherell, O. “Hunger & Homelessness at Worcester State University.” *Urban Action Institute of Worcester State University and WSU’s Department of Urban Studies CityLab*. March 2019. <https://www.worcester.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=13534>.

⁸ Kamdar, N; Lester, H; Daundasekara, S; Greer, A; Utech, A; Hernandez, DC. “Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans with Children: Findings from NHANES 2011-2014.” Poster presentation at American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA. November 2019.

⁹ Barrera, Cathy & Phillip Carter. “Challenges on the Homefront: Underemployment Hits Veterans Hard.” *Call of Duty Endowment & ZipRecruiter*. November 2017. https://www.callofdutyendowment.org/content/dam/atvi/callofduty/code/pdf/ZipCODE_Vet_Report_FINAL.pdf.

to accessing the program, exacerbating the problem of food insecurity for veterans and others who struggle instead of helping to solve it.

SNAP is the cornerstone of our nation's nutrition safety net—it helps approximately 36 million low-income Americans by providing a modest allowance to help people pay for food. While the main goal of SNAP is to provide nutrition assistance, there is a ripple effect in communities that supports the federal, state, and local economies—every \$1 spent in SNAP benefits generates \$1.70 in economic activity.¹⁰

SNAP also supports and encourages work, with a carefully designed benefit formula that contains an important work incentive—for most SNAP households, the program provides income support as they earn more and work toward self-sufficiency.

Another important facet of SNAP is that it supports healthy eating. For all Americans, research has made it clear that adequate nutritious food is a vital prerequisite for good health and for reaching one's full potential in life. For those with medical challenges, that connection is even more crucial. The billions of dollars invested in health care for veterans cannot, and must not, overlook the relationship between food security and health. Modest investments in nutrition support could mean the difference between emotional and physical well-being and poverty and despair for countless veterans.

While SNAP is one of the most successful and efficient federal assistance programs, veterans often face unique barriers to accessing the program. For a veteran trying to find out about and access SNAP, the process can often be difficult and confusing. While SNAP guidelines are set at the federal level, each state designs its own application process—the rules are complicated, they vary from state to state, and the application can be lengthy, often requiring recertification. This obviously makes for a complex landscape for an applicant.

We must work together to ensure that struggling veterans and those who serve them: (1) know that SNAP exists, (2) know they might be eligible for SNAP, (3) know where to apply for SNAP, and (4) know how to apply for SNAP. No program can work effectively if it is too difficult to access, if potential recipients are unaware that it exists, and if it comes with restrictions that unintentionally leave out vulnerable populations like veterans, among others.

In the past year, we have seen unprecedented administrative attacks that would restrict and cut SNAP for millions of Americans, including veterans. There is no more insidious rule than that which proscribes harsh and arbitrary work requirements for childless unemployed and underemployed adults age 18-49 (otherwise known as "Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents," or ABAWDs). On February 1, 2019, the Trump Administration posted a notice for proposed rulemaking that, by USDA's own estimate, would result in nearly 688,000 people losing access to SNAP. MAZON submitted

¹⁰ "Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. June 25, 2019. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/policy-basics-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

comments to USDA expressing deep concern that this rule change would severely impact populations like veterans, who often face unique challenges and may require more than 3 months to secure employment that enables them to be self-sufficient. On November 12, 2019, my organization participated in a meeting with the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) to further explain our deep concerns, then on December 4, 2019, USDA seemed to dismiss our formal comments and tens of thousands of others as they issued a Final Rule.

In order to understand the misguidedness of this administrative change, it is important to note that most SNAP recipients who are able to work do, in fact, actually work. Under current law, childless adults ages 18 to 49 are restricted to only 90 days of SNAP benefits in three years unless they can prove they are working or participating in an employment and training program for 80 hours per month. States currently have flexibility to request waivers from this harsh and arbitrary time limit for communities that face high unemployment or insufficient job opportunities.

It is clear that a significant number of those who are subject to this rule are veterans. This rule is not nuanced, it is not flexible, it is not a reflection of the realities of struggling Americans in general, and it clearly does not recognize the realities of veterans in that age bracket. These are men and women who often endure many transitions before they secure long-term employment. They are among our nation's underemployed, picking up work when and where they can. MAZON continues to urge USDA to withdraw the rule, and we are committed to pursuing all available advocacy strategies to ensure that this draconian measure is overturned. If the goal of USDA and the current administration is to move able-bodied recipients of SNAP toward self-sufficiency and into employment, there are clearly more effective actions—including targeted investments in employment and training programs that are sorely lacking in most communities—to prioritize instead of the current ideologically-driven approach.

Furthermore, we have proof that this type of policy increases hunger and hardship.

The state of Maine offers a cautionary tale. In 2015, then-Governor LePage chose not to seek a state waiver for SNAP ABAWD requirements, even though his state was eligible for the waiver due to limited job opportunities throughout the state. The devastating impacts of this decision rippled across Maine, with increased demand on the charitable emergency food network, which was already overburdened and straining to keep up with the need. Mainers struggled to find work, in many cases settling for low-wage jobs with limited or no benefits. Thousands of individuals were forced to make painful trade-offs—having to decide whether to pay for food or medicine.

MAZON's partners in the state reported on the widespread food insecurity that persisted and the harmful impact on Mainers in need, including an estimated 2,800 veterans in Maine who were affected by the newly imposed SNAP time limits. Preble Street—our local partner that provides barrier-free services to empower people experiencing homelessness, hunger, and poverty—has submitted a packet of materials to be included in the official record for today's hearing, documenting increased food insecurity among Mainers, including veterans, due to this situation. These materials include personal testimonies from several veterans who were directly impacted by the SNAP policy changes.

I would like to briefly tell you about one of these veterans, Tim Keefe. I spoke with Tim last week and he agreed to allow me to share about his very painful experience since he is not here to do so himself. I urge this Subcommittee to hold another hearing on this topic to be able to hear directly from veterans like Tim who have lived experience struggling with food insecurity—it is critical to hear the voices of those personally impacted by this issue.

Tim is a Navy veteran living in Maine. After being injured at work and completing all measures included in the worker's compensation process, Tim found himself unable to return to work and fell on hard times. With no income, Tim applied for SNAP so that he could buy food. Though the Department of Labor determined that Tim was medically unable to work, he was told that this was not an acceptable verification of disability status for SNAP. Because of the SNAP policy change made by the state of Maine to no longer waive the time limit for "able-bodied adults without dependents," Tim lost his SNAP benefits after three months. The question he repeatedly asked—to officials at the state SNAP office, to officials at the Social Security office where he inquired about the appeal process for disability claims, and to others in the bureaucratic maze he was forced into as he sought assistance—was, "What do I eat between now and then?"

Nobody had an answer for Tim, and he went through a very difficult and painful period. Without SNAP, Tim had no assistance, and he became homeless. Tim endured the harsh weather in rural Maine, living in a tent until he was found and then moving again and again. He resorted to scrounging for food and even catching squirrels to eat to get by. Tim shared in his testimony before the Maine state legislature calling for an exemption for veterans from SNAP work requirements, "There were many times, more than I'd like to try and count, when I would go two or even three days without food. I had to add seven holes to the only belt I've owned for this year to keep my pants on." Tim turned to the Preble Street Veterans Housing Services that helped him with emergency housing and he was able to get food from the local food bank. But that only went so far. Tim noted that, "the food bank has limited resources. Last month I was able to eat two meals a day for 10 days and one meal a day of rice and beans or a canned vegetable for the remainder of the month. I am truly grateful for that food, but I know that I am still lacking in nutrition and calories."

After Tim turned 50, the SNAP time limit no longer applied to him and he was able once again to get the assistance from SNAP that he so desperately needed. Fortunately, Tim is in a much better place now. But he wants others to know about the unnecessary and heart-breaking ordeal that he went through to help inform policy change so that other struggling individuals—veterans and non-veterans alike—do not fall through the cracks like he did. Nobody should ever be forced to ask, "but what do I eat?" because they can't get the help they need from SNAP.

MAZON has time and again raised concerns about the impact of SNAP time limits for people like Tim who need assistance from SNAP. During the 2018 Farm Bill process, we persistently urged the House and Senate Agriculture Committees to protect and strengthen SNAP for all who need it, including veterans. We testified before the House Agriculture Committee and participated in Farm Bill Listening Sessions, raising concerns about proposals that would make it harder for people to know about, apply

for, and access SNAP. As a result of thoughtful and engaged debate and deliberation, in the end Congress agreed that significant changes to the SNAP ABAWD waivers were unwarranted and unwise. The final Farm Bill—which passed both chambers with historic bipartisan margins of support—instead strengthens ten pilot programs that are currently examining best practices for SNAP employment and training.

We all can agree that those who make great personal sacrifices for our country should not have to struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals for themselves or their families. Therefore, we urge this Committee to consider the following policy recommendations:

1. Protect and Improve SNAP

USDA must withdraw its three harmful administrative proposals that would strip SNAP benefits for millions of Americans. Congress must continue to reject these changes to SNAP that would severely hurt veterans, among others. The policies are misguided and ill-informed, and we simply do not know enough about how populations like veterans will be impacted. It is entirely inappropriate for USDA to move forward with administrative changes to SNAP without making any effort to understand how this will negatively impact the lives of America's veterans.

Furthermore, Congress and USDA should increase the amount of SNAP benefits to better support nutritious food purchases, invest further in the SNAP Employment and Training Program to build on successful models, with targeted Veterans E&T initiatives, and support the Veteran Farmers Market Nutrition Program initiative to incentivize purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables from farmers markets.

2. Connect Veterans to SNAP

In response to MAZON's 2015 Congressional briefing about veteran food insecurity, the VA initiated the Ensuring Veteran Food Security Working Group, piloting and later implementing across the VA network a formal process to identify veterans who are food insecure. While this represented an important initial step, we are concerned that these actions do not go far enough and that more oversight is needed.

The VA should adopt the validated two-question Hunger Vital Signs screening tool, which is used by groups like the American Academy of Pediatrics, in order to more accurately identify all veterans who are at risk of food insecurity. The current screening tool of a single question only identifies veterans at risk of very-low food security, which is not sufficient. The results of the VA food insecurity screenings indicate very low rates of food insecurity and do not track with academic research and other data, including from Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey. Too many struggling veterans fall through the cracks with the current screening protocol and the VA must adopt a more comprehensive and validated screening method. The VA must also require a more comprehensive intervention and response for veterans who screen positive for food insecurity, including on-site SNAP eligibility screening and application assistance in addition to a broader nutrition consultation and/or referral to a local food pantry or other local

services. MAZON recommends the initiation and funding of a VA pilot program to demonstrate and evaluate such a SNAP application assistance program.

There has been evidence of confusion and misinformation about veteran eligibility for SNAP, particularly regarding the consideration of VA disability ratings and the exemption from SNAP time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents. To provide clarification and help ensure that fewer veterans experience food insecurity, USDA should prepare and distribute guidance specific about veterans and SNAP eligibility to USDA regional offices, state SNAP agencies, VA centers, veteran service organizations, and community partners.

3. Integrate Nutrition Assistance Information into Transition Materials and Training

The transition to civilian life poses significant challenges for many veterans, and many do not feel that they have adequate preparation and resources to help them succeed. Key findings from a recent Pew Research Center survey of veterans highlighted difficulties experienced by many veterans during the transition to civilian life—only about half of veterans say the military prepared them well for their transition to civilian life; post-9/11 veterans were more than twice as likely than pre-9/11 veterans to say that readjusting to civilian life was difficult; and about one third of veterans say they had trouble paying the bills after leaving the military, yet only 12% indicated that they received food assistance from the government. Furthermore, about 40% of veterans say that the government has not given them enough help.¹¹

As part of its efforts to meet the needs of veterans who are recently transitioning, underemployed, or vulnerable, the VA must proactively address the issue of veteran food insecurity. The VA should integrate information about federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP as part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) materials and trainings; include information about federal assistance programs like SNAP as part of the VA's new "Solid Start" suicide prevention program; and work with community partners and USDA to create and actively distribute veteran-specific resources about food insecurity and SNAP. All relevant VA staff must be trained on issues of food insecurity, so that they know and understand SNAP and its rules.

4. Listen to Veterans

The stigma associated with receiving SNAP poses an intangible yet formidable barrier that is especially pronounced for the veteran population. Negative public perceptions of SNAP have been heightened in recent years as a result of rhetoric associated with regulatory changes proposed by the Trump administration designed to restrict access to SNAP. This creates a chilling effect and adds to the stigma that makes veterans and other individuals in need reluctant to seek help and apply for SNAP.

¹¹ Parker, K; Igielnik, R; Barroso, A; Cilluffo, A. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation." *Pew Research Center*. September 10, 2019. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>.

This Subcommittee, or the full House Veterans' Affairs Committee, should hold a follow-up hearing on the issue of veteran food insecurity to include the perspective of individual veterans who have real lived experience with this issue, researchers who have examined food insecurity within the veteran and general populations, and additional veteran service organizations to explore models for community partnerships around outreach and SNAP enrollment.

We also urge USDA and the VA to collaborate with veteran service organizations and anti-hunger organizations to develop a strategic outreach plan for veterans who do not receive care or services through the VA, including peer-to-peer outreach. Such efforts ideally could take place within the context of a federal interagency task force focused on veteran food insecurity, modeled on the successful example of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness that has made great strides toward the goal of ending veteran homelessness in the U.S. Exploration of such an interagency approach to addressing veteran food insecurity would be a worthy next step for this Subcommittee, in collaboration with the House Committee on Agriculture's Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations.

5. Explore Related Issues

Lastly, I implore Congress—especially members of this Subcommittee who also serve on the House Armed Services Committee (Reps. Bergman, Brindisi, Banks, and Luria)—to address the separate but related issue of food insecurity among currently serving military families. This is another long-neglected issue of national security, military readiness, retention, and recruitment, and we at MAZON have proposed easy, common-sense policies for Congress to enact as soon as possible.

In closing, I would like to again thank Chairman Levin and Ranking Member Bilirakus for inviting me to share MAZON's perspective on this critically important issue. The failure to address veteran food insecurity undercuts our next generation of Americans who want to serve in the Armed Forces and presents a challenge to our national security. Children from families where a parent served in the military are much more likely to enlist for military service than counterparts from civilian households. But low-income, working age veterans raising children have much higher odds of experiencing very low food security compared to non-veterans.¹² As we are reminded by Mission: Readiness, an organization of over 750 retired admirals, generals, and other top military leaders, obesity—which is directly related to food insecurity and poor nutrition—limits the pool of eligible recruits for military service and negatively affects our national security.¹³ Failing to address the crisis of food insecurity and obesity for our nation's children—especially the children in military and veteran households who are more likely to serve in the military—threatens our national security.

¹² Kamdar, N; Lester, H; Daundasekara, S; Greer, A; Utech, A; Hernandez, DC. "Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans with Children: Findings from NHANES 2011-2014." Poster presentation at American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA. November 2019.

¹³ Maxey, H; Bishop-Josef, S; Goodman, B. "Unhealthy and Unprepared." *Council for a Strong America*. October 2018. <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/737-unhealthy-and-unprepared>.

While food pantries across the country provide critical food assistance to veterans and others in need, they were only conceived as a temporary and emergency response to the widespread problem. Veteran food insecurity will not be solved by food pantries that are already struggling to keep up with current demands and cannot make up for the gaps in our safety net programs, which continue to be at risk of harmful changes and cuts.

Allowing veterans who have made great personal sacrifices in service to our nation to struggle with hunger is shameful, insulting, unnecessary, and costly. Indeed, it is unconscionable. If our federal agencies and Congress do not take more proactive steps to identify veterans who may experience food insecurity and to connect them with available benefits and resources, we do these veterans and our nation as a whole a grave disservice.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.